

Titus 3

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Date: 23 August 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, in Greek mythology, the character Narcissus was renowned for his physical beauty.! He was extremely attractive.

! And in the waters he beheld the most beautiful sight that he had ever seen. Looking back at him in the reflection was an image that captivated his love and his adoration. And Narcissus knelt closer and closer to kiss this image before him.

But as he did that, his lips disturbed the surface of the water. And the face looking back at him disappeared. He was intoxicated by this image of himself.

And yet the more deeply he loved it, the more it slipped away from him. He tumbled further and further into himself. And all the while losing himself.

[1 : 21] Eventually Narcissus' god-like power was drained. And his fixation with himself slowly crippled him. And his life ebbed away.

Ghost-like, Narcissus was destroyed by his own ego. That's the story of Narcissus. And in a way it's the story of life on Crete, isn't it?

Where Titus was left in this letter to lead the church. Cretans, Paul says in chapter 1, are all liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons.

And it was an island where the self was king. That was the big obsession. Where individuals were in love with themselves. And selfishness was and is and it will always be the great enemy of true godliness in the church.

Intoxication with the self is the greatest barrier. Ever since Genesis chapter 3, since the fall of man, of Adam and Eve. That has been our biggest problem, hasn't it?

[2 : 31] Think back to Genesis 3. They take a slice of the fruit. And in a sense they fall. But they fall into themselves.

They become self-aware in a very disastrous way. They become naked, don't they? Instead of God-orientated, they are self-orientated.

And their egos destroy them and their relationship with God. And so Titus is to foster a growth in godliness.

To throw off selfishness in this church. To close the gap between what the church believes and how it behaves. And we saw, if you were here last week in chapter 2, we saw the why they must do that. Verse 11 to 14 of chapter 2. The grace of God has appeared in Jesus Christ. People now belong to him. And he has redeemed them for lawlessness.

[3 : 35] That was the why. But this week in this chapter, it's the how. The how. How on earth does somebody like a Cretan change?

How can somebody like me and you fare in this great challenge of throwing off the self and of growing in godliness? To stop looking at the reflection in the lake and to become God-orientated for good works.

And the how question is huge in this letter. Isn't it? That is the question that we should all be asking actually as we come to the end of the letter. Because Paul commands an extremely high level of godliness to this church.

If you look at the references for godliness, for doing good, they're everywhere in this letter. Chapter 1, verse 8. An overseer must be a lover of good.

Chapter 1, verse 16. The false teachers are unfit for good works. Chapter 2, verse 3. The older women are to teach the younger women to see what is good.

[4 : 45] 2, 7. Titus himself is to show himself in all respect as a model of good works. Chapter 3, verse 1. The church is to be ready for every good work.

Now you would have thought, wouldn't you, that a church struggling like this, in a culture where they are just surrounded with selfishness. Where the temptations are extremely high, but Paul would cut them a bit of slack.

He could say, couldn't he, well, they're young. They're a young church. They've got no elders at the moment. They need to grow into the Christian life, don't they?

I don't want to burden them too much with too high a standard of living. I'll ease them into godliness. And good works. But no, he doesn't do that, does he?

He commands and expects them to change significantly their behaviour. He expects them, doesn't he, in this chapter, in verse 8 and in verse 14, to devote themselves to good works.

[5 : 53] And you and I are left wondering, how? How, Paul? How can selfish people be godly people?

That is the big question of chapter 3. Because firstly, naturally, we are not godly people. We are slaves to selfishness.

That is the first thing. We are slaves to selfishness. And we all have that history. Just have a look down at verse 3 for a moment. Paul says, For we were once foolish, disobedient, led us to race, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

When Paul gives commands in this letter for good works, for godliness, in a place like treats, even in a place like healing, with people like you and me, the big question is, well, Paul, how on earth can we do that?

Because naturally, the condition of every human being is not godliness and freedom, but it's slavery. Like narcissists, we are entranced with ourselves.

[7 : 14] So much so that we cannot break free from the grip of selfishness on our own. We can't free ourselves from that. Naturally, Paul says, we're slaves to passions and selfishness.

Naturally, godliness is an absolute impossibility for you and for me. Paul, later in this chapter, he speaks, doesn't he, about teaching which is unprofitable and worthless.

Did you see that in verse 9 there? Avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions and quarrels about the law, for they're unprofitable and worthless.

There are some in this church, we've seen, who want to try and create regulations for godliness, to use the law in a way that it was never meant to be used, to split heads over regulations.

We learn in chapter 1, don't we, that they are probably from a Jewish branch of religion, and so it's probably a misuse of the Old Testament, isn't it? They're insisting on things, of made-up rules which have kind of been extrapolated from the Old Testament, which have no real impact on behaviour and on the heart.

[8 : 35] It's pharisaism, it's legalism, and it's unprofitable because it is naive about the truth of human nature. It is teaching that says, the self can be at the heart of my godliness.

But it ignores the reality of the human self, that we are slaves, slaves to selfishness, that we cannot free ourselves by doing good works.

We are not saved by good works, are we? We can only be saved for good works in the Gospel. But they've got that the wrong way round, these teachers.

And so in the Church, legalistic, moralistic, pharisaic teaching is unprofitable, and it's worthless, to slaves of selfishness. And it's the same in our society, isn't it?

We can teach society to cover up selfishness, to learn manners, that's not a bad thing, is it? But rehabilitation programmes, and self-esteem programmes, and even the threat of punishment in our society, is ultimately worthless when it comes to true godliness.

[9 : 58] When you look at verse 1 to 3, you see that this godliness thing is a mountain. It's a mountain to climb. Especially when it comes to human relationships, isn't it?

So Paul deals with different human relationships. Firstly, he emphasises our attitude towards rulers and authorities, in verse 1.

We live in an age, don't we, where the big barrier to my personal liberty, of my personal selfishness, and my autonomy, is other people in authority.

And personal freedom comes with a hostile spirit towards authority. Whether it's at work, or towards the government, towards those who are over us, in different parts of society, maybe in the church.

We live in a culture, don't we, actually, where the rebel against authority is the hero. Where it's good to stand against authority. That's fashionable.

[11 : 05] People like Russell Brand, I don't know if you know who that is, have been cruel recently, haven't they? Because they rage against the authorities. It's become an honourable thing, to riot against the police.

Autonomy is threatened by authority. And so the rebel against authority is the hero. And as folk shouted, shame on you, to the police, just after a democratic election, it's just ridiculous. It shows our propensity for aggression against authority. And it's perhaps why, at the end of chapter 2, Paul says to Titus, let no one disregard you.

As a church leader, he was in a position of authority, wasn't he? And he, then, was a threat to personal selfishness. The word there for disregard, in verse 15 of chapter 2, can mean to ignore. It's when people in the congregation, they can turn up, isn't it? But they think, well, I'm not going to listen to him. That is beneath me. That is pride.

[12 : 14] That is selfishness. Authority is a threat to selfishness. And this slavery to selfishness comes out in my propensity to kick against authority, wherever that may be.

And so, you see, naturally, I've got a mountain to climb in this quest for godliness. And that attitude, it seeps into other relationships too, doesn't it?

In fact, it taints all relationships. Paul starts with authorities, in verse 1, and then he widens the scope, doesn't he? In verse 2 and 3, speak evil of no one, avoid quarrelling, be gentle, show perfect courtesy towards all people.

All relationships are to be preserved and nurtured. But my personal liberty, my personal selfishness, is threatened not only by people in authority, but it's threatened by other people. Full stop, isn't it? Just anybody. We live in an age of aggression and confrontation. Where if anybody gets in my way, then I'll go on the attack.

[13 : 32] People think nothing of hurling abuse across the road these days, do they, from their cars. Of raging against one another. Of raging against the boss.

It's just everyday contact with other people, isn't it? Whoever that is. And that is a sign of the mountain that we have to climb.

We are slaves to this selfishness and we will inevitably fall down it. The story is told of a puppet similar to Pinocchio.

It's not Pinocchio, but similar. And this puppet was very self-centered. And his master tries to cure him of his self-centeredness. So he gives him an increasingly long nose.

But that doesn't work. So he arranges a kind of tour of hell. He sends this puppet to hell to have a look around and see what it's like. And when he arrives, the puppet finds something very surprising.

[14 : 35] The first person that he meets there is a ballerina. And the ballerina is dancing with great precision and focus and concentration. And as he goes up to the ballerina to speak to her, she just ignores him.

She just dances past him. Carries on. After the ballerina, he comes to a carpenter who is hard at work, sawing and fitting and gluing his woodwork.

And again, he tries to speak to the carpenter, but it's just impossible. He can't get his attention. He can't get him to look him in the eye. And every person that he meets in hell is just like this.

Impossible to speak to. And then he sees in a flash, he realises that in hell, everyone is left to themselves freely to do only what they each wanted to do and to take no notice of anybody else.

He returns as a wise and repentant puppet. Now that is a silly story, isn't it? But in a way, it is a picture of verse 3. It is a hellish kind of place that we are and have created for ourselves where we are slaves to our various passions.

[15 : 53] We are slaves to the self. We're naturally disobedient. We kick against the authority whenever it comes in our lives. And time just passes by as we do that, doesn't it?

Passing our days in malice, hated by each other, hating one another. We keep ourselves to ourselves and sometimes we enjoy that strange seductive pleasure of nurturing resentment towards one another.

And day after day goes by and so much time is wasted in selfishness. Passing our days, it's interesting Paul uses hour there, isn't it?

We hold time to ourselves in our selfishness. And that is the world in which we live where each day comes and it goes and it's a dog-eat-dog world where we waste our time in selfishness and aggression and confrontation are in vogue where the rebel is the hero.

That's the world in which we live and that is who we have been, says Paul. We have been slaves. And so this call to godliness from Titus should make us think how is that possible?

[17:18] How can we do it? How can I be transformed? How can this selfish man or this selfish woman change? How can this neighbourhood change and wake up?

we should not be naive about our human nature and about the slavery of the self. And we should despair, shouldn't we, at ourselves and wonder how will we do it?

On our own we have a mountain to climb and on our own we will keep falling down that mountain time and time again. There comes a time in history when suddenly things shift, don't they?

Things change in a dramatic way where the human race is able to do things that it could never have done before. Things that were never possible suddenly become possible.

Think of the industrial revolution. Suddenly mass production becomes possible, doesn't it? Think of the invention of penicillin. suddenly antibiotics become possible.

[18:29] In the last century we put a man on the moon, haven't we? Because of the invention of time travel. We can Skype somebody on the other side of the world. The internet has made things possible.

And yet in all of our achievements we've never been able to get free from selfishness. That is until now.

says Paul. Because gloriously in our slavery we have now been saved for godliness.

Secondly, we've been saved for godliness. There is a word in this chapter that amounts to a historic revolution in humanity.

And if you look at verse 4, it's a little three-letter word, isn't it? And verse 4, actually in the Greek it's a two-letter word. It's almost an insignificant word, isn't it?

[19:33] The word but. But, Paul says, there has been a cataclysmic shift in human history.

2,000 years ago, there was a revolution and the impossible has now become possible. The love and kindness of God our Saviour has appeared and it has appeared to set off a whole chain of events which leads to our godliness.

You see that in verse 4 to 8. Paul lists there a catalogue of a chain of events which have happened in human history which can now answer the how question to make it possible for us to devote ourselves to good works.

And something has happened to us that makes us different. Let's look at verse 4 to 8. We have been saved.

We were slaves. We've now been saved. We've been washed. Regenerated. Renewed.

[20:48] We've been justified, verse 7, that we would become heirs of eternal life. There has been a revolution and so now we can no longer say that godliness is just a fantasy.

That the mountain in it is just too high because we are not the same as we were. And this revolution is something that has happened outside of ourselves, isn't it?

It is God who in his love and kindness has appeared. The word kindness there, philanthropia, that's where we get our word philanthropy, isn't it?

In his charity, God has appeared as our saviour. And it's clear, Paul says, that all of his actions were independent of us, weren't they?

Verse 5, 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.

[21:53] He is there, I think, talking about a historical event, the historical events of the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ and then him giving his Holy Spirit, of him pouring out his Holy Spirit at Pentecost, in Acts chapter 2 and chapter 3.

He is thinking there, isn't he, about where God's people entered into a new age, the age where the Holy Spirit was poured out in greater measure.

It was a historical event that happened outside of ourselves. It was something that God did for us, to us, and in us. It's the language of Ezekiel chapter 36, isn't it, of the promise God has made to wash his people and renew them and to bring rebirth to them.

So, there is a new power and a new heart and a new status and relationship. We are no longer slaves to this selfishness, sin, but we can devote ourselves to good works and godliness.

And suddenly, the commands of Paul in this letter for human relationships and for submission to authorities, of working on all of our relationships, find their power, because we have been changed.

[23 : 26] Paul says in Romans that we're no longer slaves to sin, but we are slaves to righteousness. I think often we get a kind of spiritual muscle memory, don't we?

Something has changed radically, but we can't help acting as if it hasn't. And if you've endured slavery or captivity of any kind for a long time, that is a habit, isn't it?

Think maybe of a soldier who has been under the rule of his strict commanding officer on the parade grounds. But finally he's discharged and he can take those green army fatigues off and put jeans on and he puts his t-shirt on and he lights up a cigarette, doesn't he, and walks out towards the street, out of the parade grounds.

His status changes, he's under a new rule and the sergeant balls out to him as he's just about to leave the gates. Where do you think you're going soldier? And he thinks, well, I'm not a soldier anymore.

I'm not under your rule. So long sergeant, he says, I'm a free man. And so it is for the saved Christian. The rules have changed.

[24 : 47] I wonder if you come week after week to church and you're thinking, you know, I'd really love this, to be real. I'd love to be a Christian. I'd love to know this deep change in my heart.

I'd love to be changed in this way. I'd love to be free from drowning in myself, of passing my days in selfishness.

It's such hard work that, isn't it? I'd love to stop this self obsession. But perhaps you're saying that nobody knows how dirty I am.

How soiled my heart is. How selfish I really am. And I'm just the kind of person who just can't do this godliness thing. I'm just not godly enough to be a Christian.

Well, let me say to you, this morning, you're right. But Christianity is not about being saved by your good works. Let me say that again.

[25 : 50] Christianity is not about being saved by your good works. It is about being saved for good works. And being a Christian growing in godliness starts with God doing something for you, to you, outside of you.

If you're saying I'm too bad to be a Christian, it is a bit like saying I'm too dirty to have a bath, isn't it? Or I'm too ill to go to the doctor. It's just nonsensical.

I think actually sometimes we can just be stubborn in that, can't we? The picture here in chapter 3 is of someone who has lived their life in total selfishness.

They've lived a hellish, mucky kind of life. But God appears to them in Christ and he rescues them from that slavery and restores them and he washes them, doesn't it?

He takes them to a hot, healthy spring and washes them and bathes them inside and out and justifies them. He says, you are forgiven.

[27 : 00] You are right in my eyes. You are clean. You are different. And truly the things that you thought were impossible have now become possible.

And there are scores of people that you can talk to here this morning who can testify to that. that our lives have changed and we are seeing some painful habits of old dying away and the chains of slavery breaking and godliness growing.

And wherever you are at, whether you are on the verge of coming to Christ for the first time this morning or whether you've been a believer for decades, this is his command to you.

Devote yourself to godliness. God's because what was once never possible has become possible. And those of us who have gone through that transformation, we all struggle, don't we, with our besetting sins.

Our relationships are wonderful but they can be really hard work. We still get into quarrels. Christians are not blameless in that. We shouldn't claim to be.

[28 : 12] We know that. We know each other. We know ourselves. And I'm not saying that we are going to be perfect this side of heaven. That is not a biblical thing to expect actually.

There is always going to be some ungodliness that we battle with in our lives now. But I wonder, do we sometimes use that as a bit of an excuse not to devote ourselves to godliness, of making every effort with people?

people. It's almost like I put a cap on my godliness, isn't it? When we were in Swansea we had a couple of buses, and I think both of them probably were able to get to about 120 miles an hour, if the drivers had anything to do with it.

But they were limited, weren't they, at 63 miles an hour, something like that. We are now free to devote ourselves to godliness in a way that we never were before.

And so go for that. Get stuck into godliness, remembering what has been done in you from the outside by God who's changed you.

[29 : 22] You are no longer a slave to selfishness. By nature we are slaves to the self. We are just so narcissistic, aren't we?

And Paul asks for a lot in this letter. he asks us to stop that. To work on our relationships, to show courtesy and submission and to honour others, to all people, to all people.

And that is a mountain to climb. But the Christian gospel is a gospel of a God who saves, who appears with his grace and he changes us.

So that we can finally stop gazing at that reflection in the lake. And we can look at something better.

We can look at him. As we've studied this letter, we've done it really briefly, haven't we?

And there's loads that we could have looked at in more detail. But I hope we've seen the similarities between us and this church on Crete. And one writer describes this church less like planets revolving around the Father in heaven and more like a bag of marbles.

[30 : 34] our natural desire is to just be individuals, isn't it? Individual little marbles banging against each other. To be self-centered and not God-centered.

But gloriously God's grace has appeared. God's salvation has appeared and we've been changed.

And what was impossible for us has now become gloriously possible.

Paul says this saying is trustworthy 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.

Let's pray.