

Saved by God's mercy

A study of Titus 3

By Mike Morrison

Paul left Titus on the island of Crete to organize the newly planted churches there. But Titus was not a permanent pastor—he would soon have to move on. What was he supposed to teach on this temporary assignment? Paul gives some final advice in chapter 3.

Doing good is good— but not good enough

“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good” (v. 1). As Paul explained in chapter 2, good behavior puts the gospel in a good light. Although the gospel says that our Lord is Jesus Christ (not Caesar), we do not want officials to think that the gospel tells people to disrupt society.

Christians should “slander no one,” Paul says. “Be peaceable and considerate, and...show true humility toward all” (v. 2). For many believers, Paul was asking for a big change in their behavior. He explains in verse 3: “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.”

In some ways this list is a mirror image of the good qualities Paul wants Titus to teach. Be obedient, even though you used to be disobedient. Be peaceable, even though you used to hate one another. We were once foolish and ill-tempered, Paul says—implying that we are not that way anymore.

What caused the change in our lives? It was Jesus. “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (verses 4-5). God’s love appeared to us in the form of Jesus (Rom. 5:8), and he saved us not because we deserved it, but because of his mercy and grace.

We were not living a righteous life, but even if we were, those righteous things would not be good enough to save us. We are saved by God’s mercy, not by anything we could ever do to earn it.

“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” He did not save us through a physical washing, but by a spiritual washing and renewal. The word “washing” is an allusion to baptism, suggesting that our physical baptism sym-

bolizes the rebirth that comes from the Holy Spirit.

God poured the Holy Spirit “on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (verses 6-7). We are saved by God the Father, working through the Son and Holy Spirit.

We are justified by grace—put right with God—as his gift to us (and as Paul explains elsewhere, we receive it by faith). The result is that we become inheritors of eternal life, which gives us tremendous hope and confidence about our future. But the Bible also says that we have eternal life now, in this age (John 6:47). We have it as a down payment of much more yet to come.

“This is a trustworthy saying,” Paul notes. We can be sure that God saves us by his mercy, not by our works. He then adds, “I want you to stress these things...” (verse 8). Titus should stress the Holy Spirit, grace and eternal life.

Why? “So that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.” When we realize that God has saved us by his mercy, we should respond with changes in our behavior. Sin caused the death of our Savior, and we do not want to participate in behavior that caused his death.

So we trust in God alone, but we also strive to do good works. We have been saved for that purpose (Ephesians 2:10). Good works cannot save us, but they are still good, and they are characteristic of people who trust God. God’s people are *devoted* to doing good; they are *eager* to do what is good (Titus 2:14). Grace leads us to a better life. “These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.”

Something to avoid

As part of his closing comments for Titus, Paul warns, “But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless” (verse 9). Many of us have experienced “quarrels about the law”—debates about whether this or that is required or forbidden. If we try to base our salvation on keeping laws, we will inevitably end up arguing about which laws apply, about definitions of what is restricted, and whether there are any exceptions.



Debates like that miss the point. They are useless, because salvation is not based on the law. We should not waste our time with arguments about things that don't really matter.

However, if people are convinced that laws are important, they are rarely willing to drop the argument. So Paul gives Titus some pastoral advice: "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (verse 10). If the person can't drop the subject, if he is stirring up trouble in the congregation by preaching salvation by works, then he should be avoided.

If someone says, You have to keep these laws in order to be saved, then that person is (no matter what he says) attempting to divide the congregation—he is saying that it's not enough to trust in Christ. If the person won't stop preaching this error, a division is unavoidable, and Titus can minimize the severity of that division by making it early. The person should not be allowed into the congregation to cause more trouble.

"You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (verse 11). He preaches that people will be saved or condemned by their works, and such a person will be judged by his works, and by his own standard, he will be condemned. Divisive behavior is the opposite of what God wants.

Paul closes, as ancient letters often did, with some notes about personal contacts and travel plans: "As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there" (verse 12). Titus's assignment as interim pastor would soon be up. Paul wanted to spend the winter with him in western Greece.

"Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need" (verse 13). They were probably the ones who carried the letter to Titus, on their way to somewhere else.

Paul then repeats an important theme: "Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives" (verse 14). If people work for their food and stay out of trouble, that is good (1 Thess. 4:11).

"Everyone with me sends you greetings. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all" (v. 15). ●

Questions for discussion

- 1. We should be law-abiding citizens who do good (v. 1). Is there ever a time when we should disobey the law?
- 2. People who are saved by grace should be eager to do good (v. 8). Why are some Christians not devoted to good works?
- 3. When can people have erroneous beliefs without being divisive? (v. 10)