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I want to begin today with a few words of biblical background. First and Second Timothy and Titus are called “Pastoral Letters” because they are written to an individual, not to churches, on the subject of how to lead the church. Their purpose is to guide and direct pastoral activity which is why the duties and responsibilities of church leaders are written about more in the pastorals than in any other books in the New Testament, although the metaphor of pastor or shepherd doesn’t appear in any of them.

Last month we talked about how 1 Thessalonians is the likely the oldest book in the New Testament, the first to be written down. The Pastorals were written later – last week in 2 Timothy we heard how the faith that lived in Timothy first lived in his grandmother Lois, then his mother Eunice. Timothy and Titus in a sense are among the best representatives of perhaps the third generation of disciples of Jesus. The issues involved with transmitting faith from generation to generation were beginning to be understood. All three of these letters were written at a time in which the survival of the Christian community seemed to be a long shot. The churches were small groups of believers meeting in homes, not large established institutions with respect in their communities and a solid financial foundation. We know from history that things were about to get much worse for these early Christians as they would face a period of persecution.

Titus was a gentile, probably converted by Paul, who spoke of him as “*my true child in a common faith*” (Titus 1:4). Titus is frequently mentioned in the letters of Paul, especially Galatians and 2 Corinthians, as one of his trusted helpers [“*As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker in your service*” (2 Cor. 8:23a)]. Titus was sent on two urgent missions to the unruly church in Corinth, first entrusted with delivering a very confrontational letter from Paul (2 Corinthians 7:6-16) and then he had the task of gathering the Corinthian financial offering to help the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:16-24).

Titus also had been left on the island of Crete and given the responsibility to oversee the organization of the churches in that island. That’s where he was when he received this letter. Later, according to 2 Timothy 4:10, Titus went to Dalmatia, what is today Croatia.

The letter to Titus provides advice about the kind of persons qualified to lead the church, warnings about false teaching, as well as guidance for different groups in the church (older men, 2:1-2; older and younger women, 2:3-5; younger men, 2:6-8; and

slaves 2:9-10), all for the purpose of making clear that in light of Jesus' work of redemption on the cross on their behalf, **that believers should be zealous for good deeds** (2:11-15). Chapter 3 deals with the duty of Christians to be good citizens because of God's grace shown to them (3:1-7) and with the importance of **right belief leading to good deeds in Jesus' name**. The letter warns the church about becoming entangled in arguments that divert energy and distract attention away from the cause of Christ. Listen to Titus 3:1-11, 14.

“Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to **be ready for every good work**, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. 3 **For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.**

4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but **according to his mercy**, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been **justified by his grace**, we might become **heirs according to the hope of eternal life**. 8 The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to **devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone**. 9 But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. 10 After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, 11 since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned. 14 And **let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive.**”

In these verses from Titus 3 we are given a brief summary of Christian belief and what that belief should produce. It is about **who we were, what God did, and what we are to do**.

Who We Were

We may think that we live in a time that is filled with more violence, resentment, rudeness and hatred than most and it is pretty bad. But in verse 3 writing about himself and the members of the church Paul writes that **“We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.”** That description basically

describes much everyday human behavior. Even a brief look at the newspaper on any given day shows that Paul's description is accurate. A five car pile up caused by a driver with a revoked license who went speeding by a state trooper. State troopers and a doctor charged with selling Oxycontin and collecting drug debts. A Northampton man charged with operating under the influence of alcohol for the *sixth time* may be responsible for hitting and killing a bicyclist riding home from work. Stabbings, shootings, beatings, scandals, corruption, gambling growing like crazy - and these are just the local and state stories! In the world of sports the NBA and FBI are investigating a referee who apparently bet on games that he was working and influenced the outcome. Baseball is watching as Barry Bonds is about to break one of its most significant records after years of steroid enhanced performance. The NFL is dealing with one of its most visible players quarterback Michael Vick facing a federal indictment for running an incredibly cruel dog fighting operation in Virginia. Nationally and internationally it is even worse in Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, and many other places.

With all the terrible and incomprehensible things that happen it is important to remember our own failures so that we don't despair and rant excessively over other people's sins while being blind to our own. We also don't want to grow hopeless or cynical about the power of the Spirit to change even the most challenging person. Most of us would have to admit we are not successful at even doing the few things Paul mentions in the first couple verses of Titus 3 **"to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone."** I would guess many of us struggled just to do those relatively small things this last week. Paul uses eight descriptive terms that seem to get worse as they go to track the history of human sin (see verse 3). This description of **who we were** was accurate in the first century and still is today. Yet it is in the midst of the mess and meanness of human stupidity, selfishness, violence, and sin that God's grace appears.

What God Did

Paul says the undeserved, unmerited loving kindness of God our Savior appeared right in the middle of the mess of the world and our lives. The good news is simply that based on God's mercy, new life and new birth that put us right with God are possible through the Holy Spirit by Christ's grace which gives us the eternal life we long and hope for. God saves us by a renewing bath of baptism, cleansing us from sin and enabling a new life in the Spirit, in which we become beneficiaries of a great inheritance. Our boys enjoy bumper stickers and one of their favorites is "Where there is a will...put

me in it!” That is what God has done. We are not saved by any wonderful deeds we have done, but by God’s own mercy. That is the message of the gospel (verses 5-8) – cleansing (forgiveness), birth (by means of washing/baptism), and new life (by the revitalizing power of the Holy Spirit). The source of our hope is that we have received and believed God’s word about who we were and what God has done for us regardless of who we were and what we did. The question then becomes **what are we to do** now?

What We Are To Do

The key connecting phrase in Titus chapter three is “**good works (verses 1, 8, and 14).**” It is too bad that some people associate “**good works**” with the mistaken idea that we can “work” our way into heaven. God has taken the initiative in mercifully and lovingly reaching out to us in Jesus Christ through whom we are forgiven, reconciled to God, and empowered and commanded to live a new life with the help of the Holy Spirit. Humility marks our life of discipleship because we recognize how undeserving we are and how far God has gone to extend life and hope to us all. **We are saved by God for a purpose** beyond just personal eternal fire insurance and as the letters in the New Testament make clear over and over again **that purpose is to do good.** It is unfortunate that today some people actually use the phrase “do gooders” in a negative or put down kind of way because according to so many of the letters in the New Testament **good works, doing good, is the way we demonstrate that we are saved, it is the way we express our godliness, it is the way others know we have a transforming relationship with Jesus.** Good works are the way godliness expresses itself in the wider world. Our good works are the expression of our priorities and our attitudes. **So we are not saved by our good works, but our good works demonstrate that we are saved.** Listen to Titus 3:8, 14 again, “Be careful to **devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone. Let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive.**”

We are to devote ourselves to good works to meet urgent needs so that we are productive followers of Jesus and productive citizens of our communities. We are not to waste our time and energy in pointless quarrels, stupid controversies, dissensions or anything that is divisive. Paul is writing with a sense of urgency - Speak evil of no one, avoid quarrelling, always be friendly, be gentle, show courtesy to all. Life is too short. There is too much important work to be done. Christians can be so guilty of spending

their time arguing about stuff that most people don't even care about instead of devoting our selves to good works to meet urgent needs.

Good works are excellent and profitable for everyone to be a part of – whether it is supporting our Habitat project, Overnights of Hospitality, Caring Cupboard, mission trips like our students and leaders just returned from, visiting folks who are grieving or sick, giving someone a ride, giving our time and service as a volunteer – the list is endless. It is good to see the growing trend in Christianity right now of the church getting more involved in trying to deal with poverty and HIV/AIDS and issues of basic life needs such as clean water, food, education and health care. These are things that we are called to do, **we are to be energetically engaged in doing good** – whatever is profitable and excellent.

When we respond to needs it is an opportunity for us to grow in grace and in the power and leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives. A man named Sundar became a convert to Christianity and decided to stay in India to be a missionary and bear witness to Jesus. One late afternoon Sundar was traveling on foot high in the Himalayan Mountains with a Buddhist monk. It was bitter cold, and the night was coming on. The monk warned that they were in danger of freezing to death if they did not reach the monastery before darkness fell.

It so happened that as they crossed over a narrow path above a steep cliff, they heard a cry for help. Deep down in the ravine a man had fallen, and he lay wounded. His leg was broken and he couldn't walk. The monk warned Sundar, *“Do not stop. God has brought this man to his fate. He must work it out by himself. That is the tradition. Let us hurry on before we perish.”* But Sundar replied, *“It is my tradition that God has brought me here to help my brother. I cannot abandon him.”* So the monk set off through the snow, which had started to fall heavily.

Sundar climbed down to where the wounded man was. Since the man had a broken leg, Sundar took a blanket from his knapsack and made a sling out of it. He got the man into it and hoisted him onto his back, then began the painful and arduous climb back up the path. After a long time, drenched with perspiration, he finally got back to the path, struggling to make his way through the increasingly heavy falling snow. It was dark now, and he had all he could do to find the path. But he persevered, and although faint from fatigue and overheated from exertion, he finally saw the lights of the monastery.

Then he nearly stumbled and fell. Not from weakness; he stumbled over an object lying in the path. He bent down on one knee and brushed the snow from the body of the monk who had frozen to death within sight of the monastery. And there, kneeling on one knee in the snow, he said aloud to himself the scripture (Luke 9:24): *“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”* And he understood what Jesus meant and was glad that he had decided to *“lose his life”* for another.

Years later, when Sundar had his own disciples, they asked him this question: *“Master, what is life’s most difficult task?”*

(How would you answer that question, *“What is life’s most difficult task?”*)

Sundar’s answer was, *“To have no burden to carry.”*¹

The letter to Titus teaches us the basic truth that the grace of God educates and trains us how to live as civilized people who bear other people’s burdens, care for people in need, contribute to our community and our society in a positive way and by doing so we give glory to God and bear witness to the truth of what we believe.

Prayer:

“In the face of all our realities:
We are the people who heal each other,
who grow strong together,
who name the truth,
who know what it means to live in community,
moving toward a common dream
for a new heaven and a new earth
in the power of the love of God,
the company of Jesus Christ
and the leading of the Holy Spirit.”
- Dorothy McRae-McMahon

Blessing: Grace be with all of you. (Titus 3:15)

¹ William J. Bausch, *A World of Stories*, pages 323-324.