

Salvation for all

No nonsense! This is Paul's clear statement to a young man serving Christ in a very difficult situation. But



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don't hurry through the words as though they only apply to a pastor, because we are all challenged by God's grace to live as his ministers in our circumstances. Paul couldn't be any clearer: God's grace "educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world" (2:12). Christian faith is not static. It pushes you to learn and grow as you relate to others and confront the damaging influences of our society.

Paul visited the island of Crete on his third missionary journey, saw that it was a corrupt and challenging place for a new church plant, and described the people as "always liars, wild animals, and lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12). Most likely Paul's letter is an answer to a letter from Titus asking for counsel and encouragement. Thank God for these New Testament letters that continue to guide us through the obstacles every generation encounters.

Jesus spoke about choosing "the narrow road that leads to life" (Matt.7:13-14). Paul uses positive words to describe salvation and its outcome in our living. Christ "gave himself for us to rescue us from every kind of lawless behavior, and cleanse a special people for himself who are eager to do good actions" (2:14). Here is a description of "repentance," the about-face of life, the rejection of a self-destructive lifestyle. Grace is about sorting through the standards and destructive habits of this world and replacing them with love, integrity and concern for others. As in the Crete of that day, so is it in our world: God invites us to choose a new direction of living each day.

In a world of oppressive darkness, the hope of Christ is a powerful motivator. "At the same time we wait for the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (2:3). Have you

ever considered that it is only by God's grace that Jesus did not return generations ago to judge the world and call his people home? The grace of God is so generous and so beyond human understanding that we, like the residents of Crete, have been given the opportunity to experience God's salvation and grow in faith. Don't miss this opportunity of grace!

Paul reminds Titus (and us) that these different times provide the opportunity to not only learn the new language of grace, but to put grace into daily practice. "Talk about these things (grace and how to live). Encourage and correct with complete authority" (2:15). Faith is not about discovering the secret way to enter heaven while living a life of selfishness, immorality and lies. Our recent election cycle produced plenty of examples of publicly pronounced faith coupled with slander and selfishness. As followers of Christ we study the Bible, pray for and encourage one another, and clearly invite the world to experience a totally new kind of life in Christ.

Submission is an ugly word in a society that thrives on success, power, winning and doing so at the expense of others. Listen to Paul's advice: "Remind them to submit to rulers and authorities. They should be obedient and ready to do every good thing. They shouldn't speak disrespectfully about anyone, but they should be peaceful, kind, and show complete courtesy toward everyone" (3:1-2). Have you ever heard someone in our day referred to as a "Cretan"? Grace translates into words and actions. Obviously, this is not a prohibition against speaking the truth or opposing injustice. James 3:1-8 warns about the tongue as a "fire" and a "deadly poison." Our words are the sound of our prejudices, anger and revenge. Grace must change our heart, actions and words. Grace must make us a people of understanding, consideration, moral standards and actions.

Grace produces joy. Paul reminds Titus of our many reasons to celebrate our salvation: "our Savior's kindness and love," "mercy," "the washing of new birth," "the renewing by the Holy

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Spirit," "his grace" and "the hope of eternal life" (3:4-7). The people of Crete were learning about a new kind of faith based on God's love instead of fear, sacrifices to hopefully win favor or protection, rituals to ward off evil and uncertainty about a deity's interest in them. Did they need forgiveness and correction? Yes. But even more, they needed to understand that God is our heavenly Father and that his righteousness is shaped by love and grace made real in Jesus Christ.

I remember regularly visiting a young man in a federal prison years ago. He was guilty, had gone through some harsh experiences, and, because of his history could not imagine God as loving, forgiving and the author of a new beginning. I wonder if Titus did not face a similar barrier in the Cretans. Could they get beyond their culture and heritage to see the hope of Christ? This is where the grace of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit enters in. Paul expresses it simply: "The grace of God has appeared, bringing people" (2:11).

We, like Titus, can face many obstacles and disappointments as we try to share Christ with those around us. But our motivation is not to meet a quota. We are to live, love and speak of the grace of God. Instead of bemoaning the slump in church attendance and fewer people professing mainline Christian beliefs, we should examine our own faith, the evidence of that faith in our public living, the content of our prayers and the opportunities to share the joy and peace we experience in Christ. Titus had a tough challenge, but that's the world in which we all live. The Word of God does not say God loves the select few, or God looks for his kind to love, or God has a list of those who qualify and those who don't. "God so loves the world...that he gave his only begotten Son"... (John 3:16), which ought to motivate us all.

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