

Titus 2:11-15 – Foundations for Christian living

Good morning everyone, our Church family and those of you who join us on-line. My name is Jean Palmer and I am an assistant minister at Holy Trinity. Today, thanks to Covid, I am speaking to you from our home, so please forgive any glitches that might appear.

We are continuing our series on Paul's letter to Titus and this morning we will be looking at Titus 2:11-15 which I have called: Foundations for Christian Living.

Before we do that let's pray.

Prayer

Lord, your Word is alive and active, like a two-edged sword, that judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. May our hearts and minds be open to what you have to say to us today. And may we be doers of the word and not hearers only - as your grace enables us. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen

Intro

Paul's letter to Titus is unusual. Generally, Paul takes some time to establish a theological foundation, to make sure his readers understand the truths of the Gospel, before he deals with practical issues of how to live as a follower of Jesus, but in Titus, as we have seen, he gives some quite detailed instructions to young and old, men and women, even slaves, before he gets on to the reasons why we should live like that. And it is the why that we are going to be looking at this morning.

In some ways it is as though we have been wandering through the living rooms of the house but now we need to look more closely at the foundations. Jesus, of course warned us about building the house of our life on sand rather than on rock, and if you remember those that built on the rock were those who heard the words of Jesus and put them into practice. Doers not just hearers.

Paul himself saw his mission as calling the Gentiles to believing obedience (Romans 1:5); living God's way not the way of the world around them. In his Damascus road vision he was appointed to go to the Gentiles; "to open their eyes to enable them to turn from darkness to light, and from the power of the satan to God - so that they can have forgiveness of sins, and an inheritance among those who are made holy by their faith in [me] Jesus." (Acts 26:17-18). I think we will find as we go through this passage that Paul is still speaking this message to Titus and the Christians on Crete.

Why are we here?

Context is always important and we can place Paul's letter not only in the specific context on Crete, or even in the broader context of Paul's mission, but

also in the big-picture context of the age in which we live. In v12 Paul calls it the present age -as opposed to the age which is to come. It is the age which lies between the 'appearing of the grace of God which brings salvation' v11- in other words the first coming of Jesus, and 'the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ (v13) which refers to his second coming, his return in glory. These are the days in which we live and my first question is: what are we here for?

Once we have been converted, had our sins forgiven, got our ticket to heaven, so to speak, why are we still here? Wouldn't it be better to go straight to heaven? Well, maybe we need to leave a few people behind to tell others about Jesus so they can come to heaven too, - but seriously, what are we here for? Does our life on earth have a meaning and significance in God's purposes for his creation? And how does this relate to what Paul has to say about how we should live.? I want to look briefly at this before we get into today's reading because I think it can be a neglected aspect of Christian living.

Living in the context of the creation mandate ...

Do you remember that when we were studying the early chapters of Genesis we found that human beings, men and women, were created in the image of God and given certain responsibilities with regard to creation: 'to till and keep' the earth. These are words usually used in connection with serving God and keeping his commandments, but also with the sense of working on behalf of, and watching over what is vulnerable. These responsibilities haven't gone away with the coming of Jesus; in fact, the offer of new life in Him, through the forgiveness and liberation he came to give us, should enable us to do better the job we were given in the first place. It's all part of living just or upright lives as Paul calls us to in v12.

You see, in the OT *sedaqah* or righteousness refers to a harmonious world order of right relationships built by God into the very fabric and infrastructure of creation. So, when humans do not live rightly with one another or with the land, the whole earth suffers.

This is an aspect of justice that we have often been unaware of, but is much more to the fore in our current context of climate change. Increasingly we see how human activities have damaged the earth and made it less able to be the flourishing creation that God intended it to be. I want us to look at this aspect of justice first before we move into the more familiar territory of Titus 2: 11-15.

Questions –

- Have you come across this idea of justice before? What do you think about it?
- How does it fit in with your previous understanding of what it means to live justly, particularly with regard to the non-human creation?
- How might it alter some of the things you do?

Titus 2:11-15

As I explained before, in the earlier part of his letter Paul has described how Christians should behave. He wants the Christian converts on Crete to live in such a way that they will attract others to the faith. It is all part of his mission to reach out to all different sorts of people so that they turn from worshipping and serving idols to worshipping the one true God and living in His ways.

But now he goes deeper, down to the foundations of our faith, down to what should really move us and motivate us to live godly lives. It's not just so that we are a good witness and will attract others, it certainly is not so that we look good to others in our community – that we conform to expected standards; it's an inner not an outer compulsion – and it all begins with grace.

Vv11-14 are all one sentence in the Greek and the subject of the sentence is the grace of God. It all begins with God – he is the initiator in creation, in redemption and in the transformation of each one of us. Now, grace is a favour or gift, freely given, with no expectation of any return. The Greeks had a word for it – *charis* but in their culture it was only conferred on a friend, never an enemy. God's gift of grace is not like that – “While we were still sinners Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8. And Paul was more conscious of this than most – it was when he was on his way to Damascus to persecute and imprison Christians that Jesus met him and he was never the same again. To the Galatians he wrote: “My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20). It was this overwhelming sense of God's grace that transformed Paul and was the motivating force in his life.

Paul writes that this grace has appeared – it was always there in God's intent but was revealed in the coming of Jesus and is offering salvation to all people. John Stott describes it like this: ‘grace is God's unmerited favour, loving the unlovable, seeking the fugitive, rescuing the hopeless and lifting the beggar from the dunghill to make him (or her) sit among princes.’ In other words it doesn't matter who you are or where you are in your life right now, this offer of salvation, of deliverance from whatever enslaves you, is open to you right now.

Questions

- Have a go at explaining what you understand by grace to someone else in your group (or write it down if you prefer).
- Can you give an example of a time when you were aware of God's grace acting in your life or someone you know?

Shaped by grace

But, although God loves us just as we are, he loves us too much to leave us as we are. Grace desires to make us who we were truly meant to be as beings created in the image of God. That is why in v12 Paul goes on to talk about the way in which grace acts in our lives, teaching and training us. God's Word and His Spirit are at work in us but we have a part to play too. Paul tells the Philippian Christians: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose." (Phil 2:12-13).

Sorry folks, this is going to mean doing the hard yards!

So what does it look like? Paul describes it in a way that is rooted in Scripture but he does it in a way that resonates with Greek moral teaching: don't do that; do this; - similar to his language of putting off and putting on in Colossians (Col 3:9-10). So here we are to renounce or say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, and say yes to self-controlled, upright and godly lives.

Let's unpack that a bit. I wonder what you think would count as ungodliness? The Greek word suggests not giving God the worship or respect that is his due, ignoring his existence and not acknowledging any need to live in obedience to him. It is an inner attitude that will express itself by choosing to live life 'my way' and following our own 'worldly passions.' I like Chrysostom's description of worldly things as things which do not pass over with us into heaven ... and he adds that it is very short sighted to set your heart on and expend all your effort on things which you must eventually leave behind. You can't take it with you when you go!

So, as we live in expectation of the age to come, how then should we live? V12 – we are to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives. Again, let's unpack that a bit.

Self-controlled – some translations have sober which would seem particularly apt given Paul's previous warnings about drinking to excess, but the word implies that we should think sensibly or soberly about how we are living – quite the opposite of being controlled by our wants or desires. Easy to say but harder to do, I think.

Then we should be upright or just. To live justly is not so much about being morally perfect but rather it is a guiding principle that leads us to seek socially just and right relationships within our own communities, our nation, and worldwide. It means we will not be able to stand idly by in the face of bullying, prejudice and all sorts of injustice; we will have a particular care for the weak and vulnerable – as Jesus did. And, as we saw earlier that includes our planet, God's creation, when we see it being damaged by our own actions or those of others. Now, this doesn't mean we all need to be out in the streets with banners, but we do have a responsibility to be aware, to speak into a

situation when we can, or just to do little things like contributing to the food bank.

And then we are to be godly, or devout or pious. We can have rather a negative reaction to words like this, but when I think about it, some of the really godly men and women I have met have been what I would call winsome, people you would really like to spend time with.

Being godly has to do with acknowledging the presence of God in our lives. Barclay describes it as living reverently, with an awareness that this world is nothing other than the temple of God. I wonder what you think of that perspective. Tom Wright describes it as true devotion. He says: "... someone who is devout ... regards it as natural and normal to be in God's presence, to pray and live in such a way as to anticipate the future final appearance of Jesus." It reminds me of Brother Lawrence's book –'Practising the presence of God.' – something I think I need to work on.

Questions

Paul challenges us to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.

- What do you feel challenges us as Christian people today?
- If you want to, could you share what particularly challenges you?
- How can we help one another to face those challenges?
- Are there any specific actions you feel called to take?

The Saviour

Well, there was a lot in that section and maybe you are feeling a bit overwhelmed and not sure you can live up to these standards but the good news is that we don't have to! Jesus isn't telling us to live in an impossible way, he is welcoming us into a way of life for which he has set us free. Paul reminds us: that Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." Here we have the gospel in a nutshell.

Jesus gave himself for us when he died upon the cross in our place: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus has redeemed us; he has paid the price to set us free from our old master, sin, that tendency within us that makes us want to go our own way and not God's, that pull that we are not able to overcome ourselves, but the death of Jesus sets us free from that power. We are purified or washed clean so that we can now experience what we were created for – closeness with God as his very own people who are eager, to do what is good. Tom Wright defines this as "generous and helpful actions on behalf of the wider community." Grace brings salvation and salvation brings godliness.

Just a reminder: we are not saved by doing good works we can't earn our way into God's kingdom, but we are saved so that we may do good works.

To the Ephesians Paul writes: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph 2:8-10)

Suggestion:

Spend some time thanking Jesus for his sacrificial death on our behalf.

Conclusion

Remember I started by asking 'what are we here for?' Well, I hope this study has given you the opportunity to think about that.

But it's not easy is it, living in this time between, in a society that has, by and large, turned its back on God. And even more so at this present time when so many of the old certainties are disappearing and even the 'new normal' is constantly changing.

The psalmist once asked: "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3). Even as we look forward to the glory of Christ's return, I hope that our study this morning will encourage us to go back to the foundations of our faith, our experience of God's grace at work in our lives, and the foundations for Christian living. As someone has said: 'In the NT doctrine is grace and ethics is gratitude.'

So, let us encourage one another to live out our faith; to be: Those who are put right with God through the cross and who are now putting-right people for the world. May we continue to live in ways that are in tune with the ways of our Creator and which bring harmony and peace to our communities. But, above all, may we be so overwhelmed by the grace of God, as Paul was, that we are able to say with him: "My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20).

Amen