

Who do you Believe: God or Self? **Titus 2:11-15**

I'd like to begin this morning with another fairly lengthy quote. This time from Stuart Heath's article in the latest *Briefing*:

"Being Christian is not about doing good things", quoth the preacher. "It's about trusting in Jesus." Here is the uniqueness of the Christian story: God in Christ has acted on our behalf. We could never be good enough to satisfy God's requirements – we deserve to be condemned. But Jesus took our punishment for us, rescuing us from God's right anger. God calls us not to earn our salvation, but to trust that he can save us. This is a beautiful, soul-satisfying truth. But when we talk about being Christian, if we only ever speak about 'believing in Jesus', we are dangerously out of step with the New Testament.

For the whole New Testament insists that being Christian *is*, in fact, about doing good. Jesus sets the bar improbably high when he calls on his followers to "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27). They were to copy him, for Jesus "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). This is also the refrain of Paul's letters: "[L]et us not grow weary of doing good"; "[A]s we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone" (Gal 6:9, 10; cf. 1 Thess 5:15, 2 Thess 3:13). Those who are wealthy must also be "rich in good works" (1 Tim 6:18). Indeed, all "those who have believed in God [should] be careful to devote themselves to good works" (Titus 3:8). This is the apostle's consistent prayer and exhortation (Col 1:10, Eph 4:1, 1 Thess 4:1). Meanwhile, James famously scoffs at the lifeless 'faith' that is not

accompanied by good deeds (Jas 2:14-17), and Peter calls on believers to "turn away from evil and do good" (1 Pet 3:10-12). Furthermore, 'doing good' is part of worshipping our Saviour (Heb 13:16).

In fact, we might go so far as to say that the purpose of God saving us is that we might do good works: we are called *in order to be a blessing* (1 Pet 3:8-9). Why have we been saved by grace through faith? "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for* good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10; emphasis mine. Cf. Eph 2:8-9). Therefore, if we were to ask ourselves whether we (or others) are, in fact, Christian, we would do well to examine deeds along with doctrine. John puts it starkly: "Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God" (3 John 11; cf. 2 Cor 13:5-7, 2 Pet 1:5, 1 John 1:5-7, 2:6).

But when I look around in my circles, many of us are far more concerned with right thinking than we are with right practice. We manage to overlook the wealth of Scriptural material which commands us to live rightly and which shows us why and how we should do so.¹

And isn't that what Titus 1:1 says:

*Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ
for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the
truth that leads to godliness*

Our faith in Jesus and knowledge of the truth leads to godliness. That's supposed to be the outcome of real faith. If it's not the outcome, something's wrong.

It's the same in 2:11-12 – this passage we've looked at the

¹ Stuart Heath, *The Briefing #358/9* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2008) 23.

last two weeks:

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 salvation God's given us is a salvation that says "no" to ungodliness and "yes" to godliness. And, as we saw in the first half of chapter 2, godliness isn't simply believing the right things – as important as that is – it's becoming godly in terms of character.

The Tenses of Salvation

How's this work out in practice? Is it that we're saved initially by faith and then progress by works? In Matt.7, Jesus talks about two gates and two roads:

- There's a wide gate and a broad road that leads to destruction. It's not too hard to get into that gate. And it's not too hard to travel on that road.
- Then there's a small gate and a narrow road that leads to life. It's a bit harder to find. And it's more difficult going on this mountain track.

Some people think that God's part is to get us through that small gate. That's what He does in saving us. That's crucial. We couldn't get through that gate without Him. But, they think, after that, it's up to us. We've got to make our own way up the path. And maybe as you heard those words from Stuart Heath, that's how you interpreted them.

But that's not how it is. Our salvation is God's doing. It needs to be, because we aren't capable of doing it ourselves. And God's salvation of us involves three tenses: past, present and future. You can see it in these verses in

Titus:

- Past: *the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.* Jesus came. Jesus died. That happened in history. That's past. In doing that, Jesus brought us God's salvation. More than that, for those who are Christians, our response to that salvation's also in the past. There was a time when we became Christians. There was a time when we responded positively to God's offer of salvation. At that point, God saved us.
- Present: *It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.* That's what's happening now. The salvation God gives us is a salvation from sin and evil. And so, now, in the present, that salvation teaches the right way to live and also empowers us to live that way. We're moving in a direction away from sin and evil and towards God and His kingdom.
- Future: *while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good.* That's what will happen. When Jesus comes back, we'll be changed. That which is sinful and perishable in us will be removed. It'll be replaced by that which is incorruptible and imperishable. Sin and evil will be a thing of the past.

That's what God has done, is doing and will do in order to achieve our salvation.

Another way of expressing it is in terms of God's grace.

- In the past, God's grace provided for us to be

rescued from God's judgment.

- In the present, God's grace enables us to say "no" to evil and "yes" to good.
- In the future, God's grace will perfect us. Our thoughts will be totally centred on God and His goodness and perfection.

Having got us through the small gate, God now enables us to move along the narrow road. We're born again by God's grace and we grow by God's grace and we'll be fitted for God's kingdom by God's grace.

The More Difficult to the Less Difficult

Paul expresses this same basic truth in different terms in Romans. Have a look at Romans 8:32

He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?

Can you see Paul's logic? He's arguing from the more difficult to the less difficult. What's the more difficult? Not sparing His own Son – giving Jesus to die for us. That's the hard bit – and that's already done.

It's easy for us to skip over this – for it not to sink in – for us simply to take it for granted. What value do you place on the Son of God? For example, which is more valuable?

- The eternal, infinite, pure Son of God; or
- Several billion wicked, rebellious, finite creatures.

Don't get fooled by the numbers. It doesn't matter how many finite things you string together – they won't outweigh the infinite. Billions of creatures – surely they're a dime a dozen to God. He could whip up a few billion more, quicker than we can make match-sticks. And yet

God doesn't do that – instead He sacrificed His Son for us. It's something that's beyond our logic. It doesn't really make sense to us – and yet God did it.

But now – and here we return to Paul's logic – having done the more difficult thing (namely, given His Son), can't we have confidence that God will do the less difficult thing (namely, give us everything else)? He's already given the greater – won't He also give the lesser?

Suppose I promise you an all-expenses paid, four-week vacation in Switzerland in December. I undertook to get you from Bathurst to Zurich, all round Switzerland, and back to Bathurst again. At the beginning of November, I present you with airline tickets, hotel reservations, car rental tickets, meal vouchers, and so on. Will you be bothered about the fact that there's nothing yet in what I've given you to get you from Bathurst to Sydney? Having done the difficult bit, can't you count on me to do the easy bit?

So, what are these "all things" that God gives us along with Jesus? Do we get the all-expenses paid, four-week vacation in Switzerland in December? Is it followed by a similar vacation in the Bahamas in January? Is it a guarantee of good health for the rest of our lives? No. The "all things" have to do with our salvation. That's what Paul's writing about. God's done the hard bit of our salvation – He sacrificed His Son for us. So, we can be sure He won't waste that sacrifice. We can be sure He'll do the easier bit. We can be sure He'll change us so we're fit for His kingdom. As Paul writes in Philippians 1:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because

of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Note: this is God's work. In Philippians, it's God who begins the work in them and God who carries it on to completion. In Romans, it's God who graciously gives us all the things of our salvation with Jesus. We're born again by trusting God's promise and we grow by trusting God's promise.

The Struggle of Pride

Yet, the reality is that we don't always say "no" to ungodliness. We don't always exhibit lives of salvation. We don't always trust God's promises.

- I'm tempted to doubt God's word.
- I'm tempted to doubt God's goodness.

I'm tempted to seek my own happiness in my own ways and on my own terms rather than trust God.

One of our big problems is pride. We have this tendency to rely on self rather than God. We want to trust our assessment of the situation rather than God's. It's something that's dealt with in the Bible over and over again – sometimes by straight out instruction, sometimes by way of example (usually negative example). I take it that the reason it's such a frequent topic in the Bible is that it's such a huge danger for us.

Have a look at Deuteronomy 8:11. Moses warns the people of a danger they'll face once they've taken possession of the Promised Land.

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God,

failing to observe His commands, His laws and His decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant, which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

That's what happened. The land was God's gift to them. The produce of the land was God's gift to them. Their wealth and power under King David and King Solomon was God's gift to them. But they forgot it. They thought they'd achieved it themselves – that their own strength had won this wealth for them. They thought their own power would see them to future glory. They forgot about God. They forgot to rely on God's promises. They ignored God's gracious warnings. As a result, they failed to experience God's ongoing salvation. Eventually, God booted them out of the land. Their pride – their belief in their own self-sufficiency – could not save them. And it was an offence to God's gracious dealings with them.

That danger remains the same. We too can forget God's salvation is His gift to us. After you've travelled the narrow road for a while – and after you've made some progress – you may very well be tempted to think you've achieved this by your own abilities.

- I'm not such a bad chap. In fact, as I compare myself with those around me, I come out looking pretty good. I can understand why God chose me to be part of His kingdom.
- I'm glad I had enough nous to realise the importance of getting into God's kingdom. I'm glad I'm not as stupid as all those pagans who refuse God's offer.

Subtly – or sometimes not so subtly – the focus can shift from God's grace to my abilities. I forget my salvation's totally God's gift to me – and I begin to think that somehow I deserved it – maybe even partially earned it. Pride re-asserts itself – and I find I'm no longer relying solely on God's grace.

Or, in relation to how our salvation works out in our lives from day to day, pride can slip in there as well.

- I may revert to thinking I know better than God – that the promises I hold out to myself for my own personal happiness are better than His promises.
- Or I may think I know more about what's good than God does – that I question His definition of what's right and wrong and substitute my own ideas.
- I may begin to think I can handle all this temptation stuff on the basis of my own abilities – that I don't really need God's ongoing grace in dealing with this and therefore I don't pray.
- I may begin to think I can handle life in general – that I've worked out how to live comfortably within Australia – I've got a good job, a nice house, money in the bank. Sure, I need God to look after eternity – but I can handle the present quite comfortably without Him.

And so it goes on. I'm no longer relying on God's prom-

ised grace for each day. I'm relying on my own resources and abilities because I think I can handle things without God.

God addresses this matter in Jeremiah 9:23

This is what the LORD says:

*"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength*

or the rich man boast of his riches,

but let him who boasts boast about this:

that he understands and knows me,

that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,

justice and righteousness on earth,

for in these I delight,"

declares the LORD.

They're the big three, aren't they? Wisdom, strength and riches. That's what people struggle for in this life. They think that if they can make it in one of those areas, then they'll be secure in life. These are the things that lure the heart away from God.

In themselves, there's nothing wrong with wisdom or strength or wealth. It's not that God's against wisdom and wants us all to be stupid. It's not that God's declared wealth evil in itself and wants us all to live in abject poverty. These are good things. The Bible speaks of them as God's gifts to us. The problem arises when I leave God out of the equation – when I fail to remember they're God's gifts. It's when I see it as my wisdom, my strength, my riches. It's when pride sneaks in and I begin to see myself as a self-made individual – one who can stand on his own two feet. It's when I think of them as my assets and abilities and trust in them rather than God.

It's nonsense, of course. In the midst of their boasting and pride, Paul reminds the Corinthians:

For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? (1 Cor.4:7)

It's a question that may be generalised to the whole of our lives: *What do you have that you did not receive?*

- Did you have any say where you were born?
- Did you have any say who your parents were?
- Did you decide what talents you had?
- Did you choose your special aptitudes?

When you've struggled to the top of the corporate ladder and clawed your way into the upper class – where did you get the abilities that enabled you to do that?

Or look at it from the other side. You've made it to the top, but can you guarantee you'll stay there?

- What if someone better comes along?
- What if there's an oil crisis in the Middle East?
- What if you get Alzheimer's?
- What if you get hit by a lightning bolt?

We simply don't have the wisdom, strength and riches to deal with these matters. We're not God – and it's no use pretending we are.

But it doesn't stop people trying. That's how deep pride runs within us – our declaration that we can run our own lives rather than submit to God. It keeps popping up all over the place. It keeps resisting trust in God's promises. And it keeps doing it despite knowing that we can't control all the variables.

We could profitably spend some time contemplating examples of how pride works in those three areas.

- People, even Christian people, who think they're wiser than God – that think they can reject God's definitions of right and wrong and make up their own standards of morality.
- Christians who think they're strong enough to live godly lives without God's help – who don't bother coming humbly before God in prayer and asking Him to enable them to grow as Christians – to resist temptation and to develop the fruit of God's Spirit.
- Christians who think money will enable them to solve all their problems – who think that if they could just accumulate that little bit extra then they'd be able to get on top of all their difficulties.

The Bible's full of passages that provide both instruction and example in relation to these things.

But I want to turn to another area where pride sneaks in – the desire for approval. Let me approach it by way of personal example. This won't apply exactly to you – but I hope there's enough in common that you can recognise where you face the same temptation.

Each week I get up here and preach. What's my aim in preaching?

- To faithfully teach God's word.
- To explain God's word as clearly as possible.
- To challenge you to believe God's word.
- To get you to conform your lives to God's word.

So far, so good. But as I do that, I can do it from different motivations:

- I can do it because I want God to be honoured. His word is perfect. God Himself is glorious. It's right

and proper that you honour Him with all your being by paying attention to what He says. And I should work hard towards that goal.

- Or I can do it because I want your approval. That can come at a number of different levels:
 - At the more blatant level, I can want you to simply think I'm a great preacher – that I can craft words cleverly and deliver them with great impact.
 - At the more subtle level, I can want you to think of me as being faithful to God – even when that means delivering you a hard word.

Blatant or subtle, it's still looking for approval for me. I want to get honour.

That's the struggle of pride. The focus changes to me, rather than God. I've stopped looking for satisfaction in God and His promises and reverted to looking for it somewhere else.

John Piper writes: "if we are getting our pleasure from feeling self-sufficient, we will not be satisfied without others seeing and applauding our self-sufficiency. ... This is ironic. Self-sufficiency should free the proud person from the need to be made much of by others. That's what 'sufficient' means. But evidently there is a void in this so-called self-sufficiency. The self was never designed to satisfy itself or rely upon itself. It never can be sufficient. We are but images of God, not the real thing. ... So there will always be an emptiness in the soul that struggles to be satisfied with the resources of self."² The way to overcome that, he says, is to focus on making much of God.

² John Piper, *Future Grace* (Oregon: Multnomah, 1995 93-94).

The Priority of God's Grace

We've spent three weeks looking at this short section of Titus. In doing so, we've worked our way through a couple of major examples – like greed and pride. We could have done the same thing with other examples – other forms of unbelief or lack of trust in God's promises.

We've done it partly because we had a couple of spare weeks in this series. But more importantly, we've done it to emphasise the importance of God's ongoing grace in terms of living Christian lives. It's the grace of God that teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness and "yes" to godliness. That's the salvation God's given us and continues to work in us. It's easy to forget that.

If we're struggling in the area of godliness, the answer is God's grace. Read about who God is – especially of His loving goodness for us, both in the past and in the present. Read this good God's promises to us – including the promises that come in the form of encouraging us to godly living. Remember that there's nothing better than this. And then trust God. Trust that He has your best at heart. You'll be tempted to doubt that.

- Your heart will come up with alternative promises.
- Sin will come up with alternative promises.

Don't trust those promises. Trust God's promises instead. Long for God and His kingdom and His righteousness above all else.