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# God's Grace the Preacher's Tool

## A Homiletical Study of Titus 2:11-14

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Most pastors read the Christmas Epistle during the holidays. Many preached on it as a text for a Christmas message. As they prepared that sermon, they probably realized that this text speaks only secondarily to congregations. Primarily it is addressed to a pastor, a pastor who is training other pastors. It does not speak specifically of Christmas, but of the redemption of Jesus Christ in general; not specifically of the moods and joys of Christmas, but of the objective of good works in Christian people. Hence the text speaks to pastors about their own ministry to people, especially the ministry of leading their people to good works. This study proposes to guide the meditation of the Christian pastor as he ponders this text to that end.

### I

The Epistle belongs to the portrayal of the Christian Gospel, which is so dear to the heart of St. Paul, which we usually epitomize in Rom. 1:16 or 2 Cor. 5:15-21. Here St. Paul speaks of that Gospel in four stages. The first is the primary plan of God, which He brought to light in Christ Jesus (1:1-3). The second is the Gospel as St. Paul himself received it as a mandate from God and preached it to his world (1:3). The third is the Gospel as Titus accepts it and preaches it; more specifically, as he prepares and guides his co-workers to preach it (1:5-9; 2:7-8; 3:3-7). In this process, Titus is responsible not only for the setting forth of the Gospel message itself, but for keeping it pure of dilution and error (1:10-16; 3:9-11). The fourth is the Gospel as it is embraced by the people and through them witnessed to others. This witness is a compound thing: love and good works, testifying to the working of the Savior, who is proclaimed in words (cf. Phil. 2:14-16). The Cretans had particular problems of materialism to contend with (1:12-13); hence the Letter is less specific about the Christian speaking the

Gospel, and more specific about the testimony of Christian love and good works (1:13-14; 2:8, 10; 3:1-3, 9, 14). The important thing about good works is that they are an outgrowth of God's grace in Christ Jesus (text, and 3:4-8); conversely, removing the doctrine of Christ from the motive for preaching and from the motivation for good works in preaching is disastrous (1:10-11; 3:9-11).

Difficulties confront the Christian preacher as he preaches good works. His theology tells him that if his people are saved, they ought to be doing good works without further help in words. Yet many of his professing Christians are weak in good works, and he should stimulate them. How can he teach good works to the veterans of the faith (2:1-5) who are themselves teachers of others and perhaps of the preacher? How shall he speak to young men or to servants when he himself is free of the temptations of youth or world and lives in the sheltered calm of the holy ministry (2:6-10)? Are these not problems which may create a sense of unfitness or inferiority in the preacher? which may cause him to feel that whenever he speaks about good works, he is only "preaching" and not enabling or empowering? To this preacher, St. Paul says, "Let no man despise thee" (2:15). No man has occasion to despise the Christian preacher's message if—he employs "these things," the motive power for the Christian's good works, the grace of God in Christ.

## II

The Apostle has been suggesting to Titus how he and his helpers are to encourage the people of Crete to do good works. Now he concentrates on the reason for their doing so; on the gist of the message that is to empower them to accomplish it. The core of the program does not lie in Titus or in his elders. They are to do the speaking and encouraging; but they are not to be the source of the message's power. That power lies in a fact which has already happened; in a power from God, the grace of God, which has already appeared.

Look at this grace of God that is at the bottom of the life of good works. It is a grace, a gift of God, "that bringeth salvation." It involves a rescue, a release, a salvage. All men are involved in that rescue; it has happened for all people. God is unseen; His

ways often seem ungracious and forbidding. But He has revealed His grace, has revealed it as one that saves and salvages all men.

Salvation — that is a familiar word. It reminds the Christian of rescue from sin and rescue for heaven after death. In the context of this Epistle, however, the concept is specific. Men without faith have a mind and conscience that is defiled, and in works they deny God, "being abominable and disobedient and unto every good work reprobate" (1:15-16, unfit, manifestly without the ability to accomplish). People without God are aware of the need for good works, but they imagine that they can achieve them through their own power and through legalistic regimentation (1:10-13). The echo of these concepts in the text is "ungodliness and worldly lusts." God's design for man's deeds is that he should do them mindful of God — not only of God's pattern and prescription, but of His power and inner supply for the ability to do them. Man's appalling plight is that he is caught in ungodliness, in which he does things which are contrary to the prescription of God's will, but worse — he does things which may on the surface be good and useful, but which stem from a heart without God. However, only in exceptional instances will he do things good on the surface; for he is prey to "worldly lusts." The secret of behavior is not the surface action; that is only a symptom of the underlying drives and demands of the heart. Those drives are "worldly," stemming for and from fleshly existence rather than God.

St. Paul reminds Titus, and preachers today, too, that their problem is more acute than appears in theory. Christians have come under the saving grace of God; they have come to faith. Yet they continue to live surrounded by the world; the old habits of the flesh lurk on within them and their companions. This ongoing malady of the flesh, living side by side with the Spirit in the Christian, demands help. That help comes not with prescriptions purporting to be God's (1:10-11; 3:9). It must come from God's own gift of grace. The stricken man is not to be harangued to rescue himself; God's rescue must be brought to him from outside of him. God's grace is the preacher's tool for stimulating his hearer to good works; and nothing else is the tool. "These things speak" (v. 15); "these things are good and profitable unto men" (3:8); these things — the facts of the grace of God, which has already appeared.

The four verses of the text are one sentence; and St. Paul has deployed his materials so that the great appearing of God's grace is stated very clearly in immediate connection with God's plan for the good works of Christians. He makes that connection twice, in v. 12 and in v. 14. Hence the full meaning of "the grace of God that bringeth salvation to all men" is expressed below: "The great God and our Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us, etc." Here our minds are focused on the "appearing." God's grace literally became visible, though God is invisible (cf. John 1:1-14; Heb. 1:1-4). The saving grace of God has appeared; it appeared in Jesus Christ.

Yet the act of rescue, the saving quality of this grace, is specified even more accurately, in this text. At Christmas every Christian preacher reacts against the sentimentality that asks people simply to ponder the sweet Babe in the manger. This text says: "He gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us." The rescue took a price. The Savior of saving grace saved by giving Himself for us. The giving had its great purpose: that "He might redeem us from all iniquity and purify a peculiar people unto Himself." Those words are borrowed from the language of sacrifice, a sacrifice of life itself into death. Jesus *died* for sin; He was obedient unto *death* (Phil. 2:8). It is the blood of Jesus Christ which cleanses us from sin (1 John 1:7). God's grace appears in Christ; in His incarnation at Bethlehem indeed; but continuing in His human career, it climaxes in the act on the Cross, the altar of His sacrifice; His death is signed and sealed by God as our redemption through His raising Jesus from the dead (cf. Acts 4:10; 5:30; 13:30, 33; Rom. 4:24-25, and many others).

If therefore the preacher is to lead his people to good works, it is this story that must be told, the story of God's grace revealing and demonstrating itself in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. The story speaks of a task that is done, of men reconciled to God once and for all time; but as it speaks, that redemption comes home to the man, takes hold of the man, arrives at its destination in the man (2 Cor. 5:18-21). "These things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works" (3:8). How can this be? What sort of magic resides in the reciting of the work of Jesus Christ that men

should thereby be led to change their character and to become productive in good works? Why is that story so crucial in the process that preachers should be reminded not to beat about with words of law and prescription, but rather tell the story? (3:9: "strivings about the law . . . they are unprofitable and vain.")

### III

The text itself answers this question, twice over, by emphasizing the fact: the great design in the mind of God, the great purpose behind the appearing of the grace of God, the objective before Christ the Savior in His redeeming work, is that people should do good works! It says that the grace of God teaches us. In the Authorized Version we may get the impression that this "teaching" is like an instructor pointing to a list of things to do: "Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, etc."; the grace of God saves, and the grace of God instructs; it rescues from damnation, and it holds before us the prescriptions of God. That interpretation of these words may lead the preacher to speak of the Gospel as saving his people from sin and of the Law as stimulating his people to good works — an ancient fallacy. Actually the word for "teaching" in the text is intransitive; the subsequent words are not an object clause, but a purpose clause. The word itself is better rendered "stimulating" or "training." Luther uses the intransitive "zuechtiget," and the Nestle text puts a comma after it. This is it: "The grace of God, saving all men, has appeared, teaching us; its purpose is that, denying, etc." That purpose clause allows us to peer deep into the mind of God and sense what He plans to accomplish through the redemption. His plan is not simply to produce a paper transaction on a heavenly ledger, but to achieve reactions and changes in human lives here and now. He is a Fruitgrower and His *purpose* is to raise crops (John 15); He is a Salvager of bad instruments and His purpose is that these instruments do the job for which He originally designed them (Eph. 2:10). The purpose clause in v. 14 allows us to peer deep into the heart of Christ and see that when He died for us on the Cross, it was His purpose to redeem us and to fit us out for good works. Hence the preacher preaches the Word with that purpose (cf. 2 Tim. 3:17); Christians go to their Baptism with that pur-

pose (Titus 3:7-8; Rom. 6:4, Stoeckhardt: "Dass wir in Neuheit des Lebens oder in einem neuen Leben wandeln, das war der *finis ultimus*"). The particle *ἵνα* is used to emphasize not so much result or by-product, but purpose and design of the Lord's action. Actually that design of the Lord stems, in the text, from the word "hath appeared," and we might translate: "The grace of God, saving all men and teaching us, has appeared, with the design that, etc."

The design of the redemption is expressed even more fully in v. 14. The end aim in that great program of the Incarnation and Crucifixion was that "He might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." The presentation of St. Paul to the Romans has trained us to think of the process in two stages: The redemption leads to the forgiveness of sins, accepted by faith; thereupon the Holy Spirit creates in us the power for good works. The result is the popular phrase: our faith produces fruits of good works. More accurately, however — and Romans 6 itself substantiates this view — we may think of the redemption in this way: God and man through it are reconciled, and because of the redemption God simultaneously works faith to hold to Him as God and Father and works love to serve Him and our fellow man in works. The accent in this text is on the work of God; God works the works! It is precisely the accent of Luther's explanation of the Second Article: "I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord; who has redeemed me . . . that (*auf dass*, purpose) I may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him. . . ." In Titus 3 St. Paul restates this emphasis, this time with the addition of reference to the work of the Holy Ghost and of Baptism; again he asserts that the good works are the direct outgrowth of the redemption.

When Christ redeemed us from sin, therefore, it was a redemption in the fullest sense of the term not merely an abstract transaction without reference to the heart and life of the person, but a release from the bondage and hold of sin upon the person (again cf. Romans 5 and 6). The power to keep the law, νόμος, and overcome lawlessness (here translated "iniquity") is therefore not some energy in the sinner's own power, but it comes from Christ's *freeing* us from lawlessness; that power is communicated to Christians as they hear and think of His redeeming work. When Christ gave

Himself for us, He thereby "purified unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." By human birth and environment, men are of flesh and world, impure and tainted; but Christ's redemption purifies not merely from the guilt of that taint, but from the taint itself. It makes out of erstwhile worldlings a peculiar, owned group, attached to Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9; Ex. 19:5; Ps. 135:4). He has paid a price for them, and they are His. Hence when the preacher speaks of Christ's work to His people, he is leading them not simply to more acceptance of the forgiveness of sins, but he is playing a part in the program by which the purpose of Christ's redemption comes to fruition. He is lighting a fire, refueling a fire, for good works.

#### IV

The preacher who holds the redemption of Christ before his people therefore gives them the power to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. God is back in their minds; He is again the Main-spring in the drives of their hearts. They can do battle with the lusts of the flesh and world. They have no simple guarantee that they shall be without those lusts, 1 John 1; but they do have the guarantee that they can battle them (cf. Rom. 7:18-25).

The preacher who holds the redemption of Christ before His people leads them into a life, already this side of the grave, that is sober, righteous, and godly. Instead of being befuddled with the lusts and ambitions of flesh and world, they will have more and more of their hearts rooted in their relation to God through Christ Jesus, they will be more and more aware of God in Christ as the power for their thinking and desire; they will succeed more and more in bending every capacity of thought to this great consciousness of God as Lord and Savior (1 Thess. 5:6, 8; 1 Pet. 4:7).

One significant corollary of this soberness and godliness — Saint Paul makes it the summary of the Christian life — is the "looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ." Christians will be unhappy about the good works that they do, for they will not be perfect. They will try hard to serve their Lord and still come short. Hence they will yearn for the day when the battle against the flesh is over and they will be in perfection. They will audit their works with care and find them imperfect; and they will draw on the power of their liv-



ing Lord for improvement, yet at the same time long that the age may begin when there will be no more sin and they will be wholly with the Lord.

Hence the Christian preacher will seek to buoy up the flagging spirits of his people with the promise of "the redemption of the body"; but simultaneously he will impart the power to be better Christians, finer members of Christ's people, better fighters against world and flesh, right now. That he will do because he is a workman employing the tool which God Himself has entrusted to him, by which he may energize Christ's people to good works. That tool is the Gospel of the Savior's redemption, held before his people as the source of power for their conquest of sin and zeal for good works.