

Women's Bible Study – Winter/Spring 2011

## A Spiritual Legacy: Passing on What You Know

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*You Have a Helper*

Titus 3

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Our family has a long-established letter-writing custom. When my dad and his sisters left home, their parents' last words to them were, "You *will* write us every week." Those were the days of expensive long distance phone calls and cheap first class stamps. And of course a letter meant actually getting out a piece of paper and writing paragraphs on it with a pen! No posting on a blog or texting on their phone. When my parents married, my mom started taking a turn "writing to the folks" every Sunday after dinner. "Whose turn is it to write The Letter?" was as common a question as, "What's for dessert?" As kids, we knew that Grandma and Grandpa, too, would write us on Sunday, mail it on Monday, and we would get their letter on Wednesday. If we didn't hear from them by Thursday, we knew to call to make sure nothing was wrong. Likewise, when my brothers and I left home, we knew the expectation: You will write every week. So we did. And we still do, though now we send The Letter by email and copy it to whoever in the family circle wants to be included. The Letter has iconic status in our family, passing between the generations for over 50 years now. Once my aunts calculated how many had been sent and received, and the number was in the thousands.

I think of The Letter and my grandparents' initial desire to communicate with their children even though they were separated by many miles almost every time I read Paul's Pastoral Epistles—which we're studying now. I understand the desire to communicate with those we love. I understand a bit about the effort it takes to sustain written communication, though it certainly took more effort in Paul's day than it does in ours. And I find it significant that personal letters make up such a large chunk of the New Testament canon. It was a perfect way for Paul to pass on his legacy when he couldn't be there in person.

We're in Titus chapter 3 today. Turn there in your Bibles. We'll read verses 1-8 to begin: "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men. 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. 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. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out 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. This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone."

Remember the context now. Paul is in prison and probably suspects he'll be killed soon. He is writing to Titus, who's pastoring a church on the island of Crete, a place not known for its culture of integrity and moral uprightness. False teachers have made their way into the church, and Paul is concerned about this. Remember he said they were "ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach." Their motive appeared to be money (1:11). Paul says they "must be silenced."

Then last week we looked at Paul's urging to Titus to teach "sound doctrine." Paul went on to give specific instructions to various groups of Christians in the church, telling them how to live out their sound doctrine in very practical ways. And how is this possible? Because of the grace of God. Robin pointed out that Christians live in a school of grace—Grace appeared to us in the person of Jesus Christ (2:11), and grace teaches us how to live.

If the previous section focused on how to live within the body of Christ, this next section focuses more on how to live in the world—how to act toward non-Christians. And it starts with the word "Remind," which is why I've just reviewed the book of Titus so far. We tend to forget things, even though we've already heard them. The great English writer Samuel Johnson said, "Men more often need to be reminded than instructed." Don't you find that true? And the verb is actually in the present tense, so it could be translated, "Go on reminding them." Paul reminds them to do 7 things.

1. Be subject (also translated submissive) to rulers and authorities and
2. Obey them. It's possible that these first 2 reminders focus on the civil magistrate because Cretans, according to one ancient historian, were constantly involved in "insurrections, murders and internecine wars" (Barclay, 258). Christians should be different. This word "subject" or "submissive" doesn't mean a passive subservience, but rather, as R. Kent Hughes defines it, "the expression of gifts in support of a higher purpose." We can disagree with the civil government, but when we do so, we should be civil in our language. When the government seems unreasonable, the temptation is to think we get a pass on this, but that's not true. It's close to tax time. Will you be a model of subjection in the way you prepare your tax return? We've been building our house slowly over the past 4 years, and I'm thrilled to report that we have only 1 ½ rooms to complete! The issue of pulling the proper permits (and paying the accompanying fees!) and submitting to building inspectors has sometimes been a difficult one for me. Some of their requirements have seemed silly and needlessly expensive, and we know plenty of people who sidestep the whole process. But my husband is more honorable than I am, and he has been careful to do what is right. We can disobey the government only when it blatantly contradicts Scripture. Remember Paul was writing this from prison. He didn't obey the order to stop preaching because that would violate Scripture, but he did submit to his punishment.

Why are we urged to submit in this way? First, because the government is ordained by God (Rom. 13). Second, the gospel is not to be identified with political agitation. Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world. Third, if God's people submit only to the authority they find agreeable, how will we ever learn to submit to God's word when it convicts us of sin? We'll end up like Thomas Jefferson, cutting out parts of the Bible we find offensive. This issue of submission to authority is one of the main reasons we have all our kids involved in sports. There are few arenas in life so suited to teaching this principle. Few arenas where you are put under

pressure in view of lots of people, only to be required to submit to an authority that you don't agree with. In almost every game coaches make bad decisions, referees and umpires make bad calls. And we've all seen athletes blow up over that. But Christians should be different. Years ago I remember telling Luke when he was struggling to learn to rule his spirit in an athletic contest, "I'm praying that the ref will make lots of terrible calls so you can practice submitting to authority." Maybe my husband was praying that for me when the building inspectors came!

3. Be ready to do whatever is good. The church should be known in the world for being an agency of good works. It is easy to figure someone else will do this, but doing good in the world is a theme throughout this book. Verse 2:14 describes God's people as "eager to do what is good." Paul's final instructions in 3:14 urge the Cretans to "devote themselves to doing what is good." And this stands in contrast to the false teachers who, in 1:16 are "unfit for doing anything good." This is why churches have been and should be involved in building hospitals, caring for the poor, tutoring immigrants, and a host of other actions that are good for the unbelieving culture.

4.-7. These next four reminders all have to do with personal interactions, especially in our speech. I groaned many times when I was studying this, thinking, "Oh, I don't want to talk about this. This is so convicting, and I don't want to be a hypocrite. It's HARD to really do all of this all the time, and those of you who know me well know I fail too often. And of course, wouldn't you know it? In the past 2 weeks I've had an unusual number of opportunities to put this all into practice . . . or not. On Sunday at this church Pastor Steer talked about the power of Scripture to "tear us apart." (Heb. 4:11, 12). So here it is. The 4<sup>th</sup> reminder says, "to slander no one" or "to speak evil of no one." This doesn't mean that we can't ever evaluate a negative situation, point out sin or verbally identify error since Paul himself does that in chapter 1. But it does mean that we shouldn't pay back evil for evil (Rom 12) and we should bless rather than curse. So what comes out of your mouth when someone wrongs you? We should be making progress in learning to hold our tongues.

5. Next it says to be peaceable, also translated to "avoid quarreling." The Greek word means "not a fighter" or not contentious. There are things worth fighting for, but I think we all know the difference between fighting for what is right and being a contentious, quarrelsome person. Consider these words from Proverbs; I think they apply whether you're married or not: "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day" (27:15). "Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife" (21:19).

The 6<sup>th</sup> reminder is to be "considerate." Another translation uses "gentle," and the Greek denotes an indulgent consideration of human infirmities or to show clemency and be conciliatory. This reminds me of the way God is with us—"He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." (Ps. 103:14)

Finally, the NIV says "to show true humility toward all men." This is apparently a difficult phrase to translate just right. Other translators have phrased this "every consideration," "a consistently gentle disposition," "always a gentle attitude." But the ESV and RSV's "show perfect courtesy to all people" is probably best. The phrase carries with it the idea that one's temper is always under control. Perfect courtesy. To other drivers, to the incompetent checkout

clerk, to the telemarketer, to our family members. Often we are most discourteous to the people with live with and profess to love. I wrote the phrase “perfect courtesy” on my big kitchen chalkboard this week!

The world knows all about backbiting and infighting. It knows about quarreling and pride. But the power of the gospel is really seen in these 7 reminders.

Why should we be different? A more literal translation than the NIV includes the little word “for” at the beginning of verse 3. The word “for” indicates a reason—Why should we remember to behave this way? Because of what follows: We were once just like those unbelievers that surround us. So we should remember our past. You might think this contradicts what Paul says in Phil 3:13: “Forgetting those things that are behind . . .” That’s all true. We don’t need to wallow in sin that is forgiven and no longer condemns us. But remembering what we were saved from does give us a helpful sense of orientation. When you’re on a journey, it’s helpful to know where you began.

Paul lists 6 characteristics of our condition before Christ. And notice he doesn’t say, “*You* were once this way,” but “*We* were once this way.” The gospel is a great leveler. Before salvation we were all enemies of God. Sometimes it’s hard to see that if you grew up in the church and your parents disciplined you closely. Your outward behavior was never scandalous or blatantly rebellious, so you have to see clearly your own heart. When my kids mess up, my first reaction is often to say, “How could you do that?” (How could you forget to say thank you? How can you talk to your sister like that? How could you have procrastinated so long?) But lately I’ve been learning what a hypocritical spirit that betrays. *I know* how they could do that, because I once was just like that. In fact, I still know those temptations all too well. So I’ve been trying to say instead, “I know all about that temptation. I have often failed in that way, too. But there is forgiveness and hope in Christ for next time.” But that’s getting ahead of the game. Here are the 6 things Paul says we once were.

1. We were once foolish. This is speaking of a lack of spiritual understanding. Rom 1:14; Gal. 3:1, 3. We had no wisdom, because, after all, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 1:7).
2. We were once disobedient. Rom 1:30; 2 Tim 3:2. The word has with it the nuance of making a purposeful choice, of being culpable for our noncompliance.
3. We were once deceived, or led astray. This reflects Satan’s goals for us.
4. We were once enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. Rom 6:6; II Pet 2:19
5. We once lived in malice and envy. Malice implies a feeling of ill will, a grudging spirit, a desire for bad things to happen to others. Envy is the flip side of malice—it’s an inability to rejoice in another’s success.
6. We once were hateful—we were hated and we hated one another. After Sunday’s playoff game, Olivia blurted, “I hate the Packers!” Surprised at her vitriol, Rich said, “Olivia, you don’t need to **hate** the Packers . . .” Then Luke and I said in unison: “You should just hate the Yankees!” I’m sure Paul would hate the Yankees, too, but here he is talking about a hostility in our relationships that flows both ways.

And that's the condition in which God found us when he saved us. Unsaved people are often malicious, envious, foolish, rebellious. They're sometimes addicted to harmful things. They're sometime hateful. I shouldn't be surprised when unsaved people act like unsaved people. I was that way, too. And I know God did not wait for me to do something nice or noble before he saved me. Likewise, when we interact with unbelievers, we should initiate goodness to them before we think they "deserve" it. I so often will only return a kindness. When I go out of my way to be kind, it's often because someone was kind to me first. But that's not how God operated in our salvation.

So we think about our past condition and remember what we once were. And if we're truly children of God, there should be a difference between that and what we are becoming now. And then we can see that our present condition is only the result of God's mercy and grace in our lives. This section is very similar to the end of chapter 2, where Paul connects our ability to live a godly life with the gospel. Our behavior changes because *we have been changed*. We've been changed by the power of the Holy Spirit—our helper. We're not left to simply try harder on our own.

Awhile ago one of my daughters and I were having a rough day together. It was a Saturday and she was grouchy about all the chores on her list. She was complaining and contradictory for far too long before I finally told her she needed to just stop talking for awhile, spend some time alone, and come join us when she could be cheerful. I was getting ready to go talk with her after a few minutes of her solitude, but before I could get there I heard her wail, "Mommy, I need a knife!" Trying to remain calm, I went to her and asked her why in the world she needed a knife. Always the dramatic one, she cried, "Because the Bible says if something causes you to sin, you should cut it off, and my tongue keeps causing me to sin!" It was one of those mothering moments where I wondered, "Is this a good thing or a bad thing?!" I'm glad she remembered what she knew of the Sermon on the Mount, that we must treat sin very seriously, but I tried to help her see that the gospel is what would enable her—and me—to sin less and less as we allow its truth to change us. The Holy Spirit is our helper on our road to sanctification. And I'm happy to say all my children still have their tongues in their mouths.

After we remember our past, we are to remember what Christ did. Look at verse 4: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy . . ." See how the "goodness and kindness of God" contrasts with our condition in the previous verses? Our hatred, our envy, our malice . . . His goodness and loving kindness. Verses 4-7 are one of the densest explanations of salvation in all the New Testament. It's hard to even scratch the surface of its full meaning. He begins by making it clear that salvation originates with God, not with us. Nothing I did caused God to notice me or deem me worthy to be his child.

How did this come about? It says, "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." What does this "washing" refer to? One view is that baptism is what saves you (what theologians call "baptismal regeneration"). I disagree heartily with this view, because the whole thrust of the passage is anti-works and anti-human effort. The act of baptism is a work, and verse 5 already said he saved me not because of righteous things I'd done. A second view is that the washing refers to baptism, but only as an outward sign of the heart-change that the Holy

Spirit has already accomplished in me. Another view is that the washing is simply the cleansing accomplished in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which is supported by passages like Ezekiel 36:25-27 and John 3:5. But the main thing to “get” is that there is *cleansing* and there is *renewal*—cleansing from all that is past and renewal for the future—and it’s accomplished by the Holy Spirit, (verse 6) “whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” Paul undoubtedly has the cross in mind here by bringing Jesus the Son into the formula. Notice the Trinitarian emphasis. **God** saved us, through the washing and renewal of the **Holy Spirit**, whom he poured on us through the atonement accomplished by **Jesus Christ**.

For what purpose did God do this? Verse 7 starts with “so that.” “So that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs.” What is an heir? It’s someone who receives money or property that he did not earn, passed down to him within the family. We call that an inheritance. My understanding of these concepts has always been only theoretical. I’ve never received an inheritance, and, frankly, I’ve never expected to receive one. Both sets of our parents are of very modest means. But at Christmas we got a taste of what it means to be an heir. But let me back up. Rich and I honeymooned in New England. It was such a wonderful time that we always talked about returning someday for a milestone anniversary. But on our 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary Luke was a toddler and Rich was finishing grad school and thus we were dirt poor. On our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary we had 3 preschoolers and a colicky newborn. I can’t even remember our 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, so last year we decided we’d return to New England with the kids for our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which is this coming July. We started planning the trip several months ago, but then we had several thousand dollars’ worth of “life” happen to our budget. You know how that is—the van, the doctor, the furnace. My husband told me in November that the trip to New England would have to be put off again. I was so disappointed. But at Christmas after all the presents were unwrapped, my parents gave me and my brothers each an envelope. Inside was a check. My grandpa, who you might remember died in the fall, had left an inheritance, and my parents decided to share some of it with their kids right away. There’s more than enough to pay for the furnace, the van, the doctor, and the trip to New England. Maybe we’ll call it our “grace trip.” We did not earn that money. Someone else earned it for us. Do you see the spiritual parallels here? My grandpa did what we could not do, and then my parents generously poured it on us.

What will be the result of this salvation? Paul goes on to say, “I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good” (3:8). We are not saved by doing what is good, but doing what is good will be the natural response in us to being saved.

Finally, Paul issues a warning before closing his letter. Read in verses 9-11: “But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” This is a reference to a certain kind of unprofitable discussion going on in the church; a similar situation is mentioned in I Tim 1:4: “Command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God’s work . . .” It’s hard for us to understand exactly what this controversy was about—who debates genealogies? But it seems the take-away point from this

passage is a reminder that we keep the main thing the main thing. Guard against secondary discussions becoming the main focus. It's not that there won't be differences of opinion in the church but we should be careful that the world sees the church communicating one central, consistent message—the gospel. What to do with a person who doesn't merely disagree, but is bent on stirring up trouble and causing division? Have nothing more to do with him. That is, initiate steps of church discipline as described in Matthew 18:15-20 and I Cor. 5.

The last paragraph of Paul's letter reads like the real letter it is and like "typical Paul." It's a summary of travel plans and fatherly exhortations—"Do everything you can to help," "See that they have everything they need," "Devote yourselves to good works," "Don't live unproductive lives." Artemas and Zenas are not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, but Apollos is probably the popular teacher mentioned in Acts (18:24 and I Cor 3:6). Tychicus was an Asian who went on Paul's 3<sup>rd</sup> journey (Acts 20:4; II Tim 4:12). He was called a beloved brother and faithful minister (Col. 4:7, Eph. 6:21). Tychicus carried the letters Paul wrote to the Colossians and the Ephesians. In my family "The Letter" always ended with "Love and prayers . . ." Paul's letters usually end with "grace and peace," or, in this case, "Grace be with you all."

This time of year in Minnesota is hard for many of us. It's cold and dark. The piles of snow are not going anywhere. The Twins have not yet begun spring training. The central passage of this chapter in Titus is this one: "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." Let me leave you with these thoughts by John Piper on that central passage: "If you are born again—if you were wakened from spiritual death, and given eyes to see, and ears to hear, and a spiritual sense to taste that Jesus is supremely satisfying, and a heart to trust him—it is owing to the kindness of God. . . God loves to lavish kindness on us. The bigger your conception of God, the more amazing this is. God is the creator of the universe. He holds the galaxies in being. He governs everything that happens in the world, down to the fall of a bird and the change in your hair color. He is infinitely strong and wise and holy and just. And Paul says, he is kind. And because of this kindness we were born again. Let your very existence as a Christian tell you every hour of every day: God is kind to you" (John Piper, sermon, Feb. 3, 2008).

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