

A Healthy Church: The Gospel At Work Among God's People
Titus 3: 1-8

First Presbyterian Church
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Maybe you have experienced what I have—You have brought out the lawnmower that's been sitting in the garage or the shed for 6 months, dusted it off, and prepared to fire it up to cut the grass for that first Spring mow. You can already smell the pleasant aroma of freshly cut grass. You anticipate the feel of the rumbling little engine in your hands. You look forward to what might be the most satisfying job of all time—there once was long grass, and I made it short.

And then a pull on the cord. And another. And again. Over and over and over to no avail. Is there gas in it? Yeah, there's gas. So what's the problem? Well, the problem is that the gas that is in it is the same gas that has been in it for the last 6 months. For those who are experienced in these things, you know that gas goes bad. Your lawnmower isn't going to start if it has bad gasoline.

The church in Crete is not running properly. The job of the church is not being done. It's not healthy. It's not healthy because the teaching that is supposed to be feeding it is wrong. The gasoline that is supposed to keep the engine running is bad. And so the church is unhealthy and the weeds are taking over.

Crete in the first century and Louisiana in the 21st century are not all that dissimilar. And if the church today is going to be healthy—if our church is going to remain a healthy church—then the engine needs to run right. And the gas that fuels it needs to be sound and true.

The concept that Paul is dealing with here can be summarized this way: ***Truth, experienced in community, produces change.*** It's a concept that flows from this passage and it's a concept that really governs the way we understand discipleship in the church. It's a concept that governs the way we

see the function of the church. It's really part of the vision we, as your pastors, have for this particular church—that the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ might be experienced in and processed through a healthy community so that it produces change—personal change, community change, societal change, world change.

Let's dig into the passage and explore this a bit more. Look what Paul says in verse 1—"you, Titus, teach what accords with sound doctrine." Paul says that if the church is going to be healthy, then the teachers need to be teaching "sound doctrine." The word "sound" has a connotation of both health and correctness. It's accurate. It's whole. As a friend of mine said, it's "keeping it on the rails." Or if you prefer, it's "hitting it down the fairway." That means that what is taught is to be the clear and plain truth of what God has revealed to us in his Word. We don't stray into the rough and teach on the outskirts. That's why you won't hear us preaching from the pulpit on the virtues of homeschooling, even though some of your pastors homeschool their kids. You won't hear us preaching on how everyone should take the same interpretation of end time events. You won't hear us preaching about style of music that should be used in church, even though we might have strong opinions about music. Or about whether singles should "date" or "court." Because all of those topics, though reasonable to discuss, are not the central issue. What is central—what are the rails that the church is to run on—is the clear, historic Gospel. The truth that God created a good world, that humankind—you and I—have broken and distorted that goodness and turned into ourselves and therefore alienated ourselves from God. That God, in his rich and abundant mercy, has tracked us down and redeemed us through the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. This is what we preach. And we do so because we believe that the Truth is the fuel that keeps the engine going. God's revealed Truth and the glorious good news of salvation through Christ is what creates and maintains a healthy church and what ultimately leads to holistic change.

That message is, of course, both gloriously simple and gloriously layered. And if you want to know more about what this church believes, please come talk to me some time. But today, we are going to focus on one aspect of the Truth. A fundamental aspect that is highlighted here in Titus. And it's this: right doctrine leads to right doing. Healthy theology leads to a healthy church.

Sound belief leads to sound behavior. And those two things—belief and behavior—are not meant to be separated.

Let me illustrate this. Picture a straight line. On one end of the line are the words, “who I am.” And on the other side are the words “what I do.” These two things are tied together. Your identity, your value, your significance... and your actions, what you do. They are tied closely together. But great damage is done when this line flows in the wrong way. If the line is an arrow that points from what you do to who you are, then problems will arise. If I *do* things that I believe are right and good—I go to church, I help an old lady across the street, I don’t cheat on my taxes, and I attend all of my sons baseball games, then who I am seems pretty good, and I feel good about myself. God accepts me. I have value, worth and significance. All because I’m doing the right thing. Of course, that ultimately leads to pride and self-righteousness. But it can lead the other way too. Because if what I do seems to be wrong...I’ve not treated my friends very well today; I’ve yelled at my child; my computer history is filled with things I don’t want anyone else to see... if what I am doing is shameful, then I am going to view myself as shameful. My identity now is reprehensible, and I’m in despair. If my identity is based on my actions, it’s always going to fluctuate between pride and despair.

Our identity has to come from another place. It can’t come from what we do. The Bible says that by faith in Christ and his sacrificial death on the cross, we are given a new identity. When we see what God has done for us in Jesus, our identity is radically changed. Our identity is that of *loved*. We are given value and worth and significance because of what Jesus has done for us. And that frees us from having to find our identity in what we do—whether that is all the good stuff or all the bad stuff. If you are a Christian, let me remind you that your identity is loved and adored, beloved, cherished, welcomed, forgiven, righteous, pure. All because of what Jesus has done for you, not because of what you have or have not done for him. That’s the glorious truth of the Gospel.

But what is also true is that the line between who we are and what we do does not disappear. It just flows the other way. When we see how loved and

accepted we are because of what Jesus has done, it changes the way we act. We do what we do *not to be who we are, but because of who we are.*

Look at how Paul describes it. When the Gospel is at work in a community, when the truth of that clear, good news of what Jesus has done is being poured into a church, here's what happens: older men are sober-minded and dignified and patient and loving and steadfast. And older women are discreet in their speech and enjoy the gifts of food and drink without abusing them. And younger women love their husbands (and remember, in this culture they would not have *chosen* these husbands) and their children. They are working to make flourishing homes. Young men are self-controlled (which should be considered a miracle!). Slaves are working for their masters with joy and honesty. It's having deep effect! The Gospel is always supposed to do this—to change people. Who we are should affect what we do.

Paul spells it out most clearly in verse 11. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, *training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.*” And in verse 14...” (Jesus) gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” Saving grace teaches people to say no to sin and yes to righteousness. Who you are changes what you do. That is the truth that is to be proclaimed.

Let's switch to community. Remember, *the Truth, when experienced in community, leads to change.* As a preacher, I would not have minded it at all if verse one said, “Titus, teach what accords with sound doctrine. Then everything will be fine. The end.” That's what preachers would love. Preach a decent sermon and everyone will change and the world will be a better place. Truth leads to change. Which is true... but it's missing a key ingredient. In God's good and gracious design, he has designed us to need each other. That is also true about the way we change. Change takes place when the Truth of the Gospel is processed through and experienced in community. The community has to be the engine that drives it. Think about the lawnmower illustration again—if the gas is bad, the mower won't work. But likewise, the gas itself is not going to cut any grass. It needs to feed the engine that makes the

lawnmower work. The community of the Church is the engine. The Truth of the Gospel feeds it but the engine has to run in order for it to be a healthy church and in order for personal, communal and societal change to take place.

Look at what is happening in these verses. There's lots of teaching going on. And it's coming from many different places. Titus is told to teach what accords with sound doctrine. In chapter one we saw that elders are to be able to give instruction in that same thing—sound doctrine. Older women are told to teach (instruct) the younger women. Titus is teaching and he's teaching the elders to teach and he's teaching the older women to teach and everyone is learning and teaching at the same time. That sound doctrine is reverberating all throughout the church. The Word of God is filling the community in every part.

Then look at this—Paul tells Titus to be a “model of good works.” He is to model what the rest of the church is to look like. And that idea is present all throughout the letter. The elders are to reflect a godly character that is to be a model for others in the church. Older Christians are to model godly character for younger or newer Christians. Parents are to model it for children. People are to model this character for each other. Slaves are even meant to be a model of godliness to their masters. This is a vibrant and healthy engine that is at work here. It's not just leaders telling everyone what to do. It's people ministering to each other. It's people walking side by side, encouraging each other with the Gospel. It's needy people who are also needed. Those in need of change as the engine of change.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. I can stand up here and preach all day long about forgiveness, and you may come to a deeper understanding of it. You may even be moved. But when you talk about your friend behind her back and it wounds her and you ask for forgiveness and she gives it—that is the kind of learning that can't happen just from sitting in a pew. You *know* forgiveness then. You have experienced the truth. Because of that, you understand more deeply what the forgiveness of Christ is like.

Or when you feel deeply ashamed of something in your life and you open yourself up to someone else in dangerous ways—and then that person does

exactly the opposite of what you expected him to do... he moves toward you in love and care instead of moving away in fear and disgust... that will deeply affect you. You now *know* what it means to bring your shame to Jesus and have him take it and move toward you in love. You know it because you have experienced it. *The Truth, when experienced in community, leads to change.*

Let's talk about that last one—change. Look at verses 11 through 13... this is really cool (a friend of mine pointed it out to me this week). Paul says that the grace of God has *appeared* in verse 11. He's talking about the event that has changed the world—the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The grace of God—a person—has appeared, and the world is different because of it. But in verse 13, he says this... “we are waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” So Jesus has appeared *and* we are waiting for him to appear. Jesus has come, and he will come again, to complete the redemption he has initiated. To consummate his glorious work.

We live between these appearings. And here's what's so cool... what are we to be doing between these appearings? Well, we just talked about how the church is to teach one another, model the Gospel for each other, be this engine that runs on grace and is continually moving forward. Well, look what Paul says happens when this is taking place... verse 5: when the women are living out the truth of the Gospel, Paul says they are doing it so that the word of God might not be reviled, or blasphemed. So others might not have anything bad to say about God's Word. And then verse 8: to Titus, and probably to the young men as well... when they are living out the truth of the Gospel, they are doing it so that their opponents might have nothing to say. Then in verse 10: when slaves are living out the Gospel they are doing so in order that the word of God might be adorned—made beautiful, shown attractive. As Christians are waiting for Jesus to appear, we are actually to be showing Jesus to those around us. We are to make Jesus appear through our love and service to each other and our neighbors. The Church should look like Jesus to the world around it. The outside world should look at the church and not only have nothing bad to say, but see the beauty of Christ displayed in the church community.

That's real change. Change that is personal. Change that is communal. And change that is societal. A community of people fed by the truth who are living out that truth as an engine of change in the world.

So how do we do it? Well, here are a few simple recommendations: First, soak yourself in the truth. Saturate yourself in God's Word. Soak in it until you have prune hands! As a friend of mine likes to say, let the word of God run through your house like a two-year-old. Let it knock over some stuff. Christians have historically done that by coming to church and hearing God's Word preached *and* in opening God's Word on their own. Read the Bible. And pay special attention to the "indicatives." The things that are true about God, about Jesus, and about you. Read good books too. It's ok for people other than pastors to read theology. If you want recommendations, come ask me.

Secondly, do all of this with others. If you have a family, try opening God's Word at the dinner table. If you have little kids, this will probably be really hard, so don't beat yourself up if it doesn't go well all the time. Often our time is a disaster. But even if it's just a little, give it a try. Get a good children's Bible. My favorite is the Jesus Storybook Bible. Read over dinner or at bedtime, but try to spend some time in God's Word as a family, even if it's just once or twice a week. There are 44 chapters in the Jesus Storybook Bible, so even if you just read it once a week, you'd be done in a year.

Get together with friends and pray together. Read the Bible together. Join a small group. And most importantly—and this is really important—open yourself up to others in ways that are potentially dangerous to you. Be dangerously vulnerable with each other. And watch how Jesus shows you his grace and love through it.

What about change? How do we do that? Well, here's the great part. Remember all of that teaching and training that was going on? Look at who is the ultimate teacher... verse 11... for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...*training* us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions..." The ultimate teacher is Jesus. The ultimate disciple is the Holy Spirit. He's the one ultimately responsible for change. What the Bible says is that when we cast ourselves before the Lord in repentance and faith, when we

avail ourselves to His Word and his sacraments and his people, he works in us. When we hear the beautiful song of the Gospel more clearly, it will drown out the other songs that lead us astray. We will be changed. Us, our communities, and our society. He's promised to do it!