

A Community of Contrast, Part 2

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[0 : 00] Oh, good morning, everyone. Nice to see you. It's good to be here. So we're finishing up Titus today. And you know the ends of epistles and the pastoral letters?

There are these greetings right at the end, like in 2 Timothy, it says, would you greet Prisca and Aquila? And it says, an interesting little note here, and I left Trophimus, who is ill, in Miletus. And in Philemon, it ends here saying, say hi to Mark and Aristarchus and Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

I really like these endings. I really like them. They're not kind of... Here's why I like them.

It's real people, right? Like he's talking about real people. So it makes you realize that Paul isn't just talking into the air. Like they're not just... His letters, like Titus or Timothy, whatever, they're not just Paul kind of like, you know, journaling.

[1 : 06] Like he doesn't sit in cafes and kind of journal and pontificate and whatever takes his fancy that day, and then kind of, you know, throw it into a bit of a letter and send it off to some random person.

And no, these endings kind of shock us into realizing that this is not just theory. It's not dispassionate theory that Paul is talking to real people, that this is a real church, and that he clearly has deep affection for this church in Crete.

And so these candid moments right at the ends of Paul's letters are not things to be passed over quickly. There is treasure. There's gold here.

So let's have a look. Just as a reminder, so Paul is writing to a young minister called Titus in Crete, and at the beginning of chapter 1, Paul says to this young guy, Titus, he says, Titus, I need you to straighten some stuff out in the church.

And so far, Paul has said, Titus, get your leaders right, get your doctrine sound, and get your congregants' lifestyle on track. And now before he finishes up with the greetings, he gives Titus a warning in verse 9, and it would be helpful to have your Bibles open.

[2 : 26] He says, But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. Just before that warning, though, he reminds them of one of the main points of the whole book, and that is in verse 8.

The saying is trustworthy, he says, and I want you to insist on these things so that those who believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

These things are excellent. And profitable for people. So did you hear the comparison there? On the one hand, you have unprofitable controversies, and on the other hand, you have profitable good works.

Let's look at them both, beginning with profitable good works. Now, when thinking about good works, there are several mistakes we can make.

Mistake number one. Mistake number one. It's thinking that works are the basis for our salvation. It's no mistake that this just fabulous little book here, which talks about good works, also includes one of the most incredible gospel summaries, I think.

[3 : 38] One of the clearest summaries in the Bible, and it does that immediately before it gives another big nudge for good works. Let me remind you of it. It's Titus 3, verses 4 to 7.

I'm going to read it to you again, because I just love this. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, so that being justified by grace, we become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

So it makes it very clear here, we're not saved because we're really great. We're saved because God is merciful. Heaven will not be full of self-made men and women.

It will be full of people who've received God's mercy, which leads us to the second mistake we can make when considering and thinking about good works, and that is, if it's all about faith in God's amazing mercy, then I don't need to worry about works.

To think it's enough to just believe the right things, which is a danger, I think, for churches that are kind of theologically reformed.

[4 : 55] To think it's just enough to believe the right things is a denial of the gospel. It's a denial of the self-sacrificial love that is at the center of God's good news.

I'll put it another way. Good works are proof you're a Christian. Titus has made this really, really clear in Titus 2, 11 to 14.

Let me read that again, because that's a really great part of Titus as well. From verse 11. For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us, you hear that?

Training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live like we're living it, self-controlled, upright, 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 himself for himself, a people for his own position, who are zealous for good works.

I'll say this as strongly as I can. If our beliefs don't flow into actions, perhaps they're not really beliefs. Perhaps they are intellectual fancies, things we like to think about.

[6 : 19] The third mistake we can make when thinking about good works in our lives, and this is the most subtle one, and this is a dangerous one. The third mistake we can make when thinking about good works in our lives is thinking that our good works are gonna be these really huge, monstrous, amazing, spectacular things that we do.

Think back to some of the things Paul has described as good works in Titus. Because I want you to notice how ordinary they sound. Speak evil of no one.

I remember when I was, I guess in my mid-twenties, I was flatting in New Zealand, which is like, what do you call it here? Like rooming? Like, flatting is unhelpful, isn't it?

Like it's, a flat is like an apartment or a house that you live in with your mates, right? With your friend or your mates, that's again unhelpful. With your friends, right? So you're at university, you find some people you like, and you kind of live together in a house.

So I'm living together with these four guys, and a mutual friend of ours does something very stupid, a bit scandalous, quite scandalous, sinful.

[7 : 36] And so I come home, and I tell two of the guys I'm living with, I said, did you hear about, let's call him Bob, did you hear about Bob? And tell him, and they're like, shut up, he did that, I know.

Terrible, right? So we're just, you know, we're gossiping, it's terrible. And a friend of mine comes home, his name's Gene, he comes home, he walks in the door, and I say, Gene, you'll never guess what Bob did.

Can we tell you what Bob did? And I'm about to launch into this kind of, you know, gossip business. And he stops me and he goes, Aaron, do I actually need to know this? Is this, do you need to tell me what you're going to tell me about this person, this bad thing that this person did? I said, well, yeah, no, I guess not. And I remember thinking, ah, yes, Christianity. I must try that. It's a very ordinary thing, isn't it? Speak evil of no one. It's a daily thing, it's a thing we can do daily. At the end of the letter, Paul says, would you help Zenos the lawyer along his way? There we go, lawyers, Christians, that's encouraging.

[8 : 47] Would you help Zenos the lawyer along, help this guy, he's going somewhere, would you help him? Help him out. The word speed him along his way is a technical word, I think it means to support him financially. Don't quarrel, Paul says earlier.

Do you notice what's not on this list? Spending the rest of your life in a jungle as a missionary. Being Billy Graham. Single-handedly funding a hospital in a developing world.

Now, it makes no mention of really big things. Now, it's important that Christians do really big things. Those things are fantastic. But I don't think Paul's talking about that.

See, the problem with thinking about good works, going to be these extraordinary huge things that we do, is we end up, we can just end up sort of sitting, you know, warming the pew every Sunday,

waiting for our little chance to shine, and we could end up doing nothing.

Usefulness, your profitability, to use Paul's words, your profitability in the kingdom, will probably come through ordinary, simple acts, of, selfless love, daily.

[9 : 59] Quiet devotions. Quiet devotions to simple, selfless acts, I think. Mother Teresa summarizes this very well. You've probably heard this quote. She says, there is no one great thing, you're going to do with your life, but many small things, with great love.

Now, there's lots of examples I could give, about, of small things with great love. I'll give you one example. There is a couple at St. John's, at this, in this congregation here.

When they come to church, they sit quite near the back. They sit near the back, so they can spot new people. It's easy to spot them, when you're at the back. And they want to spot new people, so they can say hi to them, and welcome them into the church.

Isn't that wonderful? Just, such a simple, but, profoundly loving thing. So, let me finish, with a question, challenge I guess.

How carefully, do we attend, to the quality, of our daily, Christian lives? This is the challenge, from Paul. So, good works are profitable.

[11 : 04] But there's something, really unprofitable. That's the next little section. Verse 9, avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable, and worthless.

Now, this is not saying, we should avoid all controversies. This is not a ban. It's quite a John Stott book. Jesus was a controversialist. So, it's not a ban on controversy, it's a ban on foolish controversy.

It gives an example, of genealogies here. What's that all about? Well, as far as I can tell, what would happen, is back in the, you know in the Old Testament, there's these kind of, lots of genealogies?

He begat, he begat, blah, blah, blah, right around. Most of these people, we don't know who they are, I've got no idea. But what they'd do, way, way back in the days, is that they'd attach, some kind of myth to this person, that make up a story about them, and then other people, would attach a story to them, and so there'd be, these competing stories, about these people, that we didn't really have any idea, who they were.

And people would argue about stuff, which was actually nonsense, from the beginning. Another example, an ancient example, people spend a lot of time, arguing about whether angels, took a Sabbath.

[12 : 15] Now unlike the genealogy stuff, there's actually probably, an answer to that question, but no one is more godly, for knowing it. The classic, does anyone know, what the classic medieval, question was, that really was a pretty stupid question.

What's the medieval one? How many angels? Right, how many angels can dance, on the head of a pin? Do you know there's an answer, to that question? Anders Sandberg, a Swedish scientist.

The Swedes. Seriously, are there any Swedes here? Tell me about your country, because why is it, that every study I read, it's always Swedish, and random. So anyway, so this guy, he tackled this question, and he said, based on theories of, information physics, and quantum gravity, he established, an upper bound, of 8.6766, times 10 to the power, of 49 angels.

So, you're welcome. Rest easy. Go in peace. Now, in the Christian climate of today, that stuff, we go, that's ridiculous, they're so stupid back then.

But in the Christian climate of today, because, because we're not theologically liberal, we are evangelical, so we like, we like gospel clarity, right? We like clarity, about things, about points of doctrine.

[13 : 46] Downside of that, is we can sometimes, get caught up on minutiae. I listened to a sermon recently, about the death of Jesus, and it's the death and burial of Jesus. And it was a 40 minute sermon.

Of that, the preacher spent 20 minutes, on the evils of cremation. And he was very hard line, very, very hard line about it.

Now, he should have been talking about, what Jesus accomplished on the cross, but he was on a hobby horse. He should have been talking about the cross. He was a fool, a foolish, foolish man.

You can imagine, the drama, and division, he would cause in his church, by taking such a hard line, about something, which there is, no right answer, I don't think on.

Other things, we can get caught up on, music style, the amount of water, and baptism, church, architecture, liturgy, whether ministers, should wear robes, or not.

[14:48] Now, I'm not saying, you can't have strong opinions, on such things. I understand, David Short is sick this morning, he's not here, so I can talk about him. Have, have you ever talked to David Short, about any topic?

The man has very strong opinions, on everything. But he is a wise man, and he knows, what is central to the gospel, and what is not. So you can have very strong opinions, if you like, on liturgy, and music, and robes, etc.

But no, they are not central gospel issues, so do not let them divide us. Satan wants to deflect us from the gospel, you know that.

I hope you know that. So if he can deflect us, five degrees from the gospel, so that we spend most of our time, arguing or debating about, what kind of music, and what kind of liturgy we use, then I think Satan can chalk that up, as a win.

Now the foil for getting off course, the remedy for getting off course, is keeping the gospel center. Some people love controversy though, and they love it in a pathological way, in a very unhealthy way.

[16:08] Paul describes them as warped, they've taken their eye off the ball, so what do we do with people, who like arguing, for the sake of arguing, who cause division? Verse 10, as for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once, and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person, is warped and sinful, and is self-condemned.

Do you see here, it's interesting, it's not even about, what they're talking about. It's not even about the topic, the topic's not the problem here. The topic is division. Unity is very important to God.

So what do we do with these people? Well, we warn them once, and the warning word here is not, it's, in Ephesians 4, it talks about, parents don't make your kids angry, but instruct them.

It's that word, it's this instructing word. You're instructing them, perhaps something in their background, has made them, kind of a bit quirky, about some particular topics. Come to them, help them to see, what they're doing is divisive.

Help them to focus more on the gospel. So warn them. If they carry on, warn them again. If they carry on, and there's no change after that, have nothing more to do with them. Now, I don't know whether this is excommunication, or a lighter form of it, it doesn't elaborate.

[17:22] It's probably case by case. Either way, folks, this is not fun stuff, for a minister to do. And you can imagine, many ministers avoid this kind of thing. But I think, it is fair to say, that in many denominations, the Anglican Church of Canada, has paid a high price, for not dealing with wolves, amongst the sheep.

Guys, would you pray for your church leaders, and pray that we would have, courage to do things, which are hard, which are difficult. And now we get to the last part, of the passage.

This is a bit, I said at the start, I really liked, because it puts a human face, in all of this. Folks, I don't know what you think about Paul, but I believe some people, have him pegged, as this kind of angry loner, who just kind of, wanders around, shouting theology, at people, in perfectly formed paragraphs.

That's not the impression, we get at this last bit though, is it? I mean he clearly loves people, really likes Titus obviously, he's calling Titus back from Crete, and wants to hang out, with Titus for the winter.

He's got a couple of mates, he's going to send, to Crete, he hasn't decided, whether it's between, these two guys here. I find it really encouraging, here, Paul's gospel ambition, for this extraordinary church in Crete, and I find that very challenging too, and it makes me think about, my gospel ambition, for the city that I'm in.

[18:46] But this is more than, just a few hellos, and Paul, in the middle of his greetings to people, in the middle of naming people, he has one more kick at the can, so to speak, in verse 14.

And let our people learn, to devote themselves, to good work, so as to help cases, of urgent need, and not be unfruitful. And gives them a very practical example, in verse 13. This is the lawyer, in Apollos, he goes, see that they lack nothing, do your best, help these guys out, would you?

It's a very practical, thing you can do, to help these guys. And then he sends greetings, and in verse 15, he finishes with a benediction, grace be with you all.

And this is not a perfunctory, auto-signature type thing, like we might write yours faithfully, at the end of a letter. It's a prayer, wonderful prayer. God's favor be towards you, Church of Crete, to Titus.

God's pardon, a pronouncement of God's pardon. It's the right way to end, because Paul knows, that they all need grace, this church, this extraordinary little church. Well folks, that is Titus.

[19 : 56] And what a remarkable little book, this has been, and I hope you've been challenged, by it's called, to gospel clarity. But not just gospel clarity, the challenge to, live your life for Jesus, every day, in all the small ways, that you can, all, under the umbrella, of God's, incredible grace.

Amen? Amen. Amen. Amen.