

The Effect of Grace

Titus 2:11-15

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Some events that happen in your life change you forever. For me and several of my classmates, one such experience was the death of our classmate Dannen Latherow. For those of you who don't know, Dannen was killed because the warning system at a railroad crossing had been turned off and didn't alert him and his friend to the danger of an oncoming train around a blind corner. They were killed instantly. It affected many in our community greatly.

It's been nearly 27 years since that happened, yet I know many can remember where they were when they first heard the news, and many vividly remember going to school the next day. Many of my classmates have told me that they now do the same thing I do—at every railroad crossing, we look both ways for ourselves before we cross, even if the gates are up. 27 years later, and I still do it, every single time I cross railroad tracks. That singular event taught us that we can't simply trust these warning devices, and we need to check for ourselves.

My point today is not to start on a depressing note, because this is joyful passage. My point is that significant events in our lives change how we live. Paul's point in our passage today is that if we grasp the significance of the grace God has shown us, then it will profoundly affect how we live. This change in the direction of our lives isn't a burden, but a natural consequence of a profound experience of grace.

The Grace of God

Paul begins our passage by talking about the wonder of grace we have experienced.

¹¹ For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. (Titus 2:11, NLT)

In the preceding passage, Paul gave instructions to the different groups in the church on how they should live. Paul begins this section with the word "for", which indicates that he is giving us the justification for his preceding instructions. His justification is quite simple: God's grace has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. That's a wonderful and powerful phrase, but it is easy to breeze by it and miss what it is saying.

We talk a lot about grace here, because we believe it is central to all we do and believe. But sometimes we don't talk about what grace means. Grace has been defined in many ways. Some have defined it as an acrostic: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Others talk about grace as an unmerited gift from God. Both are accurate definitions. But I want to take a slightly different approach to defining grace.

Apart from Christ, we were dead in our sin. We were so mired in sin that there was nothing we could do to save ourselves. We deserved God's condemnation. No matter

how good we tried to be, nothing could erase the sin of our past. Because God is just, He must punish sin, and we therefore stood condemned before a holy God.

But God showed us mercy, because even though it would have been just to wipe us off the face of the earth immediately, He didn't. He delayed His justice because He had a bigger plan. That plan was more than mercy, it was grace.

Grace is when we not only are spared the judgment we deserve but also given gifts and blessings we do not deserve. Jesus offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice, paying the penalty we could not pay for ourselves. The gift of Jesus is gracious, because not only did He spare us from the penalty of our sin, but He also delivered us into a new life. He set us free from the power of sin, enabling us to live with a different orientation to our lives, and He restored our relationship with God. He continues to be active in our lives to help us live life the way God intended. And one day, He will return to the earth to bring all things under His control and bring us to live with Him in Heaven for all of eternity. This is a tremendous gift we do not deserve. That is what grace is.

If you do not understand the wonder of grace, the rest of Paul's instructions won't make any sense to you. If you do not believe that your forgiveness was that big of a deal, then you don't understand Jesus' sacrifice. If you cannot see the difference between the life He saved you from and the life He offers you now, then you won't understand that why behind Paul's instructions. But when we understand the significance of God's grace, it will profoundly change us—not just what we believe, but the way we live as well.

Now before we get into the application of this truth, I want to address a question some people raise when reading this verse. Paul says God's grace brought salvation to all people. Some have taken that phrase to mean that God will ultimately save everyone in the world, regardless of their faith or what they do. They point to this verse as evidence that God's love is greater than His justice, so everyone will be saved.

That's an attractive notion, but it's completely wrong. Remember the context of this verse. Paul just got done saying the church was made up of old and young, men and women, slave and free, and we could even add Jew and Gentile to the list. His point was that God's grace has been extended to everyone in the world. No one is excluded from the offer of forgiveness and new life Jesus offers. Anyone who comes to Christ in faith will be forgiven. But only those who respond in faith will be forgiven. The rest will experience God's justice and wrath as they deserve. Paul is saying that God has made this grace available to every category of person there is—but only those who trust in Jesus' sacrifice will receive that grace.

Grace's Impact on Us

Paul emphasizes the wonder of God's grace but moves quickly into why it matters.

And we are instructed to turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God, ¹³ while we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed. (Titus 2:12-13, NLT)

Paul says that if we understand God's grace, then we should turn from godless living and sinful pleasures. In other words, we should stop doing the things the world does.

Now some of you may bristle at this notion. After all, we are not saved by our performance. We've established that clearly. We are saved by faith, not by measuring up to a standard. So how can Paul say in the same breath that we are saved by grace and that we must live differently? Aren't those two concepts at odds with each other?

Understand what Paul is saying. He is saying that we are saved by grace. We are saved by what God has done in our lives, not because we suddenly somehow measure up to His standards. But Paul points us to an even bigger truth: if we understand this grace, it will impact the way we live. It will cause us to run from the things of this world that once kept us from God. It will cause us to understand the danger and futility of our sin and to want to go in a different direction.

Sometimes we forget the heinous nature of our sin. All sin is a refusal to trust God. We know how God has told us to live, but we choose to reject His commands in favor of our own judgment. We look at the sinful pleasures of our world and decide they are worth ignoring God. But sinful pleasures come with a price. Their pleasure is short-lived.

Tom Mason is fond of saying that sinful pleasures always come with a hangover. When you consume too much alcohol, there are usually negative effects that come with it. It's fun for a while (otherwise people wouldn't do it), but afterward, there may be vomiting, light sensitivity, headaches, and just a general feeling of being unwell. And the hangover often lasts longer than the fun did!

That's true of most sinful pleasures. Sexual sin is fun for a moment, but shortly thereafter we are flooded with the guilt of knowing what we did was wrong. Indulging our desires to spend money is fun in the moment, but the high wears off before the credit card bill arrives. Telling someone off feels good when it happens, but there is often relational fallout that lasts long afterward. Sinful pleasures always have a hangover.

This is why we should turn aside from this kind of living—Christ has shown us the futility of sinful living and shown us a better way—His way! We do not turn aside from these things as a condition of salvation, but because we have come to recognize and believe that God's way really is better.

And that's what Paul tells us in the next sentence—instead, we should live in our evil world with wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to God. He tells us to throw off the "wisdom" of our world and embrace God's wisdom instead.

The greatest virtue in our society is the freedom to do "what makes you happy." In essence, we have said that if something makes a person happy, then it cannot be wrong. That's a slippery slope. If what I think makes me happy harms others in the

process, then it isn't good. And not everything that I think makes me happy is actually good for me.

We understand this from the perspective of food. We know that eating junk food and other unhealthy things may be pleasurable in the moment but is harmful in the long run. I've spoken to many who have had open heart surgery who quickly decided that changing their diet was worth it. They saw where eating junk food led and they weren't eager to go back. They saw that saying no to some desires is good, because not every desire we have is good.

This is what Paul is saying. The Christian has seen the effect of sin. We've seen where rebelling against God leads. We've learned that God's plan is far better than ours. That truth should affect us so profoundly that we are willing to swim against the current of our society to live holy lives.

What does this look like? I've got some suggestions.

- We work to change the way we speak. We begin weeding out profanity, even though it is increasingly acceptable in our world today. We discover better ways to communicate than using vulgar language. We begin trying to eliminate speech that tears down others. We do that by changing not just the things we say, but the things we think, recognizing that our language reflects what's in our hearts.
- We follow God's commands about sex. Our world has become increasingly permissive in its attitudes toward sex. It tells us we should indulge in whatever feels good in the moment. But God says sex is a powerful tool intended for a marriage relationship. We should turn away from casual uses of sex, whether that is a premarital relationship, pornography, or the increasingly explicit portrayals of sex we see in many popular TV shows and movies.
- We work to weed out anger. Most of the time our anger has selfish motives. Often, we get angry over perceived slights from others. Sometimes we get angry because people are saying things we don't want to hear. We should work to listen, to understand what people are saying, and to engage our brains, instead of merely giving vent to our emotions.
- We should strive for honesty in all our dealings. The world says sometimes a little lie is ok. More and more people believe that a big lie is also ok if it gets us what we want. We should recognize that God is truthful and calls His children to be the same. This doesn't give us license to be mean, calling people names because "it's true!" But it means we don't try to manipulate facts to benefit ourselves. We don't leave out uncomfortable truths. We deal honestly with people, the way we hope they would deal with us.

Grace leads us to change how we live. We don't live differently in hopes of earning salvation, but because we have become convinced that God's way is best.

Looking Forward

Paul explains one other part of the motivation for godly living. It's that we are looking forward to Christ's return. Many people are nervous about Jesus coming back. They are

concerned about the things they have heard about the end times and the troubles that may precede Christ's return. But believers look at Christ's return differently. It reminds us that this life is not all there is, and one day we will be with Jesus forever in Heaven.

When Jesus comes back sin will be destroyed; the myriad ways sin had corrupted our bodies and our world will no longer be in force. We will no longer fight the temptation to go a different direction, but we will experience life as God truly intended!

Why does it matter that we eagerly await Christ's return? C.S. Lewis said it well.

It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth "thrown in"; aim at earth and you will get neither.¹

When we remember that we are living for something more than what we can see and feel and touch right now, it gives us the perspective and motivation to live differently. It reminds us that giving up some worldly pleasures now will be worth it in the long run.

Why Jesus Came

In verse 14, Paul explains why Jesus came to save us in the first place.

He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds. (Titus 2:14, NLT)

Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice not only to free us from the past penalty of sin, but to lead us to a different kind of life entirely. He died not only to purchase Heaven for us, but also to change the way we live now.

For a number of years, we took students to the Dare2Share conference, which sought to teach them how to share their faith. They taught a simple acrostic to help remember the essential points of the gospel message: **G**od created us to be with Him. **O**ur sins separate us from God. **S**ins cannot be removed by good deeds. **P**aying the price for sin, Jesus died and rose again. **E**veryone who trusts in Him alone has eternal life. **L**ife with Jesus starts now and lasts forever.

When they first started teaching this, L stood for Life that's eternal means we will be with Jesus forever. But they changed it to Life with Jesus starts now and lasts forever because they wanted to emphasize that the blessing of salvation is not just for the life to come, but this life as well. Jesus came to not only purchase Heaven, but to cleanse us, helping us to live as His people, helping us to live in a way that honors Him, and helping us to experience life the way He intended. When we understand the gospel message in that way, it drives us to live with a different set of priorities than the rest of the world.

Titus' Role

Paul concluded this section with one more exhortation for Titus.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 134.

¹⁵ You must teach these things and encourage the believers to do them. You have the authority to correct them when necessary, so don't let anyone disregard what you say. (Titus 2:15, NLT)

Paul reminded Titus that as a leader in the church, he had a responsibility to teach these things and to call believers to holiness, even though it might be an unpopular message. He reminded Titus that he ultimately did not answer to the people of Crete, but to the Lord. So, he should speak the truth, even if they were not eager to hear it.

This is a challenge in church ministry. When you are around people you love, it's hard to tell them things you know they don't want to hear. But love demands that sometimes we must confront people in their sin. We must remind them that what they are doing is leading them away from the Lord, and they are trading away the blessings of God for temporary pleasure. Sometimes people will get angry with you. Sometimes they might even stop being your friend. That hurts. But ultimately, the most loving thing we can do is call one another to holiness. Paul reminds us that calling Christians to holy living is not adding to the gospel message, but rather calling them to live up to the privilege and purpose God intends for us to have.

Conclusion

There is an old story that I once heard that I think illustrates an important truth for us to take home today. One day, a little girl went outside after a rainstorm and saw that there was a mud puddle in the driveway. She got excited, went outside, and enjoyed stomping around and sitting in the puddle. What she didn't realize was that her family was just a few blocks away from the ocean. When her parents called and told her to get out of the mud puddle so they could go to the ocean, she got mad. She was having fun in her puddle and wanted to stay there.

What would prompt someone to choose a mud puddle over the ocean? They don't understand the greatness of the ocean. If all you've ever known is a mud puddle, then a mud puddle seems great. But once you get a glimpse of the ocean, the decision is a no-brainer.

Paul reminds us that Jesus has not only saved us from the penalty of our sin, but He has given us a glimpse of a different life—a life as grand as the ocean. We've spent all our lives playing in mud puddles. It's what we know, and at times it's even fun. But Jesus has shown us something better. But if we want to experience it, we've got to get out of the mud puddle, even if everyone else is staying, and go in a different direction.

Christians, you are called to more than a mud puddle life! Look to Jesus, see what He has done for you, and trust that He sees what you cannot. As we live with a different perspective, we can pack up the life we've been living, leaving it behind, and head toward the ocean of God's grace, where we can experience the joy He intended for us all along.

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