

Living as God's People in God's World

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Preacher: Peter Orr

[0 : 00] of the body and life eternal. Amen. Please be seated. We are going to be looking at the passage from Titus that was read earlier, Titus chapter 3, which is on page 969 if you've closed your Bible.

But before we turn to God's word together, let's pray. The psalmist writes, the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. Our Heavenly Father, as we turn to your word this morning, our prayer echoes that of the psalmist.

We pray that you would revive our souls and we pray that you would make us wise for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen. Let me paint a scenario for you.

In about a year's time, you move house and you go round to say hello to your new neighbours and you find out that they are a married couple. You ask their names.

[1 : 12] The man is called Paul and the other man is called Russell. In the months and years to come, how are you going to relate to this couple?

Do you keep your distance and try and have as little to do with them as possible? Or do you spend time with them? Do you invite them round, get to know them and try and be good neighbours?

Well, this passage helps us to think through how we relate to the world, to those outside the church. It challenges us as we relate to those whose lifestyle might be very different from our own.

In the last few weeks, we've seen that Paul is writing to Titus so that the church on Crete might be established. He wants Titus to appoint elders across the island, faithful men who will teach and defend sound doctrine.

He wants Christians to relate to one another in a way that is in accord with sound doctrine, whoever they are, men, women, young, old, slave or free.

[2 : 20] But in this final chapter, Paul moves beyond the walls of the church, so to speak. He is speaking about how Christians are to live in the world, in society at large.

You can see that in the first two verses. Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle and to show every courtesy to everyone.

The Christians on Crete are to be model citizens, submitting to authorities, not gossiping, doing good, being courteous to everyone. Paul sums up what he wants in verse 8.

I desire that you insist on these things so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. Paul wants Christians on Crete to be marked by their devotion to doing good.

And in the context of Crete, this would have made them stand out. He's already given them a rather bleak picture of Cretan society. In chapter 1, verse 12, he quotes one of their own prophets, Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons, to which Paul solemnly adds the words, that testimony is true.

[3 : 42] And I guess one of the temptations that the Christians on Crete would have faced would be to withdraw from society, a society like that.

Perhaps out of disapproval, perhaps out of fear that getting too enmeshed in the lives of non-Christian society would be damaging to their own faith.

But Paul doesn't want them to withdraw. He doesn't want them to form a holy huddle. No, in chapter 3, he stresses that they are to be good citizens, that they are to be good neighbors, that they're not simply to step back or withdraw from the community around them.

And so I hope you can see the relevance for us. We live in a society that sadly is increasingly turning its back on its Christian heritage. It is becoming increasingly like first century Crete, brutish,

lazy, and deceitful.

How do we respond? I guess one temptation is just to become like the world. But perhaps for us, the temptation is to withdraw, to keep ourselves separate, to see the church as the only sphere in which we have any kind of deep relationship.

[4 : 59] So we might work with non-Christians, but we don't spend any time with them outside work because of their drinking culture. We don't make an effort with our non-Christian neighbors because their language is a bit colorful.

We exchange a few pleasantries with the other moms at the school gate, but we're not ready to actually get enmeshed in their lives. We're not zealous to do them good, as Paul puts it.

And so this chapter is a corrective for us. It shows us how we're to engage with our society, with our friends, neighbors, work colleagues who are not Christian.

And importantly, Paul doesn't just tell the Christians on Crete to do these things. He gives them the motivation to do it. And we'll see that it's the gospel that motivates them.

As we understand the gospel, we are rebuked and encouraged in our interaction with the world. So two basic points. Christians are to do good in the world because we understand the gospel.

[6 : 00] Firstly, Christians are to do good in the world. Look again at the verse, which I think is the key verse for this section. Verse 8. I desire that you insist on these things so that those who come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

Christians are meant to be careful to devote themselves to good works. It's a strong command, isn't it? Not just that we're to do good works, but that we are to be careful to devote ourselves to doing good.

You get the same thought at the end of the chapter, verse 14. Let people learn to devote themselves to good works. As Christians live in the world, we are to do good.

We are not to be like the world, but nor are we to withdraw from the world. Let's just see how Paul unpacks this in these first few verses.

A part of being good, firstly we see, is being a model subject. Verse 1. Christians are to be subject to rulers and authorities and to be obedient.

[7 : 06] In a society as pagan and anti-Christian as Crete, in the first century, where rulers would have often been harsh, unstable, cruel, the Christians were not exempt from being obedient citizens, living willingly under the rule of those in authority over them.

Perhaps for us in our culture, the challenge is not so much the raw obedience, but the respect that comes with being subject to someone.

So I think it means that though we may disagree with people over us, we still speak respectfully of them. We don't mock them or deride them, even if they belong to a party that we might not vote for, or even if they live in a country on the other side of the world.

No, we are to be model subjects. Model subjects. Paul continues, Christians are to be ready for every good work. We're to be model citizens.

Now, Paul is very broad. Every good work. Later in verse 14, he's a little bit more specific. Devote themselves to do good works in order to meet urgent needs so that they may not be unproductive.

[8 : 27] Cretan society was lazy. The Christians were to be devoted in whatever context they find themselves in. In practice for us, this will work out in a myriad of different ways.

It might mean looking after a sick neighbor whose family are neglecting them. It might mean that you serve on the PNC to help the school. It might mean that you volunteer for a local charity. Yes, as Christians, we're to be different, but we're not to withdraw from the world.

We're to be model citizens. As people look at us, they're meant to see a people who are devoted to doing good. Just in the context of the New Testament, we need to just quickly add that this good that we do cannot and should not replace the proclamation of the gospel.

In chapter 2, verse 10, we saw that Paul describes authentic Christian behavior as being an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior. In other words, our behavior is supposed to show the attractiveness of the Christian message about God, not to replace it or supplant it.

Our lives, being devoted to being good, are a witness to the power and the beauty of the gospel.

Paul continues in verse 2, Christians are to speak evil of no one.

[9 : 45] We've said that we are meant to be respectful in the way that we speak about leaders, but here it's widened. We are to speak evil of nobody. Not even the neighbor who refuses to fix the fence, the colleague in the office who neglects her duties, which means that you have more work to

do, the mom in the schoolyard who doesn't discipline her children, the relative whose life is a mess and makes things so difficult for you, or the friend who for some reason seems to no longer be speaking to you.

We, as Christians, are to speak evil of no one. Can you see how radically different we are from a world that loves gossip, the magazines, the entertainment slots on breakfast TV, the newspapers, they love to speak evil, to dish the dirt.

We, as Christians, however, are to speak evil of no one. But it's not just how we speak about people, it's also how we speak to people. We are, Paul continues, to avoid quarreling.

We're to be gentle. We're to show every courtesy to everyone. It's a striking picture, isn't it? I wonder would your colleagues at work or your neighbors or your relatives describe you in this way? You don't like quarreling. You are gentle. You are courteous. David Brooks is an American Jewish author. And a few years ago he wrote about the late John Stott, the English Anglican minister and author who died last year.

[11:21] David Brooks was comparing John Stott to certain other high-profile Christians. And this is what he said. Remember, this is a non-Christian describing a Christian. He said, Stott is so embracing.

It's always a bit of a shock, especially if you're a Jew like me, when you come across something on which he will not compromise. He has a backbone of steel. What a great description of a Christian. Embracing, but uncompromising. I think that's not only a great testimony to John Stott, it's a great application of this passage. Embracing, but uncompromising.

Not withdrawing from the world, but not being like the world. As Christians, we are meant to be model citizens in the world, marked out by our good works.

But secondly, it is the gospel that will motivate us to do good. Look at our key verse again, verse 8. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

[12:29] Can you see what Paul wants? He wants Titus to insist on certain things, so that the Christians on Crete will be careful to be devoted to doing good works. To be careful to live in the way that we've just been thinking about.

What are these things that Titus is to insist on? Well, part of what he's to insist on is verses 3 to 8. And as we read through these verses, we see that they are a summary of the gospel.

It's the gospel that motivates us to do good. Or again, look at 1 and 2, where he talks about how we're to live, and then verse 3, he says 4. And at 4, he begins to unpack the gospel.

It's the gospel that motivates us to do good. Last week, I mentioned Lord Shaftesbury. One of his co-reformers was William Wilberforce, who did so much to end the slave trade.

Wilberforce wrote one major book called *A Practical View of Christianity*. And in it, he gave the reason that he thought that Great Britain at the time was so immoral. And fascinating, his diagnosis was that Britain had become so immoral because people tried to consider Christian morals apart from Christian doctrine.

[13:47] He said that all the spiritual and practical errors that nominal Christians were making came from the fact that they were wrong on the fundamentals of Christian doctrine.

He was a man who had an impeccable Christian life, who gave himself for the good of others. And he was a man who grasped this passage, that Christian morality, you cannot separate it from Christian doctrine.

So one of the most practical things we can do as Christians is to make sure that our doctrine is correct, that what we believe about God, about Christ, about salvation is in line with the word of God.

Paul wants Titus to stress the truth of the gospel because he knows that it's the gospel which will motivate the Cretan Christians to live a godly life. We see that Paul actually unpacks the gospel in a particular way that highlights our motivation to do good in the world.

He underlines three things, what we once were, how God saved us, and what we are now. What we once were, verse 3, for we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.

[15:07] Paul describes what he, what Titus, what the Christians on Crete, what all of us were like in our pre-Christian days. Now for some of us, these things were evident for all to see.

For others, well, outwardly we might have seemed decent, but as much as we tried to cover up, these things were not far from the surface. We were all foolish, foolish in what we thought about God, all disobedient to those in authority over us, all of us enslaved to our pleasures, acting to please ourselves rather than God, relating to other people in evil, envious ways, not loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Why does Paul underline these particular things at this point in the chapter? Well, I think it's because the temptation for Christians living in such a godless society would have been to look down their noses at those living around them, to despise the liars, the vicious brutes, the lazy gluttons that surrounded them.

But they can't do that because that is what they once were. And without Christ, that is what we once were.

There is no room for arrogance, no room for looking down on the pagan society around us because in and of ourselves we are absolutely no different.

[16:37] And Paul highlights that as he reminds the creating Christians of their salvation. Verse 4, But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Do you see how Paul stresses that it is nothing that we have done that secures our salvation? Becoming a Christian isn't about reforming yourself or deciding to live a better life.

No, it is purely the work of God. Verse 5, It is God our Savior who has saved us. He saved us and we contributed nothing to our salvation.

Again, verse 5, not because of works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy. Our salvation rests purely on the mercy of God, on his kindness, on his goodness.

So how can we look down on the non-Christian world around us? It is lunacy to consider ourselves morally superior.

[17:50] Yes, we can be thankful for the work of God in our lives, but if we feel any moral superiority, we have failed to understand the gospel. So don't look down or feel superior to your colleague who's on their fifth marriage or your neighbor who swears like a trooper or your nephew or cousin who gets drunk every Sunday night.

Warn them, chide them, call them to repentance and faith in Christ. Yes, but don't look down and don't withdraw. Do good to them because God has done good to you.

Be kind to them because God has been kind to you. Love them because God has loved you. Point them to Christ. Pray for them. But in all of that, remember where you would be without God's salvation.

Paul continues to unpack the way in which God has saved us, not because of our works, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Paul's emphasis is that even though we were once wretched sinners, by God's grace, by the cleansing, renewing work of the Spirit, we are new people in his sight. But again, the only reason that we are different from anyone else is God's sovereign work.

[19:09] And so there could be no looking down, no pride in ourselves. We are, as the hymn writer puts it, debtors to mercy alone. So remembering what we once were and remembering how it was only God's salvation that changed us means that we cannot consider ourselves better than anyone else.

But thirdly, we see what we are now. Verse 6, this Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Through this salvation we are now heirs. We are children. So not only have we been cleansed from our sins, but our status has changed. We are now children of God looking forward to our inheritance.

And again, I think Paul stresses this at this particular point in his argument. Again, so that as we grasp the gospel, we can engage confidently in the world. For some Christians, what keeps them from actively engaging with non-Christian friends or colleagues is the fear of being influenced or led astray.

That if I become good friends with my neighbors or if I go on holiday with my cousin or if I join the cricket club, that somehow I might be led astray, that I might be negatively influenced.

[20 : 33] But what Paul wants us to see here is the confidence that we can have before God. We are secure. We are heirs of eternal life, children of God. And so, we can engage the world with confidence.

Our salvation is in God's hands and we can be confident in our status with Him. And so, we have the freedom to lovingly engage with the world, to be zealous to do good works, to get stuck in and serve on the PNC committee, to chair the residency association, to become the president of the golf club, to stand as Christians, testifying by our good works to the grace and glory of God as model citizens in the world.

When we lived in London, my wife Emma and I lived next to a couple who were living together. The man was called Paul and the other man was called Russell.

Now, I don't think we did a particularly good job but our aim, our goal, at the end of our time living there was for them to say, we know what Peter and Emma think about our relationship but they have simply been good neighbors.

They have done good to us. They have been kind. Now, as I say, I don't think we succeeded all that well but our aim was to live out this passage, to not look down on them, to not fear them but to do good to them.

[22 : 08] I think this will be increasingly challenging for us as Christians as our society becomes increasingly hostile to the gospel, particularly in the whole question of marriage being debated at the moment.

And it seems as if any opposition to the proposed redefinition to marriage, if you oppose it in any way, you're labeled as a hateful fundamentalist. And in one sense, there's nothing we can do to avoid that reaction, to stop that reaction.

But what we can do is to avoid the temptation that I think this passage addresses, the temptation to look down on people. How can they be so stupid? Can't they see that what they're proposing about marriage is so destructive for society?

And yet, we need to remember what we once were. Verse 3, we ourselves were once foolish. We were once disobedient. We were led astray. We were slaves to various passions and pleasures. We passed our days in malice and envy. We were despicable. We hated one another. It is only by God's grace that we have been saved. The only reason we are different is because of God.

[23 : 17] And so there can be no room for arrogance or pride or ungodly frustration with others. And the other temptation we'll face is to fear and to think that we need to withdraw.

To think that the only way we can keep ourselves safe is to withdraw from people who live radically different lifestyles from us. To almost set up a parallel Christian society.

But we need to remember that God's salvation means that we are heirs according to the hope of eternal life. And so we don't need to be afraid of a world that might live in a radically different way than we do.

Now we are secure in Christ and so we can do good. We can love those around us. God has been unspeakably kind and good to us.

He has not treated us as our sins deserve. Let us go and do likewise. Let's pray. Let's pray. Amen.

[24 : 24] When the goodness and kindness of God our Savior appeared he saved us not because of righteous things we had done but because of his mercy. Our Heavenly Father we thank you for the wonder and beauty of the gospel that though we were wretched sinners in your goodness and mercy you saved us through the work of Christ and the work of your spirit.

Father please help us to remember the gospel. Please would the gospel so impact our lives that it would flow out into our relationship with others those around us and would we live good lives in this world that brings glory to you and we ask it in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.