

The Difference the Gospel Makes

Titus 3:3-8

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If you've ever played on a sports team, you know the importance of doing the fundamentals well. The basic elements of the game are essential, no matter what level you're at. This is why sometimes when a team is struggling, a coach may insist their team go back to the basics and focus on doing the fundamental things right. They may spend an entire practice on passing properly, fielding ground balls cleanly, or working on proper tackling technique. Sometimes people get bored with the fundamentals, because they don't seem exciting, but even professional athletes spend time practicing these skills, because they know they are the foundation of everything else.

Throughout the book of Titus, Paul has been trying to give Titus the tools and direction he needs to minister to the church on the island of Crete. He has given Titus a great deal of guidance on what the new believers should be doing. So it seems somewhat strange for Paul to return to the basics of the gospel message as he nears the end of his letter. But I think Paul understood that the fundamentals of the Christian faith are what everything else is built on. If we get the fundamentals right, the other things tend to fall into place. If we get them wrong, everything falls apart.

BC Condition

Paul begins by drawing attention to the condition of people before a relationship with Christ.

³ Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other. (Titus 3:3, NLT)

The gospel message always begins with a sober view of who we are apart from Christ. This is one of the chief reasons we must keep reiterating the gospel message to ourselves—it is the basis of the humility Paul commands in v. 2. Until we understand that before Christ, we were wholly lost, we will never look at ourselves or the world around us appropriately.

Though modern academia has tried to institute different nomenclature, all of history is divided into two parts—what came Before Christ and what comes after. The same should be true in our lives. We should be able to see a difference in who we are once we begin a relationship with Jesus. A person who has no change isn't a true believer. Sometimes it is easy for us to forget what our BC lives were like, but this is a dangerous mistake to make.

Paul includes himself and Titus in this description of the BC condition. He says first that **they were foolish and disobedient**. This is significant because Paul just finished talking about the importance of obedience to authorities. He was speaking specifically of the human governing authorities, but his implicit emphasis was that we submit to those

authorities because by doing so we are submitting to God, the ultimate authority. His point is that before we began a relationship with Jesus Christ, we were foolish and rebellious. We were unwilling to submit our desires to anyone else. We did our own thing and relied wholly on our own judgment. This is the condition of every person apart from Jesus.

Furthermore, Paul says **we were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures**. This is evident in our world today. Many today reject God's authority because they believe God limits our fun. The argument many make is that we are created with certain desires, so we should act upon them. It is foolish and harmful to tell us to be something other than who we know ourselves to be. In America now, June is "pride month." Pride month, on the surface, is about the LGBTQ agenda, but its message is much deeper. The message is that there is no absolute truth; instead, we should act upon our desires, and we should do so proudly, without regard to what anyone else says, because we clearly know what's best for us.

Paul says this is the condition of every human being apart from Christ. When we refuse to submit to His authority, we follow all sorts of other lies. We begin to view ourselves as gods, and we chase after our own sinful desires. The effect is that we become slaves to those desires. We begin seeking only the next high we can get by indulging our lusts and pleasures. Ironically, we end up far more enslaved than we imagined submitting to Christ would make us!

We see this in the rampant addictions present in our world today. We see it in...

- People addicted to sex. We have treated sex as primarily a means to fulfill our desires, not as a powerful tool God has designed for a specific purpose. As such, many are slaves to their sexual desires, and are even defined by those desires. Our desires control us instead of us controlling our desires.
- People addicted to substances. This can be drugs, alcohol, tobacco, even caffeine, food, or any number of things we consume. Many substances are a way of escaping the challenges of reality. Instead of learning healthy ways to deal with the struggles we face, we mask them by using substances that make us feel good. Ironically, we then become dependent upon them to even function.
- People addicted to attention. The internet and social media have made us hungry for people to pay attention to us. We begin to believe the lie that if we can just get more likes, more shares, more people to follow us, that makes us significant. Yet, even when we get those things, we feel hollow and empty inside.
- People addicted to amusement. We have devices that provide us constant stimulation if we want them to. We play games, we watch videos, we scroll endlessly, and as a result, we miss out on the things that really matter like family, friends, and even just quiet reflection.

This is what the world holds out as our hope and purpose and meaning. When we look objectively, we can see that when we refuse to submit to Christ, we are misled and put into a slavery we don't even realize exists.

The last element Paul includes as part of the BC condition is that they were **full of evil and envy and hated each other**. This is the result of being driven only by our desires—when those desires don't satisfy us (and they never will), we begin attacking the people around us. We become frustrated by the people who seem happy (though this is often a façade, especially in our modern world) and begin to envy them and even hate them. This is the natural, downward spiral of a life lived apart from Christ. It is empty, it is unfulfilling, and every attempt to change that leads us deeper into despair.

Why does Paul say all of this? Because until we remember that this was our position before Christ, we will never have empathy and patience with those who are still in that position. Sometimes Christians look down on those who are caught in this cycle of emptiness. Sometimes we believe that if people were just more like us, then things would be better. Sometimes we forget that we were in that same condition, and Christ is the only thing that separates us from them. Understanding where we were when we were on our own should make us soft, gentle, and patient toward those still mired in futile ways of living and thinking.

This was especially important for Titus to remember, because the people of Crete did not have a stellar reputation. They were known as liars and swindlers. If Titus did not remember that he was once just like them, it would be easy to write them off. Paul said to remember the difference Christ had made in his life, and to keep the same perspective as he looked at the lives of those who were still lost.

Understanding our condition apart from Christ is foundational to the gospel message. When we remember how far we have come because of Him, it gives us the confidence and hope we need to believe He can do the same in anyone's life. And that will drive us to keep going, even in the face of people who are utterly lost. God is far bigger than our sin—hallelujah!

The Source of Our Salvation

After laying out our condition before Christ, Paul shifts into celebrating what Christ has done for us.

⁴ But—When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, ⁵ he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.

⁶ He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior.

⁷ Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7, NLT)

When Paul explains the gospel message, there is usually a spot in the middle that has the word "but". This is because the gospel message centers around the change Christ makes. In other words, we were lost in our sins, but... We lived in rebellion, but... We were utterly hopeless, but... This is what Paul does here.

He explains several elements central to the gospel message. First, **God saved us**. This seems like a simple statement, but it is significant. Notice that Paul did not say, God

helped us. He did not say, we *found* God. He does not give us any credit in the process. God is the One who does the saving. He is the One who delivers us from the life of sin and bondage. Why does this matter? It removes any basis for us to become arrogant or hard-hearted toward others. It is God who has saved us, and this should lead us to grateful and humble worship.

Second, He saved us because of His mercy. This dovetails with and expounds on how Paul began. He explains that God didn't save us because of the things we had done (or the things He saw we would do in the future), but because of His mercy. What we deserve is condemnation. What we deserve is for God to turn His back on us and leave us to wallow in our sin. But He didn't do that. He chose to show mercy to us, even though we didn't deserve it.

Sometimes people get the idea that God saved us because He could foresee that we would be good people who would eventually choose Him. But that denies what makes the gospel so wonderful. God didn't save us because He thought we were worthy—He saved us because He is merciful! Anything good that comes from us is not something we have mustered up, it is a result of what God has done for us. It removes all possibility of pride or arrogance toward those who do not yet believe. If we get this right, it changes how we view ourselves, our God, and the world around us.

Third, he washed away our sins and gave us new life. God did not merely turn the other way with regard to our sin. He did not just overlook our evil. He took care of the problem once and for all. He sent Jesus to pay the penalty of our sin. But He didn't stop there. He not only paid for our sin, He set us free from the bondage we were in! Through the Holy Spirit, we have new life. We have the ability to go in a different direction. We can now see the futility of our old way of thinking and living and submit to Christ instead. God has made it possible for us to have a life completely different from the life we had before.

Fourth, He poured out His Spirit on us. This statement mentions all three persons of the trinity. God (the Father) poured out the Holy Spirit on us through Jesus Christ (the Son). What this means is that we now have unique fellowship with God in our lives. He guides us, He leads us, He speaks to our hearts. He helps us see the futility of sin and drives us to go in a different direction. I believe we have the ability to resist the Spirit's leading for a time, but when we do, He makes us miserable to remind us that trying to live in our own strength is an exercise in futility!

Paul emphasizes that God begins a unique relationship with everyone who trusts in Him. He is present with us in every moment of our lives, and He helps us through every circumstance: good, bad, and everything in between. We no longer need to live in our own strength and wisdom, because we have His!

Fifth, He made us right in his sight and gives us confidence of eternal life. It is easy to gloss over this statement and miss its meaning and importance. Paul says that God made us right in His sight. In other words, when God looks at a believer, He no

longer sees our sin. We sometimes imagine that God looks at us the way we look at other people. We tend to keep a list of all the ways people have failed in the past in our minds. When they fail, we just add that to the list. Many imagine that's how God views us. As a result, we assume that eventually He will tire of our constant failures.

But Paul says something completely different. God made us right in His sight. God didn't just make us acceptable; He made us right. When God looks at us, He no longer sees our sin, He sees Christ's righteousness. That's great news! Why? Because it means He isn't going to get tired of us. He isn't going to eventually decide we are a lost cause and turn His back on us, and it means we can be confident of our eternal state.

If God did not make us right, or if our salvation was based on our performance, it would call our future into question. I can't tell you how many times I have heard people say, I'm afraid I'm no longer good enough for Heaven, or I think I've lost my salvation because of what I've done. If we understand the gospel properly, that our salvation is wholly because of what He has done, and that He has made us righteous in His sight, then we understand that we don't just have a pie-in-the-sky hope of eternal life, we have a confident assurance we will spend eternity with our Lord in Heaven. Jesus gives us confidence, even in the times when we feel like the most abject failures. Our confidence is not anchored to what we have done, but to what He has done.

The Effect

After laying all of this out, Paul makes one final application.

⁸ This is a trustworthy saying, and I want you to insist on these teachings so that all who trust in God will devote themselves to doing good. These teachings are good and beneficial for everyone. (Titus 3:8, NLT)

Paul urges Titus to insist on these teachings. It's easy (and tempting) as a teacher to get sidetracked by all sorts of things. People are always clamoring for something new and different. They don't want to work on the fundamentals, they want to work on trick plays, on flashy things, or on things that seem more exciting. Some may even say we need to talk about things that are more practical than the simple gospel message. But Paul says nothing is more practical than the gospel message. It is the foundation of all Christian belief and practice.

He gives two reasons to keep returning to the gospel message. **First, so all who trust in God will do good.** Paul's emphasis is that if we truly understand the message of the gospel, it will lead us to live differently. It will lead us not to live in rebellion to God, but in submission to Him. People sometimes get confused by this. They imagine that if we're saved apart from what we have done, then it doesn't matter what we do. That's not true. God calls us and enables us to live holy lives. He does this not because He is mean but because He knows the futility of living apart from Him. A person who has truly trusted in Christ cannot keep going the same direction they were before. An encounter with Christ causes us to go in a different direction, both because we trust Him implicitly and because we are grateful to Him. We don't try to earn salvation, but we do try to live in ways that honor Him and that show we trust Him.

Second, these teachings are beneficial for everyone. Paul is speaking here not only of the church, but of those outside it. Our world is profoundly messed up. It is lost. People feel hopeless and meaningless and pointless. Depression and anxiety are at an all-time high, even though we have more amusements, more pleasures, and more abundance than at any other time. Our world does not merely need a different political environment, it does not need better drugs, and it doesn't need more money. What it needs is Jesus! He is the remedy to the problems we face today. That is the message we need to teach, because it benefits those who believe, but also those who need to believe.

Conclusion

Paul lays out the fundamentals of the Christian faith in these verses. While they may seem elementary, they are also foundational. So as we conclude, let me give you some principles that will help you use these truths effectively.

First, remember where you came from. When you find yourself getting frustrated with the lostness of our world, or with people who just don't seem to be living the way they should, think about what you were like before Christ. Remember that apart from Jesus, you were misled, you were foolish, you were disobedient, and you were lost. That's the condition of the world. Rather than becoming angry at them, try to point them to Jesus. Remember who you used to be and who made you different—it wasn't you; it's Jesus.

Second, remember your source of confidence. Every Christian (even me) has times of doubt. There will inevitably be times when we doubt whether this whole Jesus thing is real or not. And there may be times when you doubt whether Jesus really loves you, or whether He has gotten tired of your constant failures and turned His back on you. Come back to the basics of the gospel when those times come. When we remember the fundamentals of our faith—that we are saved not by what we do but by what Christ has done, it gives us assurance. Christ died to give us confidence of our inheritance, so remember these truths so you can live confidently!

Finally, remember why He saved you. God saved us to give us eternal life, but that's not just something in the future—it's something now as well. The gospel calls us to live differently than the world. Many of God's commands are hard because they go against the pattern of our world, but when we're honest, we remember that the world's pattern isn't working, so we need to go in a different direction. God saved us so we would live for Him. Our goal is not to earn our salvation, but to live the kind of life God intends for us. When we come back to the gospel message, we remember that He calls us to be holy! Keep working to follow Him fully—His way is better.

The fundamentals are always important. That's true in sports and it is especially true in the Christian faith. It is easy for us to get sidetracked by all sorts of ancillary issues in our faith. That's why it is imperative that we continually preach the gospel—both to ourselves, and to the world around us.

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