

The Long Hello

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Well, I want to also wish you a happy Father's Day today as well. And I'm just sort of looking out, trying to see if there's any ties out there.

There are very few, actually, these days. So I think the gift has switched to something else for a traditional Father's Day gift. But it is a beautiful day. It's a day of remembering what a gift it is, that there are parents and children, and God places us in families.

And we're going to be talking about this in this reading today. It's part of a short series. We're in a new book called The Letter of Paul to Titus.

And it's really, you know, the great thing about these pastoral epistles, which Titus is part of, is that they are very personal writings, but they have a bigger audience as well.

Well, we live in a world right now where weblogs are very, very popular. People write a log of their personal thoughts on a vast array of topics on the Internet.

[1 : 05] And these thoughts, even though they are personal, are open to millions of people to look at if they choose. And, in fact, that's the goal of writers of blogs, is as many people as possible can read what they have to say.

But there are, as you know, varying degrees of quality in these blogs. And a wide array of truth as well.

Some completely lacking in truth, and some being very selective about the truth as well. Well, Titus is like a blog in the sense that it's a personal letter to Titus.

And they're Paul's thoughts, yet clearly it is intended for a wider audience. In fact, millions of people have read this personal letter.

But unlike many blogs that we see in the Internet, this blog is completely filled with God's truth. It is God speaking to us.

[2 : 08] And the great thing is, is that over the past 2,000 years, there have been millions and millions of hits on this blog. What Titus has written to us.

So it's great that we are studying this together. We're going to be looking at it for the next seven weeks. And I think originally Titus was chosen because it was short. And it fits neatly into the seven weeks we have before the August services.

But we have found in working through Titus as the preachers that this has a lot to do with the vision. In fact, it seems directly to do with the vision that David has written up.

That we have been thinking about and praying about and looking at how we will apply it in our church. So it's very timely that we're doing this. And the reason I think that it's so applicable to us as we think about vision is because of the context of the church that Paul was writing to.

I don't know if you've ever been to Crete before. I've never been there. But it's a very mountainous island. It's about 260 kilometers long and 60 kilometers wide.

[3 : 14] It's about 200 kilometers just directly south of Athens. It's the biggest of the Greek islands. And Paul had laid a foundation of the church in this very mountainous island.

But he had to leave quickly. And he left Titus in charge of those churches. He left him to be an evangelist and to bring order to the groups of Christians that were on that island that had sprung up. But we know by the context of the letter that immediately afterwards Satan began to try to undermine and to destroy the church in two ways.

One, to overthrow the leadership. To really corrupt it. And the other thing is to really water down the doctrine. To shift and to distort what God had taught in Jesus Christ.

And so Paul, in this letter, brings the church back to God's vision for it. And he tells them what's essential for every community of Christians if they are to be vibrant and full of life and pleasing to God.

[4 : 24] And these will be themes in this letter. He writes about belief that gives life. And he writes about how that life is lived.

And he warns about the things that might corrupt or undermine that vibrant life. So one of the things that's striking about this letter is that God's truth is beautiful.

Paul is saying that. And its beauty shines most clearly and brightly when the church is deeply committed to living it out.

So when the church obeys that truth that God has given, there is a beauty about it. The truth of God shines through the church.

And Jesus said this to his disciples in his last teaching to him before he died on the cross. He told them this. He said, Abide in my love.

[5 : 21] In other words, he's saying, Live in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love and your joy will be full. And what he's saying, Jesus' word to you and to me is that when you obey him, you live in his love.

You are knowing him. You are abiding in him. And it is a joyful, beautiful thing. In fact, you cannot know him without obeying him.

You can't love him without following what he says, what he commands. And that's a real theme in the letter of Titus. And that will be unfolding during the next seven weeks.

We know God as we obey him. And I want to trace this theme a little bit in these short verses. And it starts right out in verse 1.

Because in verse 1, you see the titles that Paul thinks of that define him as he's giving his business card in a way. This is who I am.

[6 : 22] He says, I am a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ. If you think about those titles, they both have to do with obedience.

A servant is defined as the one who obeys his master. That's what a servant does and is. And the apostle means one who is sent out.

Now, if you're sent out, then somebody must have commanded you to go. To go with a specific purpose. And you have followed that commission.

That's what an apostle is. So God is Paul's master and Jesus sends him out. And his life is completely defined by obedience to them.

The obedience to God the Father and God the Son. So Paul's very clear about what his life is about. It's about obedience to God. And he's very clear also about the purpose for which Jesus sent him out for.

[7 : 25] It is the vision that Jesus has for the church as well. It's in the second half of verse 1. It's his vision statement. He says, Now, there's something that might be a little surprising here for you.

Because God's elect means chosen one. And in the Old Testament, it was always a term for the people of God. And Paul uses it of anyone who believes that Jesus saves them by dying for them on a cross.

So what Paul is saying is that the great goal of his life is to further the faith of believers. And you might say, Well, wait a second. I thought he's the great missionary.

The evangelist to the world. And that is true. Many people come to faith in Jesus for the first time through his ministry. But he spends most of his time preaching and teaching and mentoring believers about the good news of Jesus.

And how he commands us to live out that good news. And then he sends those people out to share what he has taught them.

[8 : 40] And that's what you see in verse 4. That's what Titus is. He's my true child in a common faith. It's a faith that Paul has taught Titus. He's like a spiritual father to him.

Well, that's a picture of what his ministry is all about. And it's because the gospel of Jesus went to far more people than if he alone went and preached the gospel to unbelievers alone.

It goes out through the multiplying effect of people who are being taught who Jesus is. And what that life is like as he sends, as Paul sends them out, the church grows.

And this is what Jesus said. This was his plan for the church from the beginning, wasn't it? He said to his first disciples, Go, make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I commanded them.

In other words, Jesus said to the church, You should be first about teaching people to obey me. This is what Jesus is saying. Because people who do this affect the world in profound ways.

[9 : 45] And many come to believe through their faithful living, through their faithful speaking. And that has a multiplying effect. So this is what Paul is about. He's about teaching people how to obey, to live out this truth that he brings them.

And I want you to notice how Paul describes faith. Because this really confirms this. He says, It is a knowledge, you see at the end of verse 1, It is a knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness.

That's a very important phrase. He is saying that knowledge of God, of the truth, leads to godliness. They go hand in hand. You cannot really know God without being godly, without obeying and following him.

And that word godliness is very important for us. What does it mean? We talked about this in our staff meeting. What does that word mean? And basically what it means is a willingness to allow one's whole life, in other words, your private life and your public life, to be shaped by the calling and the will of God.

It's a willingness to allow yourself to be shaped by that calling of God, the will of God in your life. And so Paul's great goal in life is to see people's lives shaped by that truth, changed by it, made godly because they know God's truth.

[11 : 10] Jesus sent Paul to produce strong and mature, fruitful Christians by teaching them God's truth. That's his goal. And that's really God's goal for the church as well because that is the way the gospel goes out into the world.

And I need to tell you, I don't know if anybody's thinking this. They may, they may not be. But we need to be very clear that none of us have attained full maturity in Christ.

This is something that all of us are moving towards. That's just the spiritual fact we all deal with. In fact, Paul wrote to a very strong church in Colossae.

He said to them, this is what I'm doing, church. He said, I am toiling. I am working in teaching and preaching for this reason, to present everyone mature in Christ, struggling with all Jesus' energy that he powerfully works within me.

You see, he's saying Paul's strong churches, the strongest ones, were maturing in Jesus. And this is what he was working for. And that means that we at St. John's are all about growth as well.

[12 : 22] We are growing towards that maturity. We have not fully attained the godliness that God wants for us. In fact, lots of knowledge about God, which I think that we have at St. John's.

You know, there's been a very good history of preaching and teaching. But lots of knowledge about God can cause us to deceive ourselves into thinking that, I know it all.

I know it all, basically, about what the Bible has to say to me. I have arrived spiritually. There's a temptation to think that. But this is not the case.

This is what Paul is working towards. This is what the church is meant to be about, is to grow in faith. I have had a number of conversations, different conversations recently, with long-time mature Christians at St. John's.

And they have said in different ways, I want to grow in my relationship with God. I want to know Jesus deeper, in a deeper way. And to serve him better as well.

[13 : 26] And I've got to tell you that those conversations have been incredibly encouraging to me. Because that's clearly the work of the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus wants in his church.

It's why he sent Paul. It's why God's word is there for us as well. That we might grow in our knowledge of him and grow in our godliness so that we are mature in him.

So I hope that each of you know that God wants you to keep on growing. There's nowhere in the Bible that says that you can become fully grown in godliness in this world.

And it doesn't say that as you grow older, you slow down in your growth. You know, you don't have as much growth to do. In fact, Paul says that as my body is giving out, he said, as it's letting me down, God is renewing me daily, every day.

Every day he's doing that work. He's saying the Holy Spirit is no respecter of age. He is about constant growth. Whether you are a 7-year-old or whether you are a 97-year-old, this is what God is doing with us.

[14 : 39] As he gives you the knowledge of his truth, he shapes you. He shapes what you think down to the very deepest part of your personality. So your godliness grows as you obey the truth.

That's interesting. I've had conversations with people who are new to the faith. And they said, you know, I just feel bad because I don't know the Bible very well. And I always say to them, it's not how

much you know about the Bible.

It is how well do you obey what you do know. And that's what our life is about. How good a job are you doing at obeying what you know about God's word?

That's what God is interested in for you. And I want to say that that godliness has a great value to God and to his kingdom.

It's not about just us being better. This is something that blesses God deeply. And godliness blesses those around you in your life as well.

[15 : 38] He uses your godliness in ways that you don't necessarily see, in ways you can't imagine. I have two boys who are 7 and 10 years old. And today, being Father's Day, I got cards from them.

And I've got to tell you, these cards are very imperfect. They are artwork that would not hold up in any art gallery. I had a card also from Nicholas today that his handwriting is not the best of the 7-year-olds in his class, to say the least.

And so I had a hard time with it. And the other thing is the whole card was written in French. And so you combined hieroglyphics with French. And I need a translator.

And he did a good job. So these are imperfect cards, aren't they? But they are cards that I love. In fact, I saved them all. I think I have all of them that they have written.

They're not perfect. But what they do is they are a sign of their love to me. And that's why I love them. And this is what God is about.

[16 : 46] Our good works, our godliness, is a sign of your love for God. And God values that. But the other thing about those cards that my boys give me is when other people see them, they love them as well.

And I think they love it because they know it's a sign of their love for me. There's something joyful about seeing the love of a child for a parent. People love to see that. And in the same way, our godliness, this expression of our love for God, blesses people around us.

They see that that is what your godliness is about. Whether we realize it or not. It is actually something that is infectious in the church.

And I want to let you know about another thing that's been happening. I've been very encouraged by a group of ten men that I'm meeting with that we hope to expand in the fall to be maybe a larger group.

There's a very simple format of that. And it's an infectious group. We learn from God through catechism and Bible for a little while. And then we spend a fair amount of time praying for each other.

[17 : 53] Praying about how we will obey and live out what we have read. We pray that God will help us and lead us how to forgive other people and ask for forgiveness.

We've prayed about how to be a light because God teaches the church to be the light. We pray about how to be a living sacrifice. God to strengthen us to be a humble servant.

Strengthen us to be committed to each other in love. Help us to be a community of contrast that embodies God's truth and presence in the world. These are things we've been praying about.

And it's a wonderful thing to hear those prayers, to be prayed for as well. It strengthens me to obey God. It challenges my own disobedience as well to hear and see other people's godliness, their response to God's word that we've been hearing.

It's a marvelous encouragement. This is really the faith part of the vision of St. John's, that people of every age will be growing in this way. And there are lots of things like this happening at St. John's now.

[19 : 00] But this is something that God really is pushing us towards, to grow in the knowledge of God and God's truth, but also to grow in godliness as well. Now, there is something essential for us, for this growth to take place.

We need help with it in our lives. It was especially important in Crete, where there was constant temptations to disobedience, constant temptations to be spiritual couch potatoes, because Cretans had a very bad reputation.

If you look down in verse 12, Paul writes, you know, one of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said that Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons.

Well, that's quite a reputation to have. And as you notice there, Paul says, this testimony is true.

This is what I've seen.

This is what's going on. And that means that in Crete, there were strong barriers to growth in godliness, as there is in every culture. The essential help that they needed is what we need as well. [20 : 09] It's in verse 2. It is the hope of eternal life. The hope of eternal life. That is the context in which we are godly, in which we learn the truth of God.

It is the way that we grow. In our house, we have, at our house, we have lots of flowers around. And it's a wonderful thing that Catherine has a green thumb, because they really tend to flourish under her care.

But last year, she planted a number of hanging baskets with flowers, and they did not look very happy. And so this was a concern of Catherine. She went and got expert advice this spring about, what can we do to make these flower baskets flourish and look happy?

Well, they very simply said at the nursery, here's some fertilizer. Put a little bit of it in the basket as you plant, and see what happens. Well, it is amazing.

These baskets are colorful. They look like they're having a party. They're celebrating. They look very, very healthy. And that is because those nutrients, that fertilizer made all the difference, because the plant is feeding on those nutrients as it is growing.

[21 : 27] And I think that the hope of eternal life is like a fertilizer for our growth, because eternal life is all about, is defined by Jesus as knowing God and having peace with him forever.

That's what eternal life is, is knowing God. And when we feed on that incredible fact, that hope before us, we will grow in our faith as we feed on that fact.

It is this truth that heaven will come to earth one day, that our bodies will be changed so that we can see him, that we will live, that he will live with us and us with him, that we will perfectly know him and serve him with complete joy, and that he will heal the nations.

This is what is before us. That is something that strengthens our growth. It's a future that's not a pie in the sky. Look at the end of verse 2.

God, who never lies, promised this before the ages began. And you can imagine that this is very, very good news, especially on the island of Crete, where lying had been developed to an art form.

[22 : 40] It was something that people took pride in. No, Paul is saying God is utterly reliable. He cannot lie by his very nature, and he has promised this eternal life to the world.

And it's not an uncertain hope, like I hope it will be sunny tomorrow. You know, I hope my son's handwriting will be perfect tomorrow morning. It is not an uncertain hope.

This is a hope of future certainty, because it rests on God's unchangeable promise. Paul really emphasizes this there. And you can see how this works.

If you are certain that God will be the final judge who will make heaven and earth again, if you know that in his love he will show himself to you, that you will know him forever, you will want to know him now.

You will orient your lives around him now. You will want to reflect his values, trust him, serve him. You will want to live out what you will be about in heaven.

[23 : 40] And the wonderful thing is, and I'll just say this in closing as we begin to leave this passage, is that God not only promised that before the ages began, that this would happen, this eternal life, but he also says that eternal life breaks into our world now, today.

So if you look at verse 3, in the original there's no in, and so it says this, it says, God at the proper time manifested his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.

Well, what is the word that God our Savior manifests in preaching? It is Jesus. God's word is that Jesus is given to save us and that in him is life.

So he is that promise that God said at the beginning of time. He is the fulfillment of that promise as well. And the amazing thing is that in faithful preaching and teaching, God shows Jesus to us.

He's revealed to us as we hear God's word taught. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. And what's happening here is that the new world that God will bring one day has broken into our old world in Jesus.

[24 : 59] And what Jesus calls us to do is to grow up and discover what we are meant to be, what the world is meant to be one now, to live into that.

And so my prayer is that this hope, the hope of Jesus, will strengthen you and sustain you today as you grow in the knowledge of God's truth and as you grow in godliness.

It's very timely today that this is a day that we celebrate the love of fathers for their children. Because this passage celebrates our Heavenly Father's entirely reliable love for us. It celebrates that we have been made His children and that He gives us and that His great desire is that we obey Him. That we live a life that is a sign of our love for Him. That we will grow up in that love that has been poured out on us. And so Paul's wish at the end of this greeting, if you look at verse 4, is that we will grow, as we grow in godliness, we will know the grace and the peace from God the Father and Jesus our Savior.

[26 : 06] These are the blessings of being reconciled to God, the blessings of living out that peace for one another. They are beautiful words that are meant to characterize a beautiful church.

May God give us grace as we grow in Him, as we obey the truth that He has given to us. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.