

Former Fools - Examples of Excellence

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[0 : 00] During that four-year course, you study the Bible from Genesis to Revelation all the way through.

Theology, that is the nature of God and what God is on about. Church history to find out what's happened since the New Testament was written up to the present day.

You also study pastoral care, some counselling, preaching, evangelism, world missions. You gain some experience in churches.

You learn things and practice things about leadership and administration and management. And there's other things that I've left out because I probably slept through those lectures. Not only is that the training to become a minister, but there's an abundance of ongoing courses and books available for continued professional development, as it's so called these days.

Especially there are books around about preaching and about the Bible. There are dozens and dozens and dozens of books and courses and seminars about counselling and care and psychology.

[1 : 12] And there are shelves and shelves of books about leadership and management and strategy and vision and church growth and all those sorts of things. I've been a minister for, ordained minister, I guess, for a bit over 14 years, I think.

And perhaps the thing that for a minister is the hardest is the thing that is seldom, if ever, taught, seldom prepared for.

I don't remember much, if anything, in my theological course to help deal with this sort of issue. And that is how to lead a church to be godly.

And though that's perhaps so seldom addressed in theological training and in professional development for ministers, it's perhaps the thing most needed of all.

Because time and time again, around the world, churches struggle, fall apart, die or divide, because of a lack of godliness in the church.

[2 : 26] A lack of godliness in the minister and or a lack of godliness in the members of the congregation. All too often, churches lack godliness.

Often within churches, gossip is rife, slander is rife, sometimes under the guise of let me pray for you or something like that.

Many, many dozens of churches struggle because of quarrels and divisions, usually over petty issues like kitchen cupboards and things like that.

There is often exhibited in churches a lack of gentleness, humility or courtesy. Quite often in churches you find people who will not speak to each other.

Often in churches there is envy, petty jealousies, why somebody is allowed to do something and they're not, or why they've got that job and this person hasn't.

[3 : 28] There is hate. And the divisive matters are almost always trivial and unimportant. And yet so often they dominate.

And in the end, lead to church division and death. If you're a minister, how on earth do you deal with that sort of package? How do you lead a church to be godly?

I'm not sure that I was ever taught anything actually about that at my theological course, but maybe I was and I've forgotten. But it's certainly something that is sorely needed.

And I think it's one of the things that probably exercises ministers the most. If indeed they take godliness seriously. Rarely a priority in training or in practice, and sadly in many churches, not really an aim or a goal.

Well, that is exactly the issue behind Paul the Apostle writing to his protegee Titus. Titus, a younger minister, was entrusted by Paul with the oversight of the Christian churches on the island of Crete,

sometime in the middle of the first century AD.

[4 : 51] So around about probably 20, 30 years after Jesus died and rose from the dead. The issue that Paul is instructing Titus about is certainly not rare in church life.

These are the hard issues, often untouched, unaddressed, and as a result leading to corrupt and rotten church life. That's what we've been seeing through the first two chapters of the letter to Titus, and it's what we see in this final chapter of this letter as well.

Paul begins the final chapter by urging Titus to remind the Cretan Church some things. To remind them because they're things that they've already been taught, but to remind them because they're things that they still need to learn and practice.

Remind them, he says, 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 courtesy to everyone.

Well, Crete, as we've seen in the last couple of few weeks, had a reputation for vicious brutality and laziness and gluttony. It was an anarchic sort of place.

[6 : 14] And so probably in that culture, the reminder to be subject to rulers and authorities, that is not church rulers so much as the civic rulers, the local town mayor or the government of the island or whatever it was, was probably something that needed to be hammered home for the Christians, let alone the other people, on the island of Crete.

When Paul says in verse 1 that they are to be ready for every good work, most probably that context has the sense of being good citizens in society.

That is, it's not just doing every good work within church fellowship, like life cut off from the world, but actually that Christians are involved in the world, that they're best citizens of their villages and towns around the island of Crete.

In fact, good works is one of the dominant themes of this letter. And here it's made clear, I think, that the good works are not just limited to church life, but are limited, are also extend to being good citizens in their society, even a pagan and hostile society at that.

Verse 2 gives us two things that they are to avoid, and then two things to practice. They are to speak evil of no one, and to avoid quarrelling.

[7 : 32] That's an unlimited speaking of evil. Don't even speak evil of evil people. Speak evil of no one. And don't quarrel.

Avoid quarrelling. The sense there is of petty disputes over trivial or secondary or unimportant issues. Don't quarrel. Be able to set the priorities of what is clear and central for Christians to believe, as this letter in fact shows us.

The other issues, if you disagree on them, don't quarrel about them. Don't lead to petty divisions over such issues. But it's not just an absence of bad things to do, there's the positive to do as well, and that's the second half of verse 2.

Not only don't speak evil of no one and avoid quarrelling, if that's all you did, you'd be perhaps a fairly bland and unloving person, but rather, in addition, be gentle and show courtesy to everyone. The word gentle there has got a wide range of meaning, but the key sense, probably gentle in nature, sure, but also the sense of being conciliatory.

[8 : 49] That is, seek to build bridges, not burn bridges. Seek to bring people together, not to divide people. Maybe that means partly looking for the best in people and putting aside trivial issues that might cause divisions and so on.

And then, as the end of verse 2 says, show courtesy, meekness, humility, that's the sort of idea, to everyone. Again, unlimited.

Don't just show courtesy to the people you like or respect. Don't just show courtesy to nice people or good people. Show courtesy to everyone, just as balancing that, speak evil of no one.

They're very unlimited exhortations in that verse. Now, in the end, if this letter stopped here, if this was all that Titus was to do, was to just keep reminding them, be courteous, be courteous, be courteous, to some extent, I suspect, he would be unlikely to gain the desired change.

Be like flogging a dead horse sometimes. All you're doing is telling them this, telling them this, telling them this, this is what you've got to be like. It'd be like a real nagging type person. And probably in the end, an element of being counterproductive, I guess.

[10 : 09] As always, Paul undergirds the exhortation with theology. That is, he grounds it in why the people of Crete, and why Titus is to teach the people of Crete, these sorts of ethical, moral

standards and behaviours.

Remind them, he said at the beginning of verse 1, that is, remind the Christians in Crete, them, third person, because, verse 3 begins, for, because, we, ourselves.

That is, remind them about what they're meant to do, because we, were like them, but are no longer like them. That is, he's giving now a theological platform, because Paul is saying that he and Titus, we, as it says in verse 3, we were in fact like them, but something has happened to change us.

And that's what he's leading on to in these verses that now follow. Paul, you see, along with Titus, is identifying himself with where these Christians of Crete are at, in their bad behaviour.

Not that Paul is still there, but that he was like them, but has changed. And what he's doing then, is showing the Christians in Crete, the possibility and necessity of change.

[11:37] That is, it's not just words from up front, be courteous, be courteous, stop speaking evil words that so easily fall on deaf ears and stony hearts.

But Paul is now leading into showing how and why those people can and must change. Now many people, it seems to me, have a dread about going to the doctor.

And often people delay in going to the doctor because they don't like going. And probably because they're a bit fearful of what the doctor might say.

And often people are anxious about going to the doctor because they're anxious about what diagnosis the doctor might give them. I'm sorry, sir, but there is nothing more we can do.

They'd be the words that no one would like to hear from their doctor, I guess. And it would be even more shocking, of course, if you went to the doctor thinking that you're well and find out that you're not.

[12:43] I mean, mostly people who go to the doctor think that they're sick somewhere and fear the worst, perhaps. It's even worse if you think you're well and are told that you're not. But often in my experience, people who have something diagnosed are often quick to find others who've been in the same plight but are now better.

They look for the success stories and very often they try the method. A few, a couple of years ago, my father was told, in effect, that his cancer was terminal.

And after the shock, I suppose, my father began, of course, talking around the friendships that he had and periodically people would say, oh, I know somebody who had that cancer and they're okay, it's all in remission or it's gone or whatever and you should talk to them.

And so, of course, he does and for a little time he started grinding up dozens and dozens of apricot pips and then somehow drinking them in some revolting sort of gunk, I guess. Well, I don't think they worked, I think they actually made him sick if I remember rightly, but it's the sort of thing that people are like. You find out that you've got something seriously wrong so you want to find out, well, how have other people coped with this and you look for the success stories.

[14:15] And sometimes that's a good thing to do, it's part of our nature. Now, in a sense, that's sort of what's going on here. What happens in verse 3 is a very penetrating diagnosis of the human condition.

in a sense, verse 3 goes underneath the injunctions of verses 1 and 2. It diagnoses the problem but then in the verses that follow, Paul, in a sense, the success story because he's changed, elaborates and explains how you can overcome or how those, that diagnosis can be corrected, if you like, or dealt with or a remedy found for it.

Verse 3 is desperately bleak in many ways. It's a verse that maybe shocks us at first. We ourselves, Paul says, we, Paul, Titus, other Christians, perhaps, 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.

Gosh, you wouldn't like that person to be your friend, I should imagine. But that's the truth. That's the diagnosis, an accurate, unerring diagnosis of the human condition.

It might be unpalatable but it's pretty true. There's four pairs of symptoms probably in that list. Foolish and disobedient.

[15:49] Somebody who's completely without spiritual understanding and without a spiritual awareness of God, a relationship with God. They are led astray. They think they're going down a pleasurable path.

The idea of being led astray probably has the sense in which Satan has led them astray to bad things and they've ended up in slavery to their passions and desires. The things of this world that

attract and allure.

They practice malice and envy. Things that divide relationships and divide people and divide churches. That is full of resentment and jealousy of one person for another.

There's no humility there. And then the last two words of the list, despicable and hating one another, probably have a sort of countering effect that is both hating and being hated.

The active and the passive. You hate others, they hate you is the sense of the end of verse 3. We might say for those with a literary bent that such people are lacking sense and sensibility and full of pride and prejudice.

[16 : 54] It's hard to imagine a bleaker picture. The thing is though that the diagnosis might be desperately bad but the prognosis is astonishingly good.

You might expect that if that was a sort of medical diagnosis of verse 3 that you had no hope. But Paul is saying here that though that is a bad diagnosis it is not spiritually terminal.

The prognosis he says is good because Paul like Titus he was like that but is no longer. It's past tense for Paul.

He's no longer as described in verse 3. He's no longer uncontrolled. He's no longer selfish and antisocial. And what's the secret? Well it's not apricot pips. It's not Jenny Craig.

It's not some dose of chemotherapy. Not at all. Something greater, something more powerful, something more amazing. In fact a divine remedy.

[17 : 58] Because from verse 4 to the end of the paragraph the simple divine remedy comes in fact at the beginning of verse 5. He saved us. He saved us.

God saved us. Jesus saved us. That's the main clause of a long sentence of verses 4 to 7. The diagnosis of verse 3 desperate though it is has a divine remedy.

God saved us. And these very rich verses make clear the full extent of the gospel of salvation.

When did God save us? Verse 4 when the goodness and loving kindness of God our saviour appeared. Referring to the appearance of Jesus like a light in the midst of darkness.

Talking about Jesus coming to earth as a human being but living on this earth dying on the cross rising from the dead and ascending to God's right hand in heaven. That's when God acted into history to save us.

[19 : 08] Why did God save us? Well verse 5 makes it very clear that God saved us not because of any works of righteousness that we had done but according to his mercy.

That is God didn't save us because we did good things. He didn't sort of reward us for our acts of noble morality. That's self-change and that's impossible.

We can't get out of the diagnosis by ourselves of verse 3. God saved us not because of anything we did. Not because we're religious. Not because we pray.

Not because we go to church. Not because we're in a Bible study. Not because we've had some spiritual experience. Not because we sing songs. Not because we serve others. Not because we're generous with our money.

Not because we support charities. Not because I'm a minister. God doesn't save us for any of those reasons at all. God saves us because of his mercy.

[20 : 04] Verse 5 says. Because he's forgiving. And we don't deserve mercy. If we did it's not mercy. Mercy is undeserved forgiveness from God.

We fail. We're like the description of verse 3. Foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable and hating one another. And yet God forgives us. Not because we seek to make amends or pay back, but because God's merciful and God's forgiving.

Well you may think I'm not really like verse 3 or I wasn't like verse 3. That's talking about the worst of the worst. Maybe at one level, but in the end we're not that much different.

God still saves us because we're merciful, but he's merciful and we don't deserve that. We contribute nothing to it. He doesn't come halfway and we pay the rest.

[21 : 09] God saves us. Why? Because of his mercy. How does God save us? two ways are described here.

Two complementary ways. Not that there's two ways of salvation, far from it, but two particular aspects as the means by which God saves us.

Firstly, and surprisingly perhaps in this order for many of us, he talks about the role of the Holy Spirit at the end of verse 5. This salvation is through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy

Spirit.

This Spirit he poured out on us richly or generously, abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Well there's quite a bit in those few verses, those few words there.

How did God save us? Firstly, by the pouring out, the richly, abundantly pouring out of his Holy Spirit. Not holding him back, not just giving us a little drop, but pouring him out totally, freely, for us, on us, in us.

[22 : 16] And rebirth is about spiritual cleansing on the inside. Because that's where the diagnosis is pointing in verse 3. It's not just the symptoms of doing some bad things or saying some bad words, it's all in the inside, in the heart.

And so God's doing a heart clean-up job in effect. And so he's pouring out his Holy Spirit to give us rebirth, to start us again, if you like. See, every Christian's a born-again Christian.

Rebirth is about being born again, as Jesus himself taught in John chapter 3 as well. And this is something that's anticipated in the Old Testament, as it looks forward to the day when God would pour out his Spirit on the insides of his people.

And the prophets look forward to that day. A day that comes in the New Testament, a day that comes in one sense in Acts chapter 2, on the first day of Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus' spirit was poured out and in his followers and believers. That's a very radical statement to be made here. If you go to Israel today and you look through the various archaeological sites around the place, time and time again you see what are called mikvah bars.

[23 : 29] They're stone bars, not dissimilar from our adult baptistry here in a sense, often with seven steps going down and before people would come into a temple or a synagogue, maybe to make a sacrifice or for some particular function, they would go down under the water to have a spiritual washing.

But they'd have to do it the next time they came as well and the next time as well and the next time. But all of course it was doing was really an external ritual. Paul is saying here that the work of the spirit is an internal one, a rebirth from within, not just some ritual purification or washing or cleansing.

And not only a rebirth but a renewal, a heart change if you like, a heart from stone to a heart of flesh, a heart that's unresponsive to God to a heart that's full of response and faith to God.

On TV I don't watch these programs but I gather there are lots of what they call makeover programs. And so rooms and houses and people all get the makeover treatment and they go from being like that, dull and bland usually, to being something rather exotic and so on.

Well the Holy Spirit is the divine makeover agent and there's nothing queer about that. He's the one who is making over people from being like, verse 3, into becoming like Jesus Christ, changing them from within.

[24 : 50] And that's what the role of the Spirit is primarily about in the New Testament. A moral role. To change people, to be holy, to purify them on the inside.

That's the first how, if you like. How did God save us? The second thing, complementary, balanced with it, comes in verse 7.

So that having been justified by his grace. Grace, a bit like mercy in a sense, undeserved favour of God to us.

But the key word there is justified. justified. It's a legal term. Often we use the word justify as being to try and sort of, you know, support our actions, you know, trying to justify what I've done by some sort of, you know, well, blaming someone else, that sort of thing.

That's not quite the word here. The word here means to be acquitted of what we are guilty of. In Pidgin English they translate this expression justified in this very nice way.

[25 : 57] God, he say I'm alright. And that's really what it's about. God, when he justifies us, says you're alright. You're acquitted. You're not guilty.

It's not because God is blind to our sin and failure, but because as the New Testament makes clear, he deals with it when Jesus dies on the cross and takes our sin and pays the penalty for it.

It's what's called atonement. What's also called substitution. Jesus in our place dying for us. So that's how God saves us.

He saves us by the giving of his spirit within us to bring rebirth and renewal and by Jesus' death on the cross that justifies us, makes us acquitted of the sins that we committed because Jesus himself

takes them for us.

Christ. The destiny of this salvation comes at the end of verse 7. That we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

[27 : 01] Christians are heirs. That means we're adopted into God's family alongside Jesus, our brother, God's only begotten son. And we have the full inheritance rights of heaven because we're now part of God's family.

So our destiny is eternal life. The hope of eternal life as it's described here. It doesn't mean that in one sense eternal life's already begun. It has in a sense. But our full destiny and the full riches and blessing of the destiny of salvation is heaven and the perfect presence with God forever.

All of this, the beginning of verse 8 says, is sure. It's not just wishful thinking. It's not an idle hope. It's not hope that hopes tomorrow is going to be a fine day or hopes that our exam will go well. This is something sure and certain. So you see here, the gospel of God's salvation is more than sins forgiven.

It is about an internal change that God brings. as well. It's a divine remedy to our moral and spiritual dilemma which other than the divine remedy of God saving us is a spiritually terminal condition.

[28 : 23] What we saw last week is unpacked here a bit further. The grace of forgiveness is the same grace of renewing us. Or as verse 14 of chapter 2 said last week we saw that God might redeem us and purify us.

And here are both of those things in God saving us. So the gospel of God's salvation does not leave us unchanged internally.

It is regenerative and it is renewing grace within. That's the work of the spirit of God. The work of the spirit of Jesus in us. Last week we saw that very same thing in effect being described in these words of verse 12 of chapter 2.

Grace training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions. passions. And now we see that it's not just all our effort but that this grace that trains us to renounce impiety and worldly passions is the spirit of God's work within us.

It is oxymoronic for Christians to be stuck in the description of verse 3. To be slaves to worldly passions. Because if they're Christians then God's spirit has regenerated and is renewing them.

[29 : 46] So that they are no longer slaves to worldly passions. That they're being trained to renounce worldly passions. So they become more like Jesus Christ. And fit and ready for heaven. And yet somehow it seems that these Christians of Crete were more like verse 3.

And that's why Paul writes this letter. They've come to believe in God. Verse 8 says. 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.

Which is not what the Cretan Christians are doing. They're not being careful about devoting themselves to good works. They're stuck in verse 3. Now perhaps they thought that God's grace gave them a license to do what they liked.

We raised that issue last week. Shall we sin that grace may abound? Paul characterises that view in another place. Maybe they just had half a gospel. That the gospel is sins forgiven but not internal regeneration and renewal.

Well whatever the problem was, the moral dimension of the gospel was lost for them. Or ignored by them. Or misunderstood by them. And they were still acting like cretins and not like Christians.

[30 : 59] Christians. But what we've seen all the way through this letter of Titus is that God's gospel's goal is godliness. Hence verse 8 says, pay careful attention.

Be careful to devote yourself to good works. Don't be slapdash about it. Be careful about devoting yourself to good works.

It doesn't come naturally for us. We need to be careful and the spirit works within us. In contrast, verse 9 says, avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions and quarrels about the law for they are unprofitable and worthless.

There might be a right or a wrong in such a dispute but really in the end those sort of trivial issues in the end are unimportant. And they're certainly not dealing with fundamentally moral issues or gospel issues either.

So avoid them. Literally walk around them. Keep out of the way. Don't get engaged in such issues. Paul is exhorting Titus. And then he gives them some instruction about, well, what do you do with such people in church life?

[32 : 13] And often churches have these sorts of people who get bees in their bonnets about all sorts of trivial issues. They become divisive and they're like a dog with a bone and never let go. Well, he says after a first and a second admonition, that is a warning.

You tell them to stop such divisive behaviour on such trivial issues, formally, officially. You tell them to stop a second time if they've not heeded the first warning. And then if they don't heed the second warning, verse 10 says, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions.

Shun them. Ignore them. It doesn't quite go to the extent of excommunicating them. It's more just to blot them out. Ignore them from your Christian fellowship and ministry.

Since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned. They're resisting God's word. And so such people, after all those admonitions, if they refuse to submit to God's word, avoid them.

Such people are just quarrelsome persistently. Well, this chapter, these verses, provide for us one of the great statements of the gospel that we find in the New Testament.

[33 : 32] Notice how Trinitarian is. That is, God the Father's mercy is the basis of salvation. The appearing of the Son brings justification so our sins are forgiven.

And the pouring out of the Spirit regenerates and renews us. Father, Son and Spirit acting together in unison and in harmony to save.

Or we might say this is salvation that is designed by the Father, achieved by the Son and applied by the Spirit. Or we might say that salvation is eternal, designed by God the Father.

It's historical because it's rooted in the first coming of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. But it's also experiential. It's the work of the Spirit within us in our daily life as well.

And its goal is godliness. That we may be devoted to good works. Not just occasional good works, one every now and then when it suits us. But rather devoted to good works, as verse 8 said.

[34 : 33] That we may be like, verses 1 and 2 describe how we should be like. That we are subject to rulers and authorities. That we're obedient, ready for every good work.

We speak evil of no one. We avoid quarrelling. We're gentle. We show courtesy to everyone. That we may be like the details of chapter 2, verses 1 to 10, that we saw two weeks ago, delineating particular emphases for younger men and older men, younger women and older women, and slaves as well.

Thus may we receive the full inheritance of the hope of eternal life. In the end you see, from God's Gospel, godliness in word, in action and in attitude is non-negotiable.

God has given us His Son to die for that very purpose that we may be godly. God has poured out His Holy Spirit for that very purpose that we may be godly. And the goal of His Gospel is the same thing.

Godliness. God has given us the same thing. We have no option other than to be careful to devote ourselves to good works because these things are excellent and profitable to everyone.

[35 : 43] Amen.