

The Instruction of God's Grace

Titus 2:11-15

Imagine three years ago. Three 12-year-old students are having singing lessons – let's call them Maria, Nick and Julie. They each have a different teacher. Each teacher says: "I think you've got the makings of being Australian Idol in six years". Each student's eyes light up. Even more, each student has fame and fortune flashing in their heart.

Now come into the present:

- Maria stopped singing lessons 18 months ago.
- Nick still plods on with the lessons, but he's not making the progress his teacher expects.
- Julie's going great with her lessons. She's still on track to be Australian Idol in three years.

What's made the difference? They all had the same dream. They all wanted that dream. Why is it that only Julie still looks promising?

- Maria never really had a chance. She has a pleasant enough voice, but that's all. She doesn't have any real passion for singing – and so she gave up. She never really had the makings of being Australian Idol. Her teacher tells that to all his students. He thinks they'll keep having lessons if they think they've got a chance.
- Nick did have a chance. He has a superb voice and a charismatic presence. He got distracted from the dream. He discovered girls. He discovered they seem to like him naturally. He spends more time talking with them than practising his scales. He's

got a new dream.

- Julie's focused on the dream. The dream determines how she lives. Her voice training is aimed at reaching the dream. Her practice is motivated by achieving the dream. Even her diet is determined by one day becoming Australian Idol.

As Christians, we all have the same past – we've been rescued by God from our slavery to sin. As Christians, we're all given the same dream – life forever in the sinless perfection of heaven. So why is there such a big difference in our lives now?

- Some Christians are powering on, living upright and godly lives that look like a foretaste of heaven.
- Other Christians struggle to find any changes in their lives. Their lifestyle's hardly different from before they became a Christian.

Why this big variation? I think we can find some clues in this passage from Titus we're looking at today.

What's God's Grace?

I want us to work our way through this passage by thinking through a series of questions. Some of the questions have fairly short and simple answers – and we'll deal with them relatively quickly. Some of them require more extended thought.

First question: What's the grace of God? This is one of the short questions. The grace of God is God's favour – God's goodwill, God's kindness, God's mercy – toward humanity. If I see a cockroach in my kitchen, how do I respond?

- Flatten it with my shoe? Spray it with insecticide? Put out baits? None of those would be considered a

gracious response.

- The more gracious response would be to catch the cockroach and take it outside – maybe give it some of its favourite food (whatever that happens to be).

Our expectation should be that God's attitude to us is one of anger and judgment. After all, we've rebelled against Him. We've told Him to get lost. We've insisted on ordering our own lives according to our own priorities and not according to our Maker's intentions. We'd expect God to be none too pleased with such attitudes and to take fairly destructive steps toward those displaying them – flattening them with His shoe. Yet, Paul talks here about God's grace toward humanity.

Second question: What's it mean to say that grace has appeared? How can you see grace? Grace itself is an abstract concept. I can bring a chair in here and say: Look, this is a chair. A chair's a concrete object. But I can't bring grace in here and say: Look, here's a lump of grace. Grace is an attitude within a person's mind. You can't see it. But you can see the results of it.

And here, Paul refers to a specific, historical appearance of God's grace – namely Jesus. That becomes clear in verses 13 and 14. This is not the only time God's shown grace to people.

- God showed grace to Israel by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt.
- God showed grace to King David by not killing him when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah.
- God showed grace to Nineveh by sparing them judgment when they repented at Jonah's preaching.

But those things pale into insignificance when compared with the appearance of Jesus.

- The nature of the grace God shows in Jesus is far more significant – it has to do with bringing us salvation.
- The extent of the grace God shows in Jesus is far greater – it's not just Israel who benefit, it's available for all humanity.

God's Grace Teaches us to Say "No" and "Yes"

The third question – and this is one of the more complex questions: How does God's grace teach us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions?

If you read verse 12 to the average Australian, what'd be their reaction? They'd laugh at you, wouldn't they? They'd think it was evidence of God's meanness – not God's grace. Wouldn't the average Australian reason something like this?

- I like it when someone does something to please me. Such a person is showing kindness – grace – toward me.
- I like materialism (you can substitute any other form of ungodliness in there – I'm just using materialism as an example). I enjoy having things. I enjoy getting new things. I enjoy dreaming about all the other new things I'd like to make me happy.
- Therefore, if God wants to be kind to me – if God wants to show me grace – wouldn't He permit me to dream bigger materialistic dreams and give me more things to fill those dreams.

How can Paul say that God's grace teaches us to say "no" to something that pleases me? Isn't that an example of God's stinginess – of God's withholding grace from me?

Such is how sin has brainwashed the average Australian – and perhaps also the average Australian Christian. We think of godliness in negative terms and ungodliness in positive terms. What do people in Australia boast about?

- There are some godly things. We boast about those who help their mates. We honour those involved in community service. We have awards for bravery and those who risk their own lives to save others.
- But so much of what Australians boast about is ungodly – sexual exploits outside marriage, binge drinking, breaking the speed limit, taking sickies to go to the cricket, keeping up with the Joneses, not declaring income on the tax return, grumbling about work, grumbling about the government, grumbling about life.
- On top of that, we're encouraged to be greedy, envious, lustful, gluttonous, wasteful, immodest, foul-mouthed, self-indulgent.

These are national art-forms. They're part of our cultural training. We're brought up in the atmosphere of this stuff. We think this is how to really live – what life's all about. Surely if God's favourable to us, He'd simply encourage us to satisfy our desires. God's grace would teach us to enjoy this stuff.

The thinking of the average Australian's a long way from God's thinking. Indeed, it's so far from God's thinking that, unless God's grace steps in and enlightens them, they won't even get it. They'll continue to think the same old rebellious and self-centred way:

- The best way to live is simply to enjoy myself and get as much out of life as I can.
- God's grace looks so restrictive. It's so negative.

Why'd I want to live like that?

God's position is that ungodliness and worldly passions are actually bad for us. It's not that God wants to stop us having fun – it's that He wants us to stop doing things to destroy ourselves.

Let's work through an example – greed. What impact does greed have on people? On the corporate level:

- We've seen examples of rich, powerful countries exploiting poor, weak countries. Whole populations experience systemic poverty – some because of the corruption in their own governments; some simply so we can enjoy our standard of living. Some people live as slaves in third world countries so people in the first world can enjoy their little luxuries.
- We've seen examples of companies taking short-cuts to increase the bottom line. They use inferior materials that cause serious accidents for those relying on their products. They dump toxic waste in public places. Unsuspecting people are used as guinea pigs for experimental products.

The list goes on. Sure, on the surface at least, those doing the exploiting seem to benefit, but the cost is horrific for the billions of victims.

On the individual level, we've got the literary example of Ebenezer Scrooge. He was never satisfied. He always wanted more. His greed became an insatiable monster. To the outsider, he lived in misery – even though he didn't see it that way himself. He's a literary character – and the novel's written to highlight this very point. Yet, there are people like that in reality – and more often than

not they don't recognise the destructive grip greed has on them. They're enslaved. They never have enough. They may have a level of happiness, but there's always an underlying restlessness. Greed eats away at their soul.

Now, our culture trains us to think that's only the extreme – yeah, sure, there are bad aspects of greed, but you can keep them under control and you can make greed work for your good and for the good of the economy.

- Advertising's good because it creates more demand and thus increases production.
- Keeping up with the Joneses is good healthy competition – as long as you know your limits.
- Consumption keeps the economy booming – so throw out the old model and update to the new.
- It'd be wrong for our standard of living to go backwards – we have to keep pushing for more and bigger and better – even if we can't afford it.
- The luxuries of the last generation are the assumed rights of the next generation.

But you can't separate these things from their impact on our world – pollution, global warming, overuse of limited resources, exploitation. Nor can you separate them from their impact on the individual – anti-social climbing over the neighbours, general restlessness and discontent, being fooled into thinking life's all about getting things, the giving of my heart to a false idol. If we look at the world honestly, the destructive results of greed aren't all that hard to see. God says: that's ungodliness.

Come back to our question: How does God's grace teach us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions? Especially, how does God's grace that's appeared in Jesus

for our salvation teach us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions? Two things – one's past and the other's future – both are tied up with salvation.

In the past, Jesus died for us. What's involved in that?

- We'd rebelled against God. God designed us. He made us. He's God and we're His creatures. He had the right to tell His creatures what to do. But, instead of paying attention to God, we decided we knew better. We wanted to do our own thing rather than God's thing.
- That rebellion deserved God's judgment. It's right and proper that God be angry with our rebellion. We've thumbed our noses at the most important Being in the whole universe and ignored Him and insulted Him. We deserve punishment for such an horrendous crime.
- Yet, God's judgment – God's anger – God's punishment: it was poured out on Jesus instead of us. God's grace appeared in flesh and died on a cross for us. God Himself, in the person of His Son, paid the price for us.

That's happened in the past.

Why did God do that for us? Verse 14:

- To redeem us from all wickedness; and
- To purify a people for Himself.

That is, God bought back a people for Himself – not a people that would continue in their rebellion and wickedness, but a people who'd be saved from that sort of lifestyle. Thus, we should say "no" to ungodliness because that's what God's bought us out of – it's what He's rescued us from. He's saved us from the destructive lifestyle we willingly pursued. That's the very nature of the salvat-

ion He's given us.

In the future, Jesus will return. That's in verse 13:

while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ

There's a very real sense in which this salvation God's given us is not yet complete. We're not perfectly good yet. We still live in a messed up world that still rebels against God. We know that, within ourselves, we still rebel against God. The reason Paul writes verse 12 is because we still struggle to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions. We need the encouragement to do that.

But a day is coming when our salvation will be complete. We'll live in the perfection of God's kingdom where there is no more rebellion against Him and there are no more effects of that rebellion. Sin and suffering and sorrow will be gone. The struggle with ungodliness will be gone. That's our hope. That's what happens when Jesus comes back in glory. That's the dream we're heading towards. That's what drives our lives in the present. That's the motivation for saying "no" to ungodliness now.

Do you struggle in this area? Perhaps you've lost sight of the goal. For some people, it's because they never really saw the goal in the first place. They're a bit like Maria. They got a nice picture from the singing teacher – but it wasn't a realistic picture. They heard about God's judgment and that didn't sound very nice. They heard about heaven and that sounded a whole lot better. But no one told them about repentance. They may have mumbled something about being sorry for the wrong things they'd done, but no one told them they had to give up running their own life. No one told them they had to give up the

rebellion against God. No one told them the real goal was about longing for the goodness and righteousness of God's kingdom.

Other people start off with the right goal, but they lose their focus along the way. Other goals distract them. Things belonging to this age compete for their attention. They spend more time enjoying this life than preparing for the next. They still look forward to eternal life with God, but it's no longer the driving force of their lives. It's something they'll get more serious about after they've finished being serious about the great things on offer on this earth.

Now, you may have noticed verse 12 isn't just about God's grace teaching a negative. There are positives as well. God's grace teaches us to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives. George Knight suggests these three adverbs refer to our relationship to ourselves, our neighbours and our God.

- In relation to ourselves, we're no longer self-indulgent, but self-controlled; no longer motivated by selfishness and self-centredness, but renewed by God's Spirit to demonstrate the fruit of self-control.
- In relation to others, we're no longer competing on the devious terms of this world, but acting towards them in upright ways; we're no longer motivated by the desire to outdo them and step over them, but renewed by God's Spirit to demonstrate the fruit of love.
- In relation to God, we're no longer ungodly, but godly; no longer motivated by our desire to be our own autonomous gods, but renewed by God's Spirit to submit to God's goodness.

We could expand each of those terms in much more detail. In one sense I should – because the focus of the verse is actually on these positives, rather than the negatives on which I've already spent so much time. To be true to the passage, I should focus more on these than on the negatives. There are a couple of reasons I'm not going to do that this morning.

- One is that these things were already expanded in verses 1 to 10 that we looked at last week. That's where Paul spells out in more detail what godliness looks like for different groups in the church.
- The second reason is that I think we actually have more trouble with the negative than the positive. Our generation's quite happy to affirm the positives of godliness – as has every generation before us. I think our greater struggle is with resisting the lure of the dreams that would distract us from God's salvation in our lives.

Twenty years ago, James Packer wrote this:

I see sanctification as a neglected priority in today's church everywhere, and a fading glory in the evangelical world in particular. In the past, Roman Catholics and Protestants alike emphasised the reality of God's call to holiness, and spoke with deep insight about God's provision for holiness. English-speaking preachers in the Reformation tradition ... constantly expounded what God's holiness requires of us, what our holiness involves for us, and what the Holy Spirit does in us. They pointed out by what means and through what disciplines he works this momentous change in us, and how holiness increases our assurance, joy and usefulness to God. Today, there are

many ministers who believe that their usefulness depends on their mastery of professional skills; we have travelled far since Robert Murray McCheyne ... declared: "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness."¹

Packer's not the only one who's expressed that conclusion during the last twenty years.

Over the years, Christians have fallen into two traps in relation to this subject. Both traps involve a misunderstanding of God's grace. One is the trap of legalism – the idea that I earn my salvation. At its most basic level, this is the widespread misunderstanding of Christianity held by many non-Christians. They think Christianity's about earning enough brownie points to get into heaven. Some think you get the brownie points by being good; others think you get the brownie points by being very religious. It's all about me making myself acceptable enough for God to let me in.

We Christians know that's not what Christianity's about. We can never earn our salvation. It's totally a gift. God forgives us and welcomes us into His family because Jesus died for us.

Yet, many Christians who know that still hold to a form of Christian legalism. They think you get in by grace, but then you progress by works. You get in on the basis of God's generosity towards you, but you progress on the basis of your own efforts. They think verse 12 says: "The law teaches us to say 'no' to ungodliness ..." But that's not what verse 12 says. It says: "The grace of God teaches you to say 'no' to ungodliness ..." You get in by

¹ J.I.Packer, *Laid-back Religion?* (Leicester: IVP, 1989) 113.

grace and you continue by grace. God grants you grace that results in you believing in Jesus. God keeps giving you grace so that you grow like Jesus.

This godliness business is not some grim, legalistic duty where we suddenly find the hidden cost of God's free gospel. Godliness is the joyful outworking of the gospel in our lives – of God's grace in our lives – as we embrace the salvation God's given us so that we may be the people He made us to be. Godliness is the salvation we long for. It's the result of the new heart He's given us.

The other trap Christians fall towards is antinomianism – the idea that it doesn't matter what we do. Since God forgives us on the basis of grace – and since God continues to forgive us on the basis of grace – why bother about how you live? Why not go out and sin all the more so that you can get more and more of God's grace? That fails to understand the salvation God offers. God saves us from sin – not to sin. It's actually a nonsense. If you want to keep on sinning – if that's your real desire – why pretend to want the salvation from sin God offers?

The reality is we do struggle with these matters. We do struggle with the desire to sin. Our salvation's not yet completed. That awaits Jesus' return. We need Paul's teaching here – reminding us what the gospel taught us; calling us to live in the light of God's grace to us. We're no longer slaves to sin. We have a new heart. We can say "no" to ungodliness in this present age. We can stop playing games with sin. We can grow in holiness. We can wait with longing for the appearing of Jesus.

Conclusion

So come back to Maria, Nick and Julie – and their dream of becoming Australian Idol. You can find the same sort of responses among people in churches.

Some never really get the dream. They come to church and hear the message. They think hell's not really the place for them – they'd rather avoid that option. But they don't really take on board the heaven option.

- They're don't recognise it's the place where God rules and everyone submits to Him. They want to hang onto being their own god in life. They want to call the shots.
- They don't recognise that it's about perfect goodness and righteousness and justice. They want to hang onto their own pet sins. They're enjoyable. They don't want to give them up.

They have a dream – but it's not God's dream.

Some do get the dream. They listened very carefully to what was taught in church. They know what God's kingdom is and they truly wanted it. They set out to say "no" to ungodliness and to live upright lives. They seemed to make progress. But, somewhere along the line, they got distracted. That's no longer the dream driving their lives. Another dream came along and pushed God's kingdom into second place. They still attend church. They still believe in God. But God no longer has the ultimate say. It may be their wife/husband; it may be their work; their house; their sport; their enjoyment of life down here. There's some worldly passion – something that may not be wrong in itself – but they've given it a higher priority than God. They live for it rather than for God.

Some continue to chase the dream. The promise of God's kingdom still captures their imagination. They're grateful for the salvation God's given them – but they long for its completion. They long to see a universe where God's truly honoured as God – where His will's done on earth as it is in heaven. They long to see a universe of perfect righteousness and justice and goodness. They know God moves history toward that goal. They know God moves their lives toward that goal. They know God will bring to completion the salvation He's begun in them. And that determines how they live now. God's grace teaches them to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.