

SPIRITUAL LIVING

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LIVING IN GOD'S GENEROUS LOVE

Sadly, we know all too well the horror of brutal regimes across the globe, who through fear of losing power end up turning on their people. If we live in such a situation, how do we make sense of the opening verse of this chapter? Well, Paul writes before the idea of democracy has largely taken hold. He has a strong view (which we can see echoes of elsewhere in his writing - see Romans 13) of the sovereignty of God and Paul understands that governments are raised up by God for the safety and security of people and to bring order. It is important to remember the context in which Paul writes.

The Christian community on Crete, pastored by Titus, is a small and fledgling one, and Paul wants the church to be winsome, not snuffed out before they've even got going - they are to be good citizens and recognised as such by the surrounding culture. Balance is important. As I write, the COP26 Climate Summit is underway, and I see from my social media feed some Christian activists championing civil disobedience as a means of making the point about the urgent climate emergency. The right to protest, to challenge and to critique those in power is a cherished right, grounded in the Christian tradition, but our protest should be within the confines of the law, done respectfully, not with aggression or slander.

My twitter feed is too often filled with fellow Christians (and often clergy) making the most rude and aggressive statements about politicians with whom they disagree. For Paul, such interaction crosses the line - he cautions Titus to be gentle and humble in his interactions with people (v.2) - following the example of Jesus. Jesus rebuked and challenged, he didn't cave into the prevailing culture of the time, but, most obviously in his passion, he chooses the path of obedience and submission.

Now before we get too self-righteous and judgmental, Paul reminds his hearers that we all have a past (v.3), so humility is the appropriate response, remembering that God has graciously made us into what we are now. What we were (v.3) should be a stark contrast from what we are now (v.2). We were foolish, disobedient (literally a word that speaks of being rebellious, causing disorder and disarray), yet even when we were far away, 'dead in our transgressions and sins' (Ephesians 2:1ff) God has reached out to us in Jesus (v.4).

Out of sheer kindness, God has reached out to us. He acts with benevolence, with great generosity and incredible mercy. Mercy is love that is undeserved, the basis by which we are saved. Our salvation is not because of anything we have done, but because of God's extravagant and wonderful mercy (v.5). As Archbishop Temple famously once

said: 'we contribute nothing to our salvation except the sin from which we need to be redeemed.'

By God's incredible mercy we receive salvation by God's grace, poured into our lives by the Holy Spirit (v.6). As the Spirit applies God's mercy and grace we are washed clean and renewed in hope. Through such salvation we inherit all the riches of God's grace and promises. And so, in view of God's great and generous mercy, we are to respond with a life that honours and pleases him - a life that is gentle, humble and courteous towards others.

FOR REFLECTION...

- Reflect on the magnitude of the Gospel. What does it mean for you today to be saved?

DOING GOOD

The gospel that has transformed the world through the ages must transform you and me. If the gospel has no effect on our conduct, or we fail to live like those who belong to a new master, we are in danger of being like those who do not produce '...fruit in keeping with repentance' (Matthew 3:8). For Paul, the effects of the gospel should be the outworking of God's grace in our lives, seen by 'doing good' (v.8) This theme of 'doing good' is a repeated theme for Paul in this letter, so it is worth paying attention to it.

Doing good means not getting into petty arguments with people that will only lead to quarrels and disagreements. During the course of my ministry, I have had church members who seem to enjoy the drama of stirring up conflict and argument with a well-placed word or calculated comment; designed to inflame someone they know who will react. Such behaviour is unbecoming those who claim the name of Jesus Christ. Arguments only lead to quarrelling, then to someone taking offence, harbouring resentment and leading to unforgiveness and before too long there is division among God's people.

Paul takes such divisive behaviour seriously - such people should be put out of the fellowship (v.10). We may balk at such treatment but action must be taken to preserve the well-being of the whole Body of Christ, especially in a context where a fledgling community wants to remain attractive to its neighbours. Paul suggests two warnings for such behaviour, giving opportunity for repentance, grace and a response, but if the people will not listen, they have to take responsibility for the consequences (v.11). Purity of God's house trumps inclusiveness in Paul's mind.

As I write this, I have recently completed reading the first volume of John Wesley's journal featuring his time in Georgia. Wesley frequently chose not to admit to Holy Communion those who were unrepentant of their sins. To simply lift this approach into our context would be clumsy, but the discipline of the church bears some reflection alongside the grace and mercy of the church.

For Paul, 'doing good' means to be productive and hospitable. Work hard, fulfil your duties, watch your life and conduct closely. Again, John Wesley's 'works of mercy' - serving others, caring for the unlovely, being generous with our time and resources provides a good pattern of application for 'doing good'. The early Church were famed (or notorious) for such radical kindness to others. The first hospitals and orphanages were founded by early Christians who refused to desert people who were sick or destitute and instead, fled towards such folk in kindness and care. The early Methodists were known for such acts of kindness to the poor and dispossessed, their 'doing good' was a clear example of the grace of God that had been received into their lives.

In fact, John Wesley believed that by carrying out works of service and kindness, this might be a 'means of grace' - a channel by which we discover and receive more of God's renewing grace in our lives. For Paul, grace leads to 'doing good', with such good works being a sign of gratitude to God for such a salvation. The church and its members are in peril when we get this the other way around. No matter how many good works we may be employed in, they will never atone for the weight of our sin and will never contribute one iota towards our salvation.

Many years ago, a friend of mine was crossing a road in our home city. She had headphones in her ears and was more focussed on her phone than the road in front of her and so didn't notice the car careering towards the zebra crossing she was using, with no hope of stopping. An awful carnage seemed inevitable. Mercifully, a fellow pedestrian from a slightly different vantage-point spotted the danger in the nick of time and rugby-tackled my friend to safety as the passing car sailed past. Her life had been mercifully saved. When she collected herself and realised what had and hadn't happened, she couldn't express her gratitude enough to the one who had come to her rescue. What will you and I do today, then, to express our gratitude and deep appreciation for the one who has come to our eternal rescue?

FOR REFLECTION...

- What will you do today to reflect the generous kindness of our God? How/where can you 'do good'?

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