



## BECOMING ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS: GRACE

Titus 2:11-15

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### Introduction – What God Does Is More Important Than What We Do!

Today's sermon is the fifth in this series on the book of Titus. It should have been the first. It should have been the first for the simple reason that *what God does is more important than what we do*.

In this series on Titus we've been looking at how the church ought to prioritize her ministries and organize herself for more effective gospel outreach. We've been flying under the banner of being *zealous for good works*, the catchphrase that comes from the passage of Scripture before us today.

So far we've looked at three critical priorities for the church: preaching (1:1-4), leadership (1:5-16), and teaching (2:1-10). These are three indispensable priorities and practices for any church that's serious about gospel outreach and committed to being a congregation zealous for good works. We can't be that City on a Hill without biblical preaching, godly leadership, and sound teaching.

But despite how vital these three churchly practices are for raising up a people zealous for good works, they are not *ultimately* the most important things. They are not most important because we are not the most important—God is! So as we think about how to be that City on a Hill, or how to become a people zealous for good works, we must always remember that what God does is more important than what we do!

But what does God do that's more important than all these very important things that we do? What God does can be summarized in one precious word: *grace*. That's what God does. *God does grace*. And that's what God alone can do: grace. And that's what we most need: grace. And that's ultimately what makes a congregation zealous for good works: grace.

Grace is also what this passage in Titus is all about. And grace is what this message is all about. Today we're going to explore grace and celebrate grace by asking three questions of this passage. First, what is grace. Second, what does grace do when it appears? And, third, what do we need to do receive this grace?

### What Is Grace?

The first question we need to answer is *What is grace?* En route to an answer to that question, let me come at it from two different angles by, first, offering a definition of grace, and then a few characteristics of grace.

### ***The definition of grace***

How would you define the grace of God? We often talk about the grace of God as God's unmerited favor or God's favorable attitude toward us. These are accurate and helpful definitions but they tend, like most definitions, to be too abstract. The grace of God, as we learn from verse 11, is not an abstraction, but an action. Grace is not merely an idea, but an act. Grace is not simply something God feels, but something God does. Grace, as this verse says, both appears and brings with it something immeasurably valuable.

*"For the grace of God appeared, bringing salvation for all people" (v. 11).*

Grace is not therefore some abstract idea or disposition God has toward you, but an actual event in space and time: the grace of God appeared. Against every expectation, the grace of God shows up in human history and in human lives. Grace is thus always surprising: no one could have anticipated grace's appearance. And grace is also always sovereign: grace appears not by human design or ingenuity, but by God's design and plan.

But what does it mean that 'grace appeared bringing salvation'? When did it appear, and how did it appear? Paul further defines the grace that appeared in verse 14, where he elaborates on our Savior Jesus Christ, who, as Paul says, "gave himself for us." And there we find a workable definition of grace: *grace is the self-giving of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ for us.*

In other words, friends, *grace has a face* – and that face is the face of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. That face is a scared face, a bloody face, a dying face. That face is the face that agonized on the cross for your sins and mine. But that face is the face of grace. That is the face that has appeared bringing salvation for all people.

### ***The characteristics of grace***

In addition to defining grace, verse 14 also gives us several *characteristics* of grace: what grace is like.

First, grace is *powerful*. The grace that appeared, the self-giving of our Savior, "redeems us from all lawlessness." Just as God redeemed Israel from Egyptian bondage with a mighty outstretched arm, so too the Son of God redeems a new covenant people from Egyptian-like bondage to lawlessness and sin with great power. For only the grace of God in the death of his Son can redeem from lawlessness, can liberate from sin, can set the captive soul free. Nothing else will—nothing else can.

We also learn from verse 14 that grace is *purifying*. Not only does grace rescue and redeem, grace purifies, cleanses, washes, renews. Our Savior Jesus Christ gave himself for us to redeem us and "to purify for himself a people." The grace of God that has appeared is purifying grace. The death of Christ on the cross is a cleansing death. We read about this aspect of grace in Titus 3:5: "he saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Grace purifies our hearts by faith and our lives by the Holy Spirit.

The third characteristic of grace we see from verse 14 is that grace is *possessive*. This is one of the fascinating, even paradoxical, features of grace. For even though grace is a great giver, grace is also tremendously possessive; you might even say jealous. When grace comes into your life, it takes over. When enters in, it owns you. When grace appears, it takes possession: grace buys you and makes you its own. So when you

encounter the grace of God in the cross of Christ, you become no longer your own, but “his own possession.” Grace is possessive because it’s costly. It cost God the life of his own Son.

So this is a definition and some characteristics of grace. But we must also understand that grace is not a one-time deal. Grace doesn’t just appear and then disappear. No, grace is an ongoing thing. Grace is of course embodied in the self-giving of the Son, but the Son continues to give himself to his people over and over again. The grace of the cross and the grace of the Son are always there and always given afresh. That’s why Paul can encourage Timothy: “You then, my child, be strengthened by the *grace* that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1). Or Paul can say to the entire Corinthian congregation: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). Grace has appeared climactically in human history in the Son’s death on the cross; but grace is always there for you and me, like a steady, never-ending stream, in the continual self-giving of the Son for his people.

### **What Does Grace Do?**

So we’ve answered our first question. *The grace of God is the self-giving of the Son for our salvation.* But what does grace do when it appears? What does grace do when it shows up in human history? Or what does it do when it shows up in human lives?

As we learn from verse 12, when grace appears it gets straight to work and wastes no time. When grace shows up in our lives it *trains us*. Grace, thank God, doesn’t flatter us, but trains us. When grace shows up in our lives, it doesn’t tell us all is well with who we are, but speaks more bluntly and directly. Grace tells us that our lifestyle is suicidal: we’re a hundred and fifty pounds over weight, we smoke three packs of cigarettes, our blood pressure is off the charts, and we have a long family history of the worst kind of coronary disease. You see, grace is less like a counselor and more like a coach: grace undertakes to educate us, to train us, to run us through the paces, to reform and indeed transform.

Now, like all physical training, so training in grace is for the purpose of living. Grace trains us in how to live better lives—how to live according to God’s priorities and standards, and not our own. Or, as Paul says here in verse 12, grace trains us to live a certain kind of life, to live in a particular way, defined by particular character qualities. In his verse Paul singles out three: first, self-control, a favorite theme in this letter and elsewhere in the Pastoral Epistles; second, grace trains us to live upright; and third, grace trains us to live godly lives as well. And it teaches and trains us in how to live, not for some other place and some other time, but for the *now-time*, this present age, which is precisely when we so desperately need the training of grace.

Paul doesn’t elaborate on exactly *how* grace trains us to live a new life. We need the rest of the book of Titus, indeed the rest of the Bible to flesh that out properly. Hebrews 12 is particularly helpful in this regard. There we see that the training talked about here is actually divine discipline, and that the discipline God sends our direction is difficult circumstances. We shouldn’t fuss or fret, therefore, when challenges come our way, for they are fatherly discipline, training in grace.

<sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without

discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

So if you feel like the circumstances of your life are stretching you beyond what you think you can, or at least what you would want to bear, then it's probably the grace of God training you. You're at the gym getting a good work out. Yes, it hurts. No discipline feels pleasant at the time, but painful. However, if you recognize and embrace grace for what it is, then it will have that wonderful strengthening, fruit producing affect in your life. So don't chafe at the training of grace. But embrace it!

### **How Do We Embrace the Training of Grace?**

But how do we do that? How do we embrace the training of grace? Yes, grace trains us, but doesn't all training require some degree of cooperation or response on our part. Anyone who's been to the gym or worked with a trainer has learned this unhappy lesson: you can't just show up for the training and watch the trainer do all the work and somehow be benefited by it! No, you've got to actively engage, actively participate in the training if you're going to be changed by it.

In this passage, Paul identifies two critical steps we need to take in order to be trained by grace, in order for grace to have its proper effect in our lives. The life that grace trains us to live is literally, in this passage, flanked on both sides by the means of grace: what we must do, what steps we must take, to be trained by this grace. We must, first of all, intentionally deny ourselves. And, second, we must expectantly wait for what we hope for.

#### ***Self-denial***

Not unlike physical training, training in grace requires that we take a critical and often difficult first step: that first step is self-denial. No one ever trains for a marathon who doesn't first begin saying 'No' to different things in their life that would otherwise get in the way of their preparing for the race. I'm acutely aware of this because one of my closest friends from college invited me to join him and several other college friends in California later this summer for the San Francisco marathon. But it didn't take me long to say 'No.' Why? Because I knew all that I would have to give up to engage in the training that was required. He sent me the sheet: weeks and weeks of running, hours and hours every week. Counting the cost and what I had to give up to make that happen, I simply said 'No.'

Training in grace is like that. We have to say 'No' to several things as a first step in the training process. Paul identifies two: "ungodliness and worldly passions," what Calvin, commenting on this passage, referred to as "the two obstacles that chiefly hinder us" in

our worship of God.<sup>1</sup> Ungodliness is whatever attitudes or actions that undermine God's centrality in your life. If it makes God marginal, it's ungodly. And worldly passions are the result of a hungry soul that doesn't have God at the center: passions for the things of the world ensue.

But, like training for a marathon, saying 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions is not a one-time thing, just like saying no to sleeping in or taking a week off from running is a one-time thing. No, it's an ongoing part of the training itself. Yet here's the critical difference between training for a marathon and training in grace: the former lasts only until the race is run and you're done; the latter, training in grace, lasts your whole life: or until your race is run and you're done, you're dead. But until then, you're in training—training in grace. And so you're called to say 'No' or deny or renounce any and every practice or pattern of life that will get in the way of the goal of the training. And so we are to take up our cross—the cross of self-denial—every single day, as long as the Lord gives us breath.

### ***Expectant waiting***

Now the second critical step to take when training in grace is complementary and counterintuitive. The second step is expectant waiting, which we get from verse 13: "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

In order to train in grace we must wait. If intentional denial is the means by which we progress in training in grace, then expectantly waiting is the manner in which we do so. If self-denial is the action, then hopeful waiting is the attitude we must have.

This verse provides a fitting complement to the call to deny one's self because it reminds us that self-denial is not a call to asceticism as an end in itself, but a call to position ourselves for something better, something greater, something even more glorious.

Waiting is also counterintuitive when it comes to training for several reasons. First, we tend to think of waiting in primarily passive terms: if I'm waiting, I'm not working. How can I therefore be training, if I'm waiting? But, biblically speaking, waiting is not a passive, but an active, thing.

In fact, waiting has a way of drawing us forward to action, rather than causing us to sit back and relax, when the object for which we're waiting is of such a splendid and attractive nature. Like a bridegroom waiting for his bride, there's nothing passive about waiting if the object is the chief object of one's desire. I recently officiated a wedding and so was able to watch a bridegroom wait for his bride, not least as she made that seemingly endless journey down the aisle to meet him at the front of the sanctuary. To see the look on his face, to sense the eagerness in his demeanor, the energy in his countenance, it was a waiting that, well, wasn't really waiting at all! For everything in him—his heart, his mind, his soul—were in motion, moving toward the object of his deepest desire!

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.3. It's worth noting that Calvin understood self-denial to be the sum of the Christian life.

This, friends, is the kind of waiting that corresponds with the object for which we wait: “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (v. 13). It is a *blessed* hope because, unlike every other hope we might have, this hope cannot be disappointed. Just as surely as Jesus Christ appeared for the first time, so too will he most assuredly appear for a second time.

Yet this time he will not appear under the veil of frail humanity, but unveiled and fully glorified. Indeed, when he appears we shall see “the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” We shall see our *great God*—and yet, this great God will be, to those who know and love him, a *Savior* who died in our stead. And this is the essence of the glory that we shall see: the greatness of God combined with the mercy of a Savior.

As we make good on these two means of grace—self-denial and expectant hope—we will find grace training us.

### **Conclusion – Embrace Grace**

There is nothing like grace that can revolutionize a life, nothing like grace that can turn people into zealots for good works. And our aim today has been to explore and to celebrate the surprising and sovereign grace of God.

Grace has appeared on the scene of human history; grace has appeared in the face of Jesus Christ. All that remains is for me to ask you: Has grace appeared in your life? Have you embraced grace? And are you now living a life defined by an embrace of grace?

How would you know if it has? You would know by seeing the *effects* of grace in your life. Grace is a mighty doer, a power, indeed, a person. Grace has a face. And when grace appears in your life, grace doesn’t leave you unchanged, but begins transforming you from the inside out.

We all need grace. Everyone of us! And not just once, but continually: we need a steady supply of the grace of God in our lives. Pray for grace to appear. Expect grace to appear. Look for grace to appear. And when it does, give thanks for the grace that has appeared.

Amen.