

## ***Instructed to Trust God's Goodness*** ***Titus 2:11-15***

I'd like to read you the opening few paragraphs of John Piper's book, *Future Grace*:

The ultimate purpose of this book is that God be *prized* above all things. I could also say that the ultimate purpose is the *praise* of the glory of God's grace. The reason both are aims, and both are ultimate, is that *prizing* is the authenticating essence of *praising*. You can't praise what you don't prize. Or, to put it another way, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.

On the other side of the coin, the aim of this book is to emancipate human hearts from servitude to the fleeting pleasures of sin. Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God. No one sins out of duty. We sin because it holds out some promise of happiness. That promise enslaves us until we believe that God is more to be desired than life itself (Psalm 63:3). Which means that the power of sin's promise is broken by the power of God's. All that God promises to be for us in Jesus stands over against what sin promises to be for us without Him. This great prospect of the glory of God is what I call *future grace*. Being satisfied with that is what I call *faith*. And therefore the life I write about in this book is called *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace*.

Alister McGrath, the Oxford theologian and penetrating observer of American Evangelicalism, describes a "Crisis of Spirituality in American Evangelicalism". He says that Evangelicalism, particularly American Evangelicalism, is failing the church.

Evangelicals have done a superb job of evangelising people, bringing them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, but they are failing to provide believers with approaches to living that keep them going and growing in spiritual relationship with Him... Many start the life of faith with great enthusiasm, only to discover themselves in difficulty shortly afterward. Their high hopes and good intentions seem to fade away. The spirit may be willing, but the flesh proves weak... People need support to keep them going when enthusiasm fades. ...

This book has grown out of the conviction that behind most wrong living is wrong thinking. Jesus calls us, for example, to a radical purity. But I find that many Christians have no categories for thinking clearly about the commands and warnings and promises of Jesus. When He says that we should pluck out our lusting eye, He backs it up with a warning: "It is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matthew 5:29). Threats of going to hell because of lust are simply not the way contemporary Christians usually talk or think. This is not because such warnings aren't in the Bible, but because we don't know how to fit them together with other thoughts about grace and faith and eternal security. We nullify the force of Jesus' words because our conceptual framework is disfigured. Our Christian living is lamed by sub-Christian thinking about living.<sup>1</sup>

It's a sober warning. It's similar to the warning we heard from James Packer last week. For this reason, we're

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace* (Oregon: Multnomah, 1995) 9-11.

going to spend a couple more weeks camped in these verses at the end of Titus 2. Paul reminds Titus:

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age ...*

### **The Appearance of Jesus**

When Paul says *the grace of God has appeared to all men*, he's talking about Jesus. Jesus – the eternal second person of the Godhead who became man and appeared among us – is the greatest expression of God's generosity (God's grace) to us. And when Jesus appeared, what did He say to us? John 4:13-14

*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*

John 6:35

*I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never go hungry, and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty.*

John 11:25-26

*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.*

This is the nature of the salvation Jesus brings. It's the salvation promised by the Old Testament.

- It's a salvation that quenches man's thirst – not thirst for natural water, but thirst for God.
- It's a salvation that satisfies man's hunger – not hunger for physical food, but hunger for God.

- It's a salvation that deals with death – for Jesus promises true life in relationship with God forever.

It's a salvation that's at the very heart of the Bible's message – and thus, it's a salvation that deals with what the Bible sees as humanity's fundamental problem. In our world, all sorts of problems jockey for the position of being the greatest threat facing the human race:

- insufficient resources;
- climate change;
- global warming;
- the gap between rich and poor;
- the gap between rich nations and poor nations;
- over-dependence on unrenowable resources.

You can add your favourites to the list. Now, I don't want to downplay any of those problems. They're big problems. They have far-reaching consequences. It's good that people be concerned about them. It's good that people plan how to solve them.

But, they're not our biggest problem. Our biggest problem is that we aren't on speaking terms with God. And the reason we aren't on speaking terms with Him is our fault – it's our wanting to play at being God instead of submitting to Him as God. We want the right to determine our own rules and our own lives and our own purpose for existence instead of paying attention to what our Creator says about those things.

But life doesn't work that way. We simply don't have the ability to be God – not individually, not collectively. The result of us trying is all those other threats that plague our current existence. But again, they're not the worst part of the result. The worst part is that we no longer relate to

God and we face the prospect of God's eternal judgment. God warns we'll get the just desserts of our rejection of Him – we'll be excluded from His presence forever. It's very fair:

- Humans say: God, I want to live without You.
- God says: OK. You can have what you want. You can live without Me forever.

The Bible calls it hell.

It's at that point – in dealing with that problem of our failed relationship with God – that Jesus brings salvation. He takes the consequences of our rebellion on Himself – He suffered the judgment that we should suffer. Because of that, He offers the gift of right relationship with God.

- We can be forgiven for our rebellion.
- We can have access into God's presence.
- We can be adopted into God's family.
- We can enjoy eternal life in God's kingdom.

Quenched thirst, satisfied hunger, eternal life.

Think what this salvation is not.

- It's not a way of keeping the status quo – that God's said: I've found a way of dealing with your future, so you don't have to worry about the present any more; just keep ignoring Me the way you've been doing in the past.
- It isn't that God's changed the rules – that God's said: I was wrong to tell you guys that greed's idolatry; it's now OK for you to be greedy to your heart's content (or maybe discontent would be more accurate).
- It isn't that God's abdicated – that God's said: All right, I'll stop being God and I'll let you guys be God instead; it's OK for you to run the world as you

see fit from now on.

The salvation Jesus brings is to get things back to the way God made them to be in the first place – to what it was before Adam and Eve rebelled against Him. He remains Boss. In this salvation, He expects us to submit to Him as Boss. His definition of right and wrong stays the same. In this salvation, He expects us to desire what He says is right.

### **The Living of our Salvation**

And so, verse 12:

*It [the grace of God that has appeared] teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age ...*

What caused our problem in the first place? If you go back to the Garden of Eden, what happened? Adam and Eve were there in the middle of paradise. Everything was in harmony. Their needs were met abundantly. God provided for them and met with them. So, what went wrong? The serpent entered the picture. He didn't alter their external circumstances.

- No ring-barking of trees in the garden.
- No earthquake to shake their foundations.
- No threat of global warming.

He simply changed their perspective. He got them to think differently about God.

- He got them to doubt God's word.
- He got them to doubt God's goodness.

They no longer believed God. They no longer trusted God. They believed the lie instead. And so they usurped God's position.

That's the source of all ungodliness and worldly passions.

- We doubt God's word.
- We doubt God's goodness.

Why do I sin?

- Does someone hold a gun to my head?
- Is my arm being twisted behind my back?
- Am I being blackmailed?

Occasionally that sort of thing may happen – but it's relatively rare. I sin because I want to sin. I sin because I believe the promises of happiness held out to me.

- Tell a lie – you'll avoid some pain.
- Cheat on your taxes – you can buy better food.
- Look at pornography – it'll give you a thrill.

And there's some truth in the promises of sin – enough to get my attention.

It's like the bait on a fish-hook. If you put the hook in the water all by itself, what'll happen? The fish may see it. They may even investigate it. They may not realise its danger, but they're not likely to put it in their mouth. But put a juicy worm on it and it's a different story altogether. The worm appeals to more of their senses. It offers the promise of whatever passes for happiness for fish. It's a true offer. But it's not the whole truth. The hook – the thing that's deadly for the fish – is hidden. The fish may get some happiness from the worm – but the experience as a whole will be fatal.

That's how it was for Adam and Eve. They took the bait and were plunged into a world that no longer trusted God. Their minds were twisted. They now had a bias against God. They now had a bias toward acting as if they are God. Their descendants are born with that same bias against God and towards self. The Bible calls it a slavery

to sin. We live as if we alone are running the place. We live as if we're gods.

- Some do it very deliberately. They openly defy God. They refuse His directions.
- Some do it less deliberately. They simply ignore God. They pretend He's not there or not interested. They get on with their lives as if He didn't exist.

The salvation Jesus brings rescues us from that slavery. God's not interested in simply rescuing us from the consequences of our sin – namely, His judgment – so that we can continue merrily to ignore Him. He wants to rescue us from sin itself. He wants to rescue us from that bias against Himself – that bias that's so destructive to our own selves and the way we relate to each other.

- He wants a people who'll trust His word.
- He wants a people who'll trust His goodness.

That's the salvation Jesus brings – a salvation that enables us to trust the promises of God rather than the promises of sin.

### **Salvation from the Inside Out**

How's it work out in practice? It starts on the inside and works its way out. It begins with God giving us a new heart. In the Bible, heart refers to our inner being – that which drives us. It's the place of our attitudes, our motivations, our thoughts, our decisions. Our old hearts weren't capable of properly responding to God. They had bias against God. They trusted self, rather than God. Every now and then they may have *seemed* to go along with God.

- Sometimes what they wanted accidentally coincided with what God wanted.
- Sometimes they felt pressured by external judg-

ments to go along with God. But their heart wasn't in it. They still asserted their own rule rather than submit to God's rule.

The Old Testament prophets spoke of this. They saw the failure of Israel to keep her covenant with God. They identified the reason as being heart failure – Israel had hearts that weren't capable of truly loving God. They spoke of the new covenant God would make – where God would take away the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh; where God would write His will on the hearts of His people. Jesus brings that salvation. God regenerates our hearts so they have the ability to respond to Him and trust Him – hearts that have the ability to say "no" to the lure of ungodliness.

Yet, it's not automatic. As a Christian, I can find this a real struggle.

- The bait of the promises of sin still looks attractive. The promise of happiness in the short term is real. I don't always see the deadly reality of the underlying hook.
- And God's promises sometimes fade in my focus. I get distracted from them. They seem distant and remote. In my heart, they're not always the vibrant reality that they should be.

And so there are times – many times – when my trust wavers and fails. I believe the promises of ungodliness rather than those of God.

What am I to do? First, I must feed my heart on God's word. My mind must be renewed. It must be convinced both of God's goodness and God's promises.

Satan still works at getting me to doubt God's goodness. He whispers:

- God's so negative. He's got all these "Thou shalt nots". He wants to stop you having fun. He wants to cramp your style. He wants you to miss out on all the happiness these other people are having.
- God's so demanding. He's at you 24/7. It's like being a slave. You don't get any time off for yourself. He doesn't give you a chance to let your hair down.
- God talks about you having to suffer. Look at what the apostle Paul went through just because he was a Christian. How can that be good?

God's word tells me God's totally good and He's got my best interests at heart. James 1:16-17

*Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

Romans 8:28

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose*

Ephesians 1:3

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*

Do I believe God's testimony about His goodness? Or do I believe Satan's testimony that I have a better understanding than God about what my best interests are?

And likewise with God's promises. Think on the global scale first of all. God promises His kingdom.

- He rules according to His perfect will.

- There is no wickedness at all – everything is good and right and just. No wrongdoing whatsoever.
- There is no suffering or sorrow.
- Best of all – God's there. I can relate to Him forever in the perfection of His kingdom.

On the other hand, what's Satan promise? Satan's bait: Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Sounds good in terms of my present existence and the decisions involved in that. Don't worry about issues of right and wrong – just do whatever makes me happy. He forgets to tell you about the hook: after death comes God's judgment. I will be held accountable for my actions.

Then bring that global stuff down to the more particular scale – the scale of the individual decision. The global stuff's still important for the individual decision

- God's promise is: Doing what's right is what's best for you. Yes, doing right may lead you to suffer – maybe financial loss, maybe loss of career path, maybe loss of face, maybe even persecution. That can happen when living in a world that's rebelled against God. But the damage to you from doing wrong is much worse.
- Satan's promise is: You'll get more happiness doing the wrong thing. It may be more money, more pleasure, more prestige, more power, less pain or something else like that. That's the bait he'll put on the hook. He won't tell you about the hook – about what it'll do to your character; about the greater hurt it'll cause you in the long term.

Whose promise will I believe?

So the first thing is that I must feed my heart on God's

word so that I know God's goodness and God's promises. The second thing is I must feed my heart on God's word so that I know what's right and wrong – what fits with the values of God's kingdom and what doesn't. This doesn't happen automatically.

- I've got that old inbuilt bias against God still hanging round. It's very good at what it does. It's good at justifying wrong. It's good at deceiving me about what pleases God and what doesn't.
- I live in a culture that's biased against God. Not everything in that culture is wrong – but there are many areas where that culture does encourage thinking and values that God opposes.

If I'm to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions, then I have to know what they are. The only way I can know what they are is by God telling me. That happens as I read His word with the help of His Spirit. And I need to meditate on and think carefully about His word – for otherwise my inbuilt bias will twist His word to justify doing what I want to do.

The third thing is that I must trust God's word. In each choice I make in life, it boils down to this: Do I believe God or do I believe Satan? Will I trust God's promises or Satan's promises?

When I started this sermon, I set out with the aim of dealing with the whole area of contentment in the light of these verses in Titus 2 – not so much contentment versus greed (for we touched on that last week), but contentment in terms of what we expect to experience while living in this world. The sermon seemed to take on a life of its own. I got to this point and realised there wouldn't be enough time left to do that adequately. So let me work

through one practical example that relates to that area.

There's a new movie coming out next week. It's a sequel. Everyone's looking forward to its release. They want to see what happens next. I really enjoyed the first one. It was rated PG – but this new one's rated M. It has coarse language, a bit of nudity and some violence. Should I go and see it?

What are the sorts of promises Satan will make?

- You really enjoyed the last one. It was fun. It had a good story-line. It left you feeling good. It even got you thinking about that important issue.
- Everyone else will be going. They'll all be talking about it. You'll feel left out. You'll be on the outer. No one will want anything to do with you.
- You've had a solid week of work. You've done a good job – achieved lots. You deserve a break. It'll do you good to put you mind in neutral for a couple of hours.
- Yeah, it's got a bit of nudity in it, but you've seen movies like that before. It's not nudity as such that God's against – it's lust. You've matured since that last image you've struggled with – you'll be able to handle this one.

Satan may even add a Christian twist to some of his promises:

- How can you talk effectively to non-Christians if you're not up on their interests – if you can't talk intelligently about the sorts of things they're talking about?
- Movies often raise important issues – even important issues that relate to the gospel. How will you know about it if you don't see it?

Now, there are elements of truth in his promises – and we need to weigh them up carefully. And we need to think about the nature of the hook that may be underneath.

What are the things God would have us consider?

- God does provide us rest. He doesn't expect you to be at hard labour 24/7. Yet, the idea of "deserving a break" carries with it dangers. There's the danger of thinking that it's my right, rather than God's gift. There's the danger of being self-centred in my view of rest, rather than God-centred. There's the danger of this thinking also crossing over into the area of godliness – I've been godly all week, I deserve a couple of hours to take a break from that and be ungodly for a while.
- God does provide materially for us – the financial resources that enable us to go to the movies. Yet, we're responsible as stewards for those resources. Is this movie a responsible use of those resources? If it is, is there a cheaper way of doing it? Maybe wait for it to come out on DVD and hire it. Or should I rather use these resources for missions? Or maybe for helping the poor?
- Is it helpful to have these scenes in my head – the coarse language, the nudity, the violence? Will I replay them again and again in my mind? Will I have ongoing struggles with lust? Is this the sort of stuff that God wants me to see?

That's not an exhaustive list of issues – but it's enough to give you the general idea.

I'm not going to give you a definitive yes or no answer this morning. That would require more details than I've given. And the decision may vary with different people.

My purpose is to highlight the nature of the issues involved in saying "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to encourage us to think through those issues when facing decisions – not just to go along with whatever we've done in the past or whatever the culturally acceptable decision is or whatever everyone else is doing. That's the attitude that leads to the crisis in evangelicalism. That supports the drift toward ungodliness and worldly passions. God's grace teaches us otherwise.

One further point by way of conclusion. If I'm satisfied in God – if I'm convinced of His goodness and the greatness and generosity of His promises to me – if I'm trusting Him and if I desire Him above all else – the more easily I'll be able to make the godly decision. His promises are far greater than the promises of ungodliness. He Himself is far more desirable than the promises of ungodliness. I must have faith in Him and the salvation He's given me.