

A Community of Contrast, Part 1

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[0 : 00] Well, it would be great if you would take up your Bible and turn back to Titus chapter 3, please, on page 999. And as you do that, I'm in the freedom of this shirt because in 2008, I was officially defrocked by the Canadian Anglican Church.

So, I have complete freedom up here. So, Titus chapter 3, I hope you noticed as it was being read that this is a passage about salvation.

Verse 4, God is called our Savior. Verse 5, Jesus Christ is called our Savior. And at the beginning of verse 5, these three little words, He saved us.

But I think to the average person in Vancouver, salvation is used pretty much only of finance or forestry.

But not speaking about spirituality. When we talk about spirituality, we speak about soul healing and wellness and consciousness and faith journey and vague terms that don't offend anyone.

[1 : 21] There's something slightly disreputable about using the term salvation, isn't there? As though I need help from someone. And this embarrassment has come into the church big time.

A few years ago, when we were part of the diocese, I probably should not tell this story. But I've been defrocked anyway. So, I went to a meeting at which the bishop spoke.

And his talk was based on the idea that we should not try to preach the gospel and share the faith with people of other religions. Because the language of salvation is offensive and completely unintelligible.

And his talk was illustrated by Buddhism. He said, the whole concept of salvation is completely incomprehensible to a Buddhist. So, we shouldn't be proselytizing.

We shouldn't evangelize other religions. And it came as a great surprise to one of the women from St. John's who'd come with me. Who had been wonderfully converted out of Buddhism to Christianity.

[2 : 28] And had given her life to telling people about the salvation that she had in Jesus Christ. And was not at all shy about standing up and sharing her experience of the darkness and hopelessness and emptiness of Buddhism.

Until she came to know the person of Jesus Christ. And what the change of being reborn had meant to her. And how as a bishop, etc, etc. You understand the story. However, it's true, isn't it?

That the one thing that we ought not to be ashamed of. Probably we're a little embarrassed about. But in the Bible, God is a God of salvation.

And if you are a believer. You are one who loves salvation. We tell his salvation from day to day. With joy, the Bible says.

You draw water from the wells of salvation. And at the center of our faith is the person of Jesus. God saves. That's what it means. Jesus Christ. Who was born this day to you a savior.

- [3 : 25] And he says in Luke's gospel. I've come to seek and save the lost. And I think this Titus passage is the fullest and most intimate and personal depiction of salvation.
- Probably in the Bible. And what is remarkable about this passage, I hope you noticed. Is it's about our experience of salvation.
- Salvation. See, salvation involves both what God has done for us. Outside us. As well as what God does in us.
- And when you go to the New Testament and you say that you ask the question, How do I know God loves me? 95 times out of 100, the New Testament answers by what God does for us. God shows his love for us in this that while we were sinners, Christ died for us.
- God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. But every now and again, and here I think is the classic, The Apostle describes, the Bible describes the more subjective side of salvation.
- [4 : 33] Not just what God has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. But what God does in us by his Holy Spirit now. So if you look down at verse 5, halfway through.
- See, he saved us, it starts. Halfway through. By the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.
- He's talking about a sweeping, drastic, far-reaching change. Salvation is about a change. It's a change of heart.
- It's a change of our very nature. It's an inner washing, a new life, a new birth. And we can talk about it till the cows come home. But it's not real until we've experienced it.
- And salvation does not become a delight and a joy until we receive this washing of regeneration and new birth for ourselves. So I have two major points.
- [5 : 40] The first is, how does God change us? And the second, why does God change us? And they both come in this little passage here. We're not going to turn to any other scriptures. It's so deep and wide, this text.
- So the first question, how does God change us? And this passage tells us, gives us four R's. The letter R. Are you with me?
- How does God change us? Four R's. And I'll ask everyone as they go out, what are the four R's? And the first is revelation. Revelation.
- How does God change us? Verse 4. When the goodness and loving kindness of our Saviour appeared, He saved us. And the word appear is epiphany, revelation.
- But whereas, you remember back in chapter 2, verse 11, I think this might have even been last week. For the grace of God has appeared. In chapter 2, Paul is speaking about the historical appearing of Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection.
- [6 : 46] Here, in verse 4, the goodness and loving kindness of our God appeared. He's speaking about a personal revelation into our hearts where we suddenly see and know the goodness and loving kindness of God and that He is our tender, heavenly Father.
- It's a miracle. It's not something you can do to yourself. It's not something anyone else can do for you. Church can't do it.
- Ministers can't do it. This is a change that God Himself has to work directly in each one of our hearts. That's why He begins in verse 4, when the goodness occurred.
- It happened at a particular time, the death of Jesus 2,000 years ago. But this is speaking about our life now. And until God appears and reveals Himself, we remain in the dark.
- And all the saving goodness of what Jesus did 2,000 years ago is just theoretical. I say this as someone who was raised, I'm very grateful for it, I was raised in a Christian family.

[7 : 53] I was taught the scriptures from childhood. But it made no radical change in my life until God revealed Himself to me.

Christ must be real to us inwardly. And for that to happen, there needs to be revelation. This is how the change begins. The first is God has to shine in our hearts, appear in our hearts to change us.

That's the first R, revelation. The second R, regeneration. Down there in verse 5, He saved us by the washing of regeneration.

Now we use this word, don't we? I was writing in the UBC forest yesterday, keep out, renovation, environmental restoration. We use it of land that we've made a complete mess of and we regenerate the land so it goes back to what it was.

We use it of urban regeneration or you're going on holidays to regenerate your batteries. And all the way we use this word today has something in common. It's something old and tired and worn out.

[9 : 02] And we rearrange it and we do things with it to give it some newness. We repair it, we revitalize it, we renovate it. But it's still fundamentally the same old thing. But the biblical view of regeneration is completely different.

It means there is something entirely new, something which is drastically new, God places in our lives. It's not a repair, it's not a renovation.

It is, the phrase simply means a new birth, an again birth. This is what Jesus talked about, being born anew, born from above, born again, which we have used wrongly too.

The point is, when God regenerates us, he plants in us a new life. His own life. This is a very big Bible word.

Be regenerated. It's an inner recreation of our nature by the Holy Spirit where we're made new people. We're given a new heart with new affections and a new life.

[10 : 07] And if you've had it, you know you begin to desire what God desires. You see Jesus as the most brilliant one who's ever lived. You want to serve him and trust him and turn to him and become like him.

And it's called the washing of regeneration because when God plants this new life in us, we become aware of our sin and our distance from God and our need of cleansing and our eyes are open to the spiritual reality and we die with Christ, we're buried with Christ and we're raised with him in new life.

This is what it is. This is what regeneration is. And there are some of us here who know the very moment that that happened in their lives. Someone at the 8 o'clock service came out and said to me, June 14, 1976, I was dragged along to a camp and I heard the four spiritual laws and that was the moment I became a Christian 40 years ago.

And my wife became a Christian at 16. Day before, spiritual darkness. Day after, light. But some of us, probably most of us, have no memory of that moment.

I don't remember the moment of my physical birth either. But what really matters is not whether we can mark it on the calendar, of course.

[11 : 21] What matters is whether you are alive today in Jesus Christ. So, do you know God? Do you know God as your loving Heavenly Father?

Do you trust Jesus as your Lord? Do you hunger for his presence and long to hear his word? Are you distressed by your own sin and seek forgiveness?

Do you really want to follow him and obey him and serve him and live for him? Do you find yourself loving other Christians? These are all infallible marks of being alive in Jesus Christ.

They come to us. This is the change made in us by the washing of regeneration. This is how God changes us. And the first R is revelation and the second is regeneration.

Are you with me so far? What are the two R's? Sorry, I won't do that. No, sorry. Apologize. The third is renewal, of course.

[12 : 23] Renewal. Verse 5. The renewal of the Holy Spirit. This is not new as in you get a new car. You know, it's recent. This is new, meaning something of an entirely different quality. The word is literally re-new, again new, and it comes out of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

And if you combine regeneration and renewal, you have the ongoing life of the Christian. Because the Holy Spirit doesn't come in and give us a new life and then just leave us on our own to cope by ourselves.

What he does is this. He makes us alive and he grafts us like a branch into the person of Jesus Christ. Into the body of Jesus Christ. That's why one of the signs is that you love other Christians.

And where does the power of renewal come from? So where does the power of personal renewal come from? You know, we as a church, where will the power of renewal come from?

[13 : 33] It only comes from the power of the Holy Spirit. He gives us a new heart. He renews us spiritually. And every other form of renewing that Christians are engaged in, social renewing, whatever it is, are based on this.

As you and I daily walk in newness of life. As we try and walk by the Spirit. As we try to be filled with the Spirit and be led by the Spirit.

This is how God changes us. First by revelation, regeneration, renewal. And my fourth R is a little bit of a cheat. I'm sorry, I just had to get an R.

It's in verse 6. It's the word richly. You see that? The renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom God poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Very, very important. When you first become a Christian, if your eyes have been made open, if you're alive to Jesus Christ, He does not give you part of His Holy Spirit.

[14 : 39] Don't get a little bit of the Holy Spirit, then a little bit more when you become a little bit more godly or go to my conferences. We get all of God's Holy Spirit because God pours His Spirit out lavishly on us through Jesus Christ.

Through Jesus Christ. The giving of the Spirit and Jesus Christ are together, you see. We can't separate them. In fact, did you notice that all three persons of God, the Godhead, are involved in our saving experience as well as our salvation?

God Himself saved us by the regeneration of the Spirit through Jesus Christ. This is how God changes us. This is what the passage teaches us.

I found in the last few weeks as we've gone through this book of Titus, I have been overwhelmed, honestly, with some of these truths and feel very inadequate in explaining them.

And what I've done is I've taken one phrase a week and had that as a sort of a key phrase. And I'll write the phrase out on a sticky and put it in front of my computer. And if you're finding one of these that really God is speaking to you, take it and mark it and have it with you.

[16 : 00] The epiphany, the appearing of God. The new life that God, the renewing of the Spirit. The richness of His Spirit pouring into you. Take one of those.

Pray it through, please. So that's how God changes us. And I need to move secondly and a little more briefly, why? Why does God change us? And there are three answers and there are no, there's no alliteration here, I'm sorry.

Why does God change us? First, because of His own reputation. It's obvious, really. God is invisible. And the way in which our friends and our neighbours and the rest of the world are going to see the reality of salvation is by seeing the change that God has made in us.

And we talked about this last week, didn't we? That God has entrusted His reputation into our hands. We are reading this letter from the Apostle Paul sent to his co-worker in Crete, Titus.

It's a very clever letter, really, because at the end of the letter, it's clear that Paul wants the letter read to the congregation. It's not just privately to Titus.

[17 : 09] The last, a grace be with you all, is plural. So the Apostle is expecting Titus to preach and to teach and to read this in the churches because, you remember, God's strategy for changing and reaching the island of Crete is to have little churches around Crete of reborn Cretans who are devoted to good works.

Devoted to good works. Remember? And in chapter 1, Paul showed what that looked like in the church, in our relationships with one another. And in chapter 2, Paul showed what it looked like in the family.

And now here in chapter 3, in verses 1 and 2, the focus is on what it means for a Christian to live as a citizen in the wider society. How do we as Christians relate to our culture, our city, and our community?

What does it mean? What does a saved community look like Monday to Saturday? And I want to say that in North America, there seem to be two models, two prominent models of engagement.

And one model expects too little of us and the other model expects too much of us. One model I'm calling sub-biblical and the other I'm calling supra-biblical, above-biblical.

[18 : 30] So let me see if I can offend everyone at once. The sub-biblical model says this. It says, The church's job is not to engage society whatsoever. We're here to preach the gospel.

We want to make sure everyone in our church knows the message of salvation and that individuals are saved. Our focus is on getting people to heaven. Yes, we should be good and law-abiding citizens.

But we have to protect ourselves from the sinfulness of the world and worldliness. And the world could go to hell so much as we are concerned. And any focus of good works is just us showing we are real Christians.

That's the sub-biblical model. The supra, the above-biblical model, says that the main job of the church is to engage society because the role of the church in this world is to fix the broken creation.

The church must identify with the oppressed and the downtrodden to be engaged and to be active so as to cooperate with God in bringing the kingdom of God here in Vancouver.

[19 : 41] What salvation means is to bring this world back to God's design so that we all ought to be working on the restoration of the world. And so the focus of good works is activism and doing good, making people's lives better.

Now there are truth in both those models and I'm not going to spend much time on them but I just want to point out they are not what Paul teaches here in Titus or anywhere else.

Look down at chapter 3 verse 1 please. Paul says, You've ever wondered if you've been a Christian for a couple of years why almost every book of the New Testament speaks like this?

And I think it's because, it may be, because when the gospel came to new communities and there were new Christians, most of these places were where government authorities were corrupt and there was a very heavy cynicism about rulers in the Roman Empire.

Christian posture is one of obedience and submission, not unconditional allegiance. We know from the book of Acts, remember when the apostles were beaten and imprisoned and said you must not preach the name of Jesus Christ raised from the dead?

[21 : 24] They said we must obey God rather than man. And there have been many of our brothers and sisters even in the world today who've given their lives because they would not deny Christ in order to serve the authorities.

But the New Testament does teach that God appoints governing authorities and delegates authority to the state and our fundamental allegiance to God will show itself in a particular style of engagement with the city.

So in the usual course of things, Christians, we Christians, we ought to be the first to pay our taxes. We're law and order people, we engage in neighbourhood gatherings, we're ready for every good work.

That's why week by week by week we pray for our governing authorities. It's not just a time filler. We're praying for the governing authorities so that the gospel may be proclaimed and lived out and this pleases Jesus Christ our Saviour who wants all to be saved.

How do we engage in the city? Well look at verse 2. Speak evil of no one. Avoid quarrelling. Be gentle.

[22 : 30] Show all courtesy toward all people. That's pretty clear, isn't it? Go and do likewise. You can see though the assumption is we're engaged.

But you see it's our speech and our attitude that's meant to represent Jesus Christ. So you don't pass on that juicy story that's going to destroy your friend's reputation. You're not someone who's combative and always flaring up when you're offended.

You're gentle, considerate. Not just to those whom you're going to get something from, but to all. And these words are words Jesus used of himself.

Gentleness, humility and meekness. It's not weakness and being passive. It's power under control. Not having to prove yourself. Not asserting your dignity, but be patient with those who irritate you.

And the reason is not personal so that we'll be better than others. The reason is not pragmatic so that society will work better. The reason is spiritual. So that the change of God might continue.

[23 : 35] That people will see the change of God in us. And my guess is that when these Cretans began to be submissive and gentle in Crete, my guess is they were mocked mercilessly and admired quietly.

And who knows who came to faith through that? So the first reason why God changes us is his own reputation. The second, because we need it very badly.

Verse 3. We ourselves were once foolish, which means ignorant. Disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? It's a terrible picture. Do you notice at the beginning of the verse, Paul includes himself?

He says, we ourselves. Paul, the deeply religious, religious man. Strict, strict Jew. And he speaks for himself and he speaks for all of us as Christians who have been made anew by the Holy Spirit.

[24 : 52] He says before, he says, for all my wisdom, I was foolish. All my knowledge was ignorance. I could pass all the exams. I could tell you the laws from memory.

I wanted to do what was right, but I had a bad heart. I needed regeneration. And he gives us an example in one of the other books of the New Testament. He says, take the commandment of coveting.

Take envy. I just couldn't help myself. He said, when other people got good things, I resent, not only did I resent them getting those good things, I wanted to take it away from them and have it for myself.

The good things I wanted, I could not do, but the things I hated, this is what I did. I was a blind man in a dark room until Christ shone in my heart. It's the place of all of us.

None of us love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, do we? Naturally, we don't. None of us love our neighbor as ourself. That's why, you see, we need this change, because there is no social renewal apart from this spiritual renewal.

[25 : 55] Why does God change us? If we're honest, it's not just for his reputation. It's because we need it. And thirdly and finally, and this is quite short, why does God change us?

The answer is because he loves us. Just look back to verse 4, please. 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.

This is it. This is, we are at the absolute bedrock of Christian faith, of the world, and of salvation.

Because ultimately, the reason God gives us salvation and this change is because of nothing in us, but out of the freedom of his own love.

There's nothing in us that kindles or stimulates him to love us. He made us for himself and we've turned away from him. But he saves us completely independently of anything you might have done which is good or righteous, but out of his love and mercy.

[27 : 11] And if this is new to you, I encourage you to take this little wine-coloured book in the pew and have a read in the back of some articles, 39 articles, 11, 12, and 13.

They're very interesting. This is one of the great keys of the Christian faith, that we're justified by grace, that we're forgiven and renewed purely because of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

That the basis of our renew, we didn't prepare ourselves, we didn't go seeking for God, but the basis of our new birth is his love, his grace.

In saving us, God had no regard whatsoever for our works. We bring nothing to him, we do not prepare ourselves, we do not deserve his kindness.

It's this, that Christ has taken our sins and given us his righteousness in love, in love, in love. I can hardly, I can hardly speak to you about how remarkable and amazing this is.

[28 : 24] It means that if you trust Christ, there is nothing that you can do to make him love you more. There's nothing that you can do to make him love you less because his love springs out of his own eternal kindness and goodness.

And if you don't know Christ, ask him to do this miracle of revelation and renewal and regeneration in your hearts and he will.

And I think a good way for us to finish today is to pray a prayer together. So I wonder if you would take out this wine-colored prayer book and turn to page 228.

In just a moment, David is going to come and lead us in prayers, but I thought we should pray this prayer together because it sort of brings to a head and application all the things that God has been saying in this passage.

So page 228. As we remain seated, let's just bow our heads and pray this. Lord of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of thy name.

[29 : 49] Increase in us true religion. Nourish us with all goodness. And of thy great mercy, keep us in the same. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.