

Titus 3

M. W. Bassford, 6-6-10

One of the greatest challenges that we face as disciples of Jesus is learning to understand our discipleship in the way that Jesus wants us to understand it. Sometimes, we struggle with leaving behind the world and its lusts. At other times, though, the temptations are more subtle, and in many ways, they arise as distortions of views we should have.

For example, we understand that sin is bad, and that the people of the world live in sin. From this, we should rightly learn that we need to be careful when we are in the world to preserve our own purity, and we also need to be diligent to lead as many people to Christ as possible. However, a lot of Christians study the evidence and reach the wrong conclusion. They reason that because the world is a sinful place, we need to do everything we can to escape from the world, and on the rare occasions when we actually talk to someone from the world, we should really adopt an arrogant, holier-than-thou attitude so that those worldlings know just how bad they are. That does nothing to save the lost.

Likewise, it's correct for us to recognize that every man must give an account of himself before God. Every one of us is responsible for our own salvation, so in turn each one of us must study the Scriptures on our own to make sure that we personally are on the path that leads to eternal life. That's good. What's not so good is when we lose track of the purpose of Bible study in the first place, and we get caught up in all kinds of bitter dissensions with our brethren about things that aren't particularly relevant. It happens all the time, and it can easily destroy a church.

As always, these problems, though they particularly plague more mature Christians, are not new problems. Perhaps fittingly, Paul addressed them two thousand years ago in the final portion of his letter to Titus. With his help, we can make sure that these problems don't become a problem for us. Let's look, then, at Titus 3.

Righteous Living and God's Kindness

This chapter opens with another series of admonitions directed toward **RIGHTEOUS LIVING**. This series appears in Titus 3:1-3. Unlike some of the other lists we've looked at in Titus, this one is addressed equally to all Christians, and if we were to sum it up, Paul's message would be "Don't rock the boat." Under this overall heading, the first instruction that Paul gives us is that we are to be obedient to rulers and authorities. This is a familiar theme for Paul; we see him saying much the same thing earlier, in Romans 13. Paul continues to repeat this idea, though, because of the great temptation that the first-century church faced to turn their faith into a social movement. One of Christianity's core ideas is that every man is equal in the eyes of God, and that was anathema to a Roman Empire that was built on inequality. Some Christians, then, wanted to oppose their government, but Paul warns them off because revolution isn't what Christianity is about. Even today, when we have a legitimate means of seeking social change, we need to be careful so that we don't try to save the world through politics instead of through Jesus. Our kingdom is not of this world.

Likewise, in private life, the Christian is to distinguish himself by his quiet, obedient lifestyle. We should obey all who are in authority over us, from police officers to employers. We should always be ready to do good as we have opportunity. We should never insult others nor speak evil of them, either to their faces or behind their backs. We should keep the peace with everyone as far as we are able. We should deal kindly with everyone we encounter, and we should always remain humble, no matter the provocation. As we look at these ideas together, it becomes evident that they're related to each other. In fact, they describe an entire philosophy of life, a life that is self-effacing, harmonious, and dedicated to doing good. This is not a popular way to live, even among Christians. Too many brethren like to bang their drums about how spiritual they are and how much they know about the Bible and how everybody else is going to hell and they aren't. Sadly, that attitude is just as proud and wrongheaded as the worldly attitudes those brethren look down on.

In fact, Paul proceeds to tell us why we should be so obedient, gracious, and humble, even when those we encounter seem undeserving. No matter how wicked the world may seem, we must remember that we were just as wicked as they are. In fact, even though we now strive to do right, all of us still have massive gaps in our personal righteousness. Who are we, then, to look down our noses at anyone else because of how wicked they are? Who are we to go around pounding on our chests about our own personal wisdom and righteousness? If we are righteous at all, it is because Christ has made us righteous. In that, we have every reason for humility and thanksgiving, not pride.

In fact, this idea is exactly where Paul heads next as he discusses **THE KINDNESS OF GOD**. This discussion appears in Titus 3:4-7. It is certainly true that all of us as Christians have been raised up with Christ in heavenly places. However, our spiritual elevation isn't because we were so wonderful we deserved to be saved. Instead, we owe our salvation to the kindness and the love of God. We didn't do such an impressive job of living righteously that God looked down on us and said, "They're so good I've just got to bring them into heaven." Instead, He looked down on us and saw that we were not righteous, that we persisted in sinning against Him, but despite the hatefulness of our sin in His eyes, He pitied us and had mercy on us. We can never glory in our own goodness. We can only glory in Him.

Paul then moves on to explain what the instruments of God's mercy are, and both of these are doctrinally significant. First of all, this tells us that we were saved through the washing of regeneration. This is particularly interesting because the Greek word translated as "washing" is the word *loutron*, which means "bathtub". We are saved through God's work in the bathtub of regeneration, which we have little trouble identifying as the process of baptism. Sadly, a lot of people in the denominational world struggle with this concept. They say that we can't possibly be saved by baptism because baptism is a work that we perform and we aren't saved by our own works. They're only about half right. Baptism is a work, yes, but it's not our work. It's God's work, when He saves us through the washing of regeneration.

Coincident with this washing, we also experience the renewing of the Holy Spirit. This actually helps us understand one of the most familiar passages in the Bible, Acts 2:38. That verse ends with Peter telling the Jews on Pentecost that if they are baptized for the forgiveness of sins, they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. There's much controversy over whether that gift is the Holy Spirit Himself or the Holy Spirit giving us something. In the context of Acts 2, it's clear that Peter is making reference to the Holy Spirit's promise that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Here, Paul reaffirms that idea. When we are baptized, we do not receive a personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit, perhaps even complete with miraculous spiritual gifts. Instead, the Holy Spirit acts as the agent of our spiritual renewal, so that although we entered the waters of baptism dead in our sins, we rise in newness of life.

This renewal is only possible through Jesus Christ. It is His death that makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to cleanse us, and it is His grace that justifies us and makes us righteous. However, the implications of our salvation don't end there. We are not merely consecrated for this life. Instead, the grace of Jesus makes us heirs of eternal life as well. It gives us the opportunity to live forever with Him in heaven. It is impossible to overstate how important this is. Sometimes in our lives, we are overwhelmed by the greatness of our sin. We see all the evil things we do and all the good things we don't do, and we wonder how we could ever make it to heaven. The bad news is we can't. The good news is that we don't have to. Our salvation is not dependent on our own good works, either before or after baptism. Instead, it is dependent on the grace of Jesus, and though we let God down all too often, Jesus will never let us down.

Contention and Closing Remarks.

In that seven-verse nutshell, Paul sums up what Christianity is about. It's about striving to live humble, righteous lives while still relying upon the grace of God. We're expected to focus on those things, both individually and as a church, but if we make our spiritual lives about other things, it inevitably leads to **CONTENTION**. This is Paul's basic point in Titus 3:8-11. First of all, he emphasizes that we shouldn't take the idea of grace too far. Just because Jesus saved us in His mercy doesn't mean that we get to live however we want. We still must be careful to maintain that pattern of good works he's been talking about since the beginning of the book. If we preach and teach on those things, we'll do well, but if we get off course onto anything else, it can only lead to trouble. In Paul's day, a lot of the trouble had to do with the Law of Moses and the Jewish genealogies, the favorite subjects of those Judaizing teachers he condemned earlier.

Thankfully, we don't have to struggle with the party of the circumcision anymore, but foolish disputes and contentions are still very much among us. We all know that Christians can get in the biggest arguments over the dumbest things, and ironically enough, when we do that, we make things that are otherwise insignificant into huge spiritual problems for us. I fear that on the day of judgment, many brethren are going to hang their heads in shame when God asks them why they split a church or drove another brother away from the Lord because of their own foolish opinions. We need to remember that the next time we're tempted to get all heated about something another Christian is doing. If we don't have book, chapter, and verse to back us up, we're far better off keeping our mouths shut instead.

Sadly, not all Christians learn that lesson in time to save their own souls, but the congregation still has to deal with them. Here, Paul lays out a simple process for dealing with divisive members. Warn them once, warn them twice, then withdraw from them. We need to recognize the seriousness of this passage and be willing to apply it. Sometimes, we behave like the only people we can withdraw from are people who have stopped coming to services, but in reality, withdrawal can serve other purposes as well. In this case, it's like chopping off your hand after you've been bitten by a coral snake before the poison spreads to the rest of your body and kills you. In just the same way, one divisive man can spread his poison throughout the entire body of a church and kill it. We need to cut off that member before it's too late.

Finally, the chapter winds up with a few **CLOSING REMARKS**. They appear in Titus 3:12-15. These give us some insight into Paul's personal situation and the situation of some of his contemporaries. Paul is apparently in a city called Nicopolis, which was located on the west coast of Greece. From Nicopolis, though, Paul has a number of messengers roving around. He tells Titus to expect a summons from either Artemas or Tychicus, and he also tells him to send Zenas and Apollos on their way, from which we can conclude that those two men had been tasked with bringing the epistle to Titus in Crete. In fact, the Christians in Crete are to use the presence of Zenas and Apollos as an opportunity to do good by helping them with their needs. Likewise, today, we need to be careful to meet needs whenever we see them. As Paul has made clear throughout the entire book, good works are the fruit that God expects to see from us.