



A God-Centered Life (Titus 1:1-4)

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One of the more common criticisms of Christian churches, books, or positions is that they are legalistic. We're not exactly sure what the word means. But we know it when we feel it! If it feels too strict, too hard, doesn't support what I want to do, or emphasizes obedience more than acceptance, that's legalistic. Why is legalism bad? Because Jesus is all about love, all about grace, all about accepting people just the way we are. If something feels kind, it must be the gracious thing Jesus would do. If something feels unyielding, that's the legalism the Pharisees promoted.

Friends, the perspective I just described is a tremendous problem because it gets both legalism and grace completely wrong. What's legalism? Trying to earn love or favor from God through obedience to God. It has nothing to do with whether something feels hard or requires careful obedience. What's grace? God's undeserved favor poured out through Jesus Christ that produces a holy people who are zealous for good works. It's not about telling people they're ok just the way they are.

Tit 2:11-14, "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, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who 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."

Many Christians think of grace and good works as opposites. We like the idea of relating to God on the basis of grace. But the moment someone emphasizes the importance of our works, legalism alarms go off. Listen carefully to me. In the kingdom of God, grace and good works are not spiritual enemies. They're inseparable twins. We are saved *by* grace *for* good works.

That's why I'm excited to begin a 7-week sermon series on the book of Titus entitled "Zealous for Good Works." Where grace is present, good works follow. Where good works are absent, grace is missing in action. Paul's letter to Titus explains the connection. He shows us how the gospel of grace creates a people who are zealous for good works! How grace produces good works such that a life of godliness, a life of obedience, is a tremendous joy, not a crushing burden.

Titus worked alongside Paul in the 1st century as an apostolic delegate, which meant he was caring for the Gentile churches Paul planted. He labored with Paul from his very first missionary journey onward and became a dear friend and partner in ministry. He also served in some very difficult settings, including the church in Corinth. The mid-60s found Titus on the island of Crete. Paul left him there (Tit 1:5), “so that you might put what remained into order.” False teachers were threatening the purity of the church. They “profess to know God, but they deny him by their works” because they themselves are “unfit for any good work” (Tit 1:16).

We don’t know all the wrong things they were teaching. We do know they were leading people away from the truth and in the process undermining the biblical foundation for good works. It’s why Paul charges Titus to “teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Tit 2:1) – not so the church in Crete could pat themselves on the back for having a good statement of faith, but “so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (2:10) by learning “to devote themselves to good works” (3:14).

Where sound doctrine is present, good works will follow. Where false doctrine takes root, good works will die. Believing the gospel of grace and living a godly life characterized by good works go hand in hand! The grace that saves us is the grace that trains us. The grace that redeems us is the grace that purifies us. God is behind both. God is in both. God is the goal of both.

To read Titus is to be confronted with a God-centered, grace-saturated view of Christian life and ministry. It’s the kind of life and ministry Paul modelled and taught. It’s the kind of life and ministry Titus needed to model and teach. It’s the kind of life and ministry God calls us to embrace today. And that’s precisely where Paul begins in Tit 1:1-4.

< READ Titus 1:1-4 >

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, 2 in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began 3 and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior; 4 To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

KingsWay, the Lord calls us to a radically God-centered life and ministry where cherishing the gospel of grace makes us zealous for good works. So what does a God-centered life and ministry look like? Paul’s example and instruction urges us to

embrace at least three things: An identity rooted in relationship with God, a mission accomplished by the Word of God, and a supernatural strength that comes from God.

1) AN IDENTITY ROOTED IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD (v. 1a)

The way Paul identifies himself at the beginning of the letter is provoking, to say the least. Look at v. 1. “Paul, a servant of God...” He’s not talking about being someone who is generally helpful to God. He’s talking about being owned by God. It’s the Greek word for a slave or bondservant. When Paul wishes to identify himself, this is the first thing that comes to mind. Who am I? I’m a slave of Christ.

His past was not the heart of his identity. His vocational success was not the heart of his identity. How other people evaluated or thought of him wasn’t the heart of his identity. His relationship to God as a servant of God was the heart of his identity. Listen to how Murray Harris describes Paul’s sense of self.

“A slave is someone whose person and service belong wholly to another. As Christ’s purchased possession, the Christian is wholly devoted to the person of the Master. As Christ’s ‘movable property’, the Christian is totally available for the Master’s use. This complete devotion to Christ includes three elements: Humble submission to the person of Jesus...Unquestioning obedience to the Master’s will...An exclusive preoccupation with pleasing Christ. This was Paul’s magnificent obsession...”

Brothers and sisters, is that your magnificent obsession? Humble submission. Unquestioning obedience. Exclusive preoccupation. That last phrase has gripped me in recent years. “Matthew, do you have an exclusive preoccupation with pleasing Christ? Or are you preoccupied with pleasing men or pleasing yourself?”

Here's the paradox. Only in becoming a slave of Christ, only in laying down your life to serve the one who laid down his life for you, will you find freedom. It feels like joy awaits those who serve themselves. But it’s never enough, is it? You’ll always want more stuff. More approval. More success. You’ll end up envying those who have more or looking down on those who have less. Neither path leads to joy. Only in becoming a servant of God will you find a stable identity, life-giving identity that nothing in this world can threaten or take away.

A God-centered life begins with an identity rooted in God. I’m his bondservant. I do not exist, fundamentally, to serve my company, my clients, my boyfriend, my spouse, my kids, or my church. I exist to please God and God alone. Our sense of self must begin with him. And as his bondservants, what are we charged to do? The same thing our



Master charged Paul to do. We are sent ones – not in the apostolic sense as Paul was, commissioned to write Scripture as an eyewitness of Jesus – but in the sense of being entrusted with the good news of the gospel.

The idea that your primary job as a Christian is to hunker down, avoid the evil in this world, hide behind your garage door, and hold on until Jesus comes back is the definition of unfaithfulness. Why? Because we are not just servants. We are sent servants. In 21:21, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” Sending us to do what? Matt 28:19, “Go and make disciples...” Introduce people to me. Teach them to follow me. 2 Cor 5:20, “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”

As the risen Christ sent Paul out as an apostle to the Gentiles, so too he has sent you, Christian. That means we don’t wait for opportunities. We create them. We pursue them. We move toward people who presently serve a different master. Linger when you run into them in the parking lot of your apartment complex. Invite them to walk the dog with you. Play basketball together. Make a meal for them or invite them over for dinner. Find out what’s going on in their life. Care for them. Pray for them.

We also move toward people who have the same master! Don’t wait for opportunities to do spiritual good to fellow members of our church. Create them. Pursue them. Take a married couple out for lunch, even if you’re a single adult, and ask how you can pray for their marriage. Bring a single adult with you when you take your grandkids to a Flying Squirrel’s game and ask, “Where do you most feel your need for God’s help in life right now?” Encourage them with the encouragement you have received from God.

What an honor to be his sent servants! As Murray Harris concludes, “There can be no higher and more ennobling privilege than to have the Lord of the universe as one’s Owner and Master and to be his accredited representative on earth.” A God-centered life first means embracing an identity rooted in God. Second, it means embracing...

2) A MISSION ACCOMPLISHED BY THE WORD OF GOD (vv. 1b-3)

This is my longest point because it’s Paul’s longest point! So let’s break it down under two headings. First, what is our mission? Second, how is it accomplished?

A) What is the mission?

As sent servants, what are we laboring for with those who don’t know Jesus and those who do? Paul gives three answers because our mission has three goals. Think of these



as discipleship goals! **First, like Paul, we labor “for the sake of the faith of God’s elect...”**

God chose the people of Israel for himself under the Old Covenant. He is still in the business of drawing a people to himself today – not from a crowd of raised hands begging to know him, but from sinners who are spiritually dead, who want nothing to do with him, without God and without hope in this world.

The elect are not chosen because God peered down the tunnel of time and saw who would respond to him if he made them an offer. No. The elect are chosen because God delights to set his holy affection on the unlovely that he might make them lovely, opening our eyes to see our need for a Savior and that Jesus is the Savior we need!

To labor “for the faith” of God’s elect means helping people who don’t know Jesus come to the point where they begin to trust Jesus. Brothers and sisters, pray that 2024 would not come to an end without the Lord giving you privilege of leading at least one person to faith in him. And you can pray that prayer with confidence! Why? Because the elect coming to faith is ultimately God’s work. Acts 13:48, “As many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

You don’t “appoint” anyone, friend! God does. And his election, his calling, are irrevocable! So whether you’re loving a room full of toddlers or talking with a teenager who has doubts about the existence of God, take care, Christian, that your discipleship labor is consciously grounded in God’s sovereign work. And remember the cause for which you labor will ultimately succeed because of God’s sovereign work!

Second, like Paul, we labor for “their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness.” Notice the underlying presumption. There is such a thing as truth, and we are able to know it! If initial faith in Jesus is goal #1, a growing knowledge of Jesus is goal #2. In other words, our mission doesn’t stop with introducing people to Jesus. It requires helping one another to grow in our understanding of who he is and the difference that makes in everyday life.

Knowledge of the truth is not a one and done sort of thing. “Yeah, back when I was 8, I became a Christian and I’ve been good with God ever sense.” Genuine faith in God reveals itself through life-long growth in the knowledge of God. 1 Pe 1:5, “Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge.” A growing knowledge of Jesus is no less important than your initial faith in Jesus.

And where the truth about God is increasingly known and believed, it always produces something. What does Paul say in v. 1? It's the truth which "accords with godliness" or "leads to godliness." So many people grow up in the church with two mental lists. List A is all the things we believe about God. List B is all the things we're supposed to do and not do as Christian. And the two lists are rarely connected.

That's a tragedy, friends, and in the long run, it's not sustainable! Why? Because in the kingdom of God, there are not two things, one called truth and the other called godliness. There is one thing. The truth that accords with godliness! If the truth of the gospel is the root, godliness is the fruit. And only plants that have roots are able to produce fruit! Only when the truth of the gospel is increasingly known and believed, will godliness thrive and increase.

Do not try to do something you know Christians are supposed to do" without stopping to consider, "Wait, what is it about who Jesus is and what he's done for me that make this expression of godliness good and right and possible?" And if you're not sure, ask an older believer or a pastor for help! Reduce Christianity to list of "what's" without understanding the "why's" and you won't grow, friend, at least not for very long. And what "growth" you do experience will be nothing more than fruit-stapling. Helping one another know the truth that leads to godliness is the second part of our mission.

Here's the third goal. Like Paul in v. 2, we labor "in hope of eternal life." The hope Paul refers to here is not wishful thinking. It's a confident expectation. Confident expectation of what? That there is more to life than trying to make it through another day or leaving the world a better place than you found it. There is a life found in knowing God, enjoying God, and being with God, not just on this side of the grave, but beyond the grave.

That's where biblical faith and knowledge of the truth are ultimately heading, brothers and sisters. They're not just good things. Have faith. Know the truth. Practice godliness. Repeat. Do those things. But do them, remembering they have a great and glorious goal! You are running after eternal life because God has given you eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's why our Christian identity as sent servants ultimately matters. We are helping those whom God has sovereign purposed to grant eternal life discover eternal life! We are helping those to whom God has already granted eternal life grow in their present experience of eternal life even as we wait to know it in full!



Listen to how Jesus combines election, knowledge leading to godliness, and the hope of eternal life in Jn 10:27–28. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” 1 Cor 2:9, For “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.”

That’s our hope, brothers and sisters. That’s why every act of sacrificial love is worth it. That’s why the time, the money, the emotional energy we spend to make disciples is worth it. That’s why we don’t stop killing sin, fighting for holiness, and helping the people around us do the same. God has set eternal life before us! That’s the prize. That’s the goal. That’s why our mission matters and why we refuse to lose heart.

Richard Yarborough, “The future God promises is more powerful in this fallen world than the seemingly intractable evil and setbacks that can easily darken church leaders’ vision, skew their judgment, and extinguish their hope.”

That future (and the hope we draw from it) is not make-believe. Look at v. 2. It’s what “God, who never lies, promised before the ages began...” How often do we make promises we don’t keep? We say we’re going to do something, and then we forget, or our circumstances change, and we can no longer do what we said we would do. God never lies because he cannot lie.

Num 23:19, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” What a comfort that is! The hope of eternal life isn’t a possibility. It’s a promise. We have a glorious mission, a mission upheld by the promise of a faithful God!

B) How Is the mission accomplished?

Question: in *what* form or *what* kind of way does the promise of eternal life come to us? Look back at v. 3. It comes to us “in his word,” as a message, an announcement, of good news! Because of what Jesus has done, sinners can come home to God! So *how* does that word, the powerful word of the gospel, come to us? God manifested the hope of eternal life in his word, Paul declares in v. 3, “through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.”

The word Paul uses here for preaching is not a general word. It’s a specific word, a unique word, used to describe the public proclamation of the gospel by an authorized representative. We’re missing something of critical importance if we read v. 3 and



immediately say, "Oh, I get it. God accomplishes the mission as all of us speak the truth of the gospel just like Paul did!"

There's truth to that and we'll get there shortly. But that's not Paul's primary point at the end of v. 3. That's not the initial means Paul points to as he reminds Titus how our mission will be accomplished. He points to the activity of preaching, to the unique role the public proclamation of God's Word plays in the advancement of God's kingdom.

Preaching has fallen on hard times. In our day and age, people don't want to be talked to, let alone by someone in a position of spiritual authority where they speak and rest of us do what they say. We want conversation. We want our pastors to walk on stage with a cup of coffee, pull up a chair, and give us advice for living our best life now. We want some humor. Some entertainment. We want someone who feels relatable, who says everything we want to hear and nothing we don't. We want a comfortable spiritual experience with excellent production values that fits nicely in our schedule and doesn't stretch our attention span.

There's only one problem. That sort of thing is not the means God has chosen to manifest his word. That's not what 2 Tim 4:1-2 tells pastors to do. "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."

God has not chosen a polished communicator. He's chosen a weak preacher, a man who stands in the pulpit with fear and trembling. That's who Paul was. And while there are important discontinuities between Apostles who preached back then and pastors who preach today, the essential task is the same. Declare the truth of God's Word and press it home on the minds, and hearts, and wills of your hearers.

The most important work that takes place every Sunday morning is the preaching of God's Word. It's how God manifested the word of the gospel in the first century. It remains his chosen means for manifesting his word today. So come eager. Come expectant. Get enough rest the night before so you can stay awake! And don't come thinking, "I wonder what Matthew will say." Come asking, "Lord, what are you saying?" Listen for his voice.

If the Word of the gospel Paul first preached is the Word our pastors continue to preach, the elect will come to faith. If we receive the apostolic Word as it's preached on Sunday and build one another up with the same Word during the week, we will grow in the knowledge of the truth that produces godliness. And as the preached Word

reverberates in our hearts and comes out of our mouths, we will obtain the hope of eternal life and help others do the same! The proclamation of the apostolic Word, especially through public preaching, is how the mission is accomplished!

In all the work you do for the Lord, take care that your confidence lies not in the power of your words, but the power of God's Word! Yes, Paul had work to do in seeing the elect come to faith, the faithful grow in godliness, and the godly arrive home to heaven. We do too! But it is ultimately a mission God accomplishes through the power of his Word. That doesn't make us passive. That makes us confident! God-centered life and ministry requires embracing an identity rooted in relationship with God, a mission accomplished by the Word of God, and finally...

3) A STRENGTH DERIVED FROM THE GRACE OF GOD (v. 4)

Paul explicitly tells us in v. 4 that he's writing "to Titus, my true child in a common faith..." Their faith is a shared faith because it has the same object – the person and work of Jesus Christ, the truth that accords with sound doctrine. It's the truth in which Paul had discipled Titus as a spiritual father – teaching, training, and caring for his spiritual son in the faith. Describing Titus as his "true child" anticipates the spiritual instruction Paul will provide in Titus 2 where he urges older men and women to be spiritual fathers and mothers in the church, creating a culture of gender-specific, intergenerational discipleship! It's one of the themes we'll linger on in the coming weeks.

For now, however, focus on the second half of the verse. Paul is about to tell Titus to do some pretty hard stuff in Christian life and ministry. The stakes are high. The work is hard. The opposition is real. But before he jumps into specific instructions, Paul directs Titus' gaze to the source of all we need for all God calls us to do as sent servants. V. 4, "Grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior."

You know what you have, Christian, that no disgruntled customer, angry child, or struggle with sin can take away from you? You have peace with God. Because of what Jesus did for you on the cross, it is well with your soul. It will always be well with your soul! And in that reconciled relationship, where you get to call Almighty God your Father because he is your Father, what does he pour out on you in supernatural abundance?

He pours out grace. Rivers and rivers of undeserved favor, support, supply, help, wisdom, provision, all we need for life and godliness. When we have "peace" from God, when we have "grace" from God, we have exactly what we need to embrace our God-



given identity and remain faithful in our God-given mission. Don't look to your own resources as you head into another week. Look to the Lord! His grace is more than sufficient. It's abundant. In Christ, goodness and mercy follow us.

CONCLUSION

Titus 1 calls us to embrace a God-centered view of life and ministry. A God-centered view begins with an identity rooted *in God*. We are sent servants! It means devoting our lives to a mission accomplished *by God*. We point people around us to the powerful Word of the gospel and all Jesus is doing in us and around us! And it means relying on a strength that comes *from God*. It's not about digging deep and gutting it out. It's about relying on the grace that is ours through peace with God.

No matter the field in which he's called you to labor – whether you're seeking to be a faithful friend, a faithful parent, or a faithful pastor – Christian life and ministry is all about God. He is behind the work. He is in the work. He will complete the work. Remember that and find rest for your soul. Let's pray and ask for the Spirit's help.