

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**  
**Dr. Barry M. Foster**  
**February 7, 2021**

### **Knowing God, Being Good**

Titus 2:1, 11-15; 3:1-7 (NIV)

*2.1 You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine.*

*11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. 12 It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 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.*

*15 These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.*

*3.1 Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, 2 to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.*

*3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

#### **[Slide 1] Opening**

Good morning church! What does it mean to be good? What does it mean to be “a good person”? What does “being good” have to do with knowing God? These are the questions I want us to think about this week as we continue in our series “*God is a Good God.*” But first, let’s do a quick review.

#### **[Slide 2] Review**

As I pointed out last week, the Holy Spirit is tying together three intersecting and overlapping ideas for us at FCC as we begin this year:

- The year of the Lord’s favor: when God graciously brings salvation to his people, showing us his kindness, in fulfillment of what he has promised;

- The coming of the kingdom of God: when God invites us to live under his rule, bringing the blessing of his rule over his people to us;
- The goodness of God: the recognition that God is perfectly and eternally good, that he gives good gifts to his people, and that living in his favor, underneath his rule, not only results in good coming to us, but produces good in us so that we are more and more like him.

[Slide 3]

We began our study of Titus by recognizing that God defines what goodness really is; whatever conforms to his nature is good. So to know what “good” means we must know God, who is good. We also saw that “goodness” was closely related to “truth.” The truth of God’s word, the message of the gospel, is given to shape us toward goodness, so that we look and think and behave more and more like God.

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Then we looked at Paul’s directives for choosing elders, the spiritual leaders of the church. Those who speak for God and lead others to him must be able to recognize good and to show that they have been transformed by the power of God so that they now are growing toward that mark of conformity to Christ. They model the goodness of God for the church and the world, and they instruct the church, so that believers are able to recognize the difference between what the surrounding culture calls “good,” and what God says is good.

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Next we focused on two broad categories for Paul’s doctrinal teaching: (a) *conceptual theology* that told us what healthy, good doctrine looked like, what truths we must believe as followers of Christ; and (b) *practical theology* that told us what healthy, good behavior looked like in God’s people. Paul’s instructions explain what “goodness” ought to look like in the church—both in the truths that define our faith and in the behaviors and attitudes that represent that faith lived out.

[Slide 6]

Last week the key point concerned *choosing good*. Knowing what is good, knowing right from wrong, does not by itself bring us salvation. But the grace that brought salvation to us not only teaches us what goodness is, but and it empowers and trains us to choose what is good.

[Slide 7] *Paul’s theological bookends*

Today’s text encompasses the end of chapter two and the start of chapter three. I’ve highlighted this portion of Titus because it presents to us two paragraphs that serve as a pair of theological bookends that capture the central and

crucial focus of Paul's message: his understanding of salvation. Paul's conceptual theology of salvation in these two paragraphs is the glue that holds together all of his instructions about moral behavior.

In his letters—and probably therefore, in his sermons and in his personal instructions to those he was training—Paul always reasoned from theological truth (conceptual theology) to the implications of that truth for Christian living (practical theology). Who God is, what he has done; who Christ is, and what he has done; who we are as God's covenant people—Paul spells out these critical doctrinal truths for the church. He then follows his theological truth with a huge “*therefore*” (whether explicitly stated in the text or implied): this is how you should now live.

[Slide 8]     *God our Savior*

In Titus, the main theological points that Paul emphasizes are all about salvation. Even when he firmly asserts the deity of Christ, the significance of that doctrinal truth is connected to his exposition of the truths about salvation. For instance, one of the ways Paul affirms the deity of Jesus in Titus is by making parallel statements about God the Father and Jesus the Son. Three times in this short letter, Paul refers to God as “our Savior”: in 1:3; 2:9; and 3:4. Each time, he follows this acclamation with a reference to “Jesus Christ” (or “Christ Jesus”) “our Savior”: 1:4; 2:13; and 3:6. Paul is very purposefully and clearly making these parallel statements to affirm that Jesus is divine, just as the Father is divine. At the same time, he is showing that both the Father and the Son are intimately joined as *the source for salvation* for people.

[Slide 9]     *Truths about salvation*

What else does Paul teach about salvation?

The *reason* that salvation is available is that *God is merciful* (2:11; 3:4-5). Because he desires to show kindness to those who have sinned rather than to punish them, God has made salvation available. It is his mercy that led God to act to save us, not his frustration.

We see that the *means* for making that salvation available was the self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (2:13-14). His death was not a tragic accident, but the determined plan of God to save humankind from our sin. *What happened* at salvation was rebirth and renewal, which comes about through the working of the Holy Spirit in us (3:5). The Spirit of God comes to dwell within us when we are born again, making us spiritually alive, a new creation.

The *result* of salvation is that we are redeemed: released from the penalty of sin (condemnation), as well as from its power (2:14). We are purified, made holy

through the justifying power of his grace and separated from our former lives as his people (2:14; 3:7).

Paul reminds us of the *purpose* of salvation: that we are called to make the abstract idea of the goodness of God into a concrete reality in our lives (2:14). And he ties that purpose into the *end* toward which salvation is aimed—the realization of our inheritance, eternal life (3:7).

[Slide 10] *Being good*

Why does this theology stuff matter? Shouldn't we just focus on what we're supposed to do and leave the rest for the intellectuals who like that sort of thing? Let's just take our cue from the Boy Scouts, and make sure that we "*do a good deed daily.*"

Well, Scouts who are doing a good deed daily are building a good habit. It's certainly a good way to live; it's helpful and it's better than getting into trouble all the time. But putting a checkmark in the box marked "*my good deeds*" is not what it means to live as a Christian. We don't do what is good in order to fill up all the boxes with our checkmarks in the hope that we will get a good grade from God. That's not the picture of what Christian faith looks like.

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You see, doing good deeds is not the same as being good. In fact, being good is not the way God measures us. Being good isn't the bar we have to clear to qualify for God's approval. Being good is the result of having the good God living in us, joined to our spirit. We do good because we have been changed on the inside by his Spirit. God has delivered us from our past, from the power of sin, and empowers us to do what is good, what is like his nature. And he is always at work in us, empowering us by his Spirit and changing us, in order to bring us into conformity with his goodness, with the image of Christ.

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And let's be very clear about this. You and I cannot be good on our own. The standard is far too high. It's out of reach. The fact is that as human beings, we have greatly overestimated our own goodness. Some guy rapes his date, but his parents tell the police, "*He's a really good boy.*" Or some lady embezzles \$40,000 from the company she works for to pay off her gambling debt, and her neighbors and friends all say, "*I can't believe it, she is such a good person.*" We don't think that we're all that bad, because we've seen people we consider worse than us. ("*Compared to so-and-so, I was okay.*") But comparing ourselves with someone worse doesn't mean anything at all. What we have to understand is that we're being compared to God. And by that measurement, we come up very short.

That's why Paul reminds us that God didn't save us because we were righteous, because of anything we had done to merit his salvation. He isn't dismissing whatever good things we might have done. God doesn't call the good things that we may do evil. But those good deeds aren't enough to offset our sins. They aren't the whole story and they can't erase the evil that we did or change what we were. We weren't good people. Not really. Our sins might have been less visible, or less damaging, or maybe just less unusual, so that we and some other people regarded them as if they didn't really count.

But they did count. And they weren't pretty.

[Slide 13] *Remember what you were before you met Christ*

That's one of the reasons that Paul reminds the people about what we all were like before we came to faith in Christ (3:3-4). You and I have to die to this illusion that we were good people. Paul's statement cuts that ground right out from under our feet: we were all "*foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.*" We were living, consumed by "*malice and envy, being hated* [i.e., for what we had done to others] *and hating one another.*" (3:3)

Paul is not trying to glorify how awful we were, nor to exaggerate our wickedness. (We sometimes fall prey to the temptation to outdo one another in describing our lives "B.C."– "before Christ.") But Paul wants us to recognize that sin is real. Its effects on us and others are harmful; and our self-determined ideas about what is moral and what isn't actually rendered us guilty and deserving of judgment by God.

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But what is Paul's point? Why is he being so harsh? It's really quite simple—and once again, it has everything to do with making sure that the truth of the gospel is going out to the world.

Paul says, "*Remember who and what you were before you met Jesus Christ and received his grace. Don't forget what it felt like to be separated from God because of your sin.*" If you remember what you were before Christ, you won't take God's mercy for granted. You won't forget to be grateful to God for his love. It will be easy to praise God because you genuinely know that apart from his grace you would be completely lost.

At a church I used to attend, one of the staff pastors was Brother Catron. Brother Catron was about eighty-something; he preached every once in a while, usually at the mid-week service or on Sunday nights. And every time he preached, he would break down and start crying somewhere in his sermon—because he had been the town drunk, a hopeless and helpless mess until Jesus saved him and

delivered him from his addiction. Brother Catron never forgot what he was before he found Jesus. (And he wasn't about to let the rest of us forget either.)

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The other reason God wants us to remember who and what we were is so that we will remember what it was that made it possible for us to be different—God's grace—and to extend that same grace to people that we might think are beyond his reach. Paul wrote in Romans 1:17: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."* We don't need to be looking for people we think would be good additions to the club. We need to tell people about the love of Christ that made it possible for us to be changed from what we were—self-centered, broken, consumed by anger, hatred, lust, ego, fear, or whatever—and has empowered us to live a new life by his Spirit.

[Slide 16] *Satan's subtle lie*

Remembering where I came from and how I got here will also help with another trap that Christians can easily fall into. There is this very subtle lie of Satan that trips us up. Basically it goes like this: *"Yes, God has forgiven you for what you've done in the past. That's nice. And yes, you didn't deserve his forgiveness. Isn't that wonderful? But now that you've been forgiven, you need to up your game. You need to quit all that sinning that no one sees, all that stuff you've got hidden in your heart. You're supposed to be a Christian, right? So that means you have to be good. And if you want God to love you more, you need to be gooder."*

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But that's a lie. Of course we all need to be aware of our sinful tendencies, the attitudes and habits that need to die in us. Of course God wants us to be purified from those sinful things. But if salvation came through grace, why do we think that we don't need his grace now? If he loved me when I was his enemy, not because I was righteous, but in spite of being unrighteous, why should I think that his love now is conditioned upon my being good? God's love is unchanging. He doesn't love me more when I'm good and less when I'm not. He loves me, period. And it's the same for you, too. He loves you, period.

[Slide 18] *Grace—the power to change*

Now, because he loves you, he's going to keep working on you to change you so that those sinful tendencies and habits and so forth become a thing of the past. Paul's instructions about our need to be upright, self-controlled, saying "no" to ungodliness and worldly lusts—those are still commands that we need to obey. So because I believe that God loves me, I trust his grace toward me, and I allow

the power of the Spirit of God that resides within me (because I've been born again) to have its transformative effect in me as I begin practicing the good things I see in the examples and instructions of Jesus and those who are following Jesus with me. Dallas Willard put it well: "*Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning.*"

[Slide 19] *What does it mean to "be good"?*

What then does it mean to "be good"?

It begins with the recognition that I am not good on my own, that I fall far short of the standard for measuring good, which is God himself—his person and his ways. So I acknowledge that I must change. It is not enough to admit that I am lacking in the goodness department; I must also admit that I must change if I want to become like Christ.

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Second, I recognize that the point of becoming a good person is not so that I may establish my relative position on the pyramid of goodness and thus secure a passing grade to get rewarded by God. No, instead I understand that the point of becoming a good person is to honor God and to thank him for delivering me from the mess that I was and from the punishment that was due me.

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Third, I take the stance of humility and faith: If God can save me, he can certainly save you. I can hold out hope for you because God's salvation isn't a prize for those who are good, it is his gift to those who are not, a gift that is conditioned only on our willingness to surrender and to come to him in repentance and faith. I can be a model of hope for others because I understand that whatever good is in me did not get there by my heroic and superior moral abilities. The good that is in me comes from the enabling power of God's grace, which is available to everyone without exception.

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Fourth, I allow the Holy Spirit to work his transformation in me by taking what steps I know to follow Jesus and live according to his word. I'm not talking about living in pretense, or trying to appear good, hiding my faults to create an image, or adopting certain habits when others are around so that I fit in with the rest of the people at church. I'm talking about a genuine transformation of desires, loves, wants, behavior, attitudes, beliefs; of who I am and what I do; a transformation of the whole person that grows out of a changed sense of what is good.

[Slide 23] *Hope*

There's a lot more in this passage that we could dig through—and it would be helpful for our growth as followers of Christ. But though that would be good for us (*please note the clever connection to the general theme of this sermon series*), it might make us late for other commitments we have later today. So I will only examine one more important point before we close: it has to do with “hope.”

In this section of Titus, Paul twice mentions “hope.” “Hope” refers to a future expectation. A good way to think of hope as it is generally used in the Bible is “*the confident expectation of future good which is yet to come.*” Biblical hope is not wishing for something that may or may not ever happen. It is not a matter of me identifying something that I think would be nice (“good”) and dreaming about it happening. Biblical hope is the confident expectation that something that God has said is good will certainly happen *because God has promised that it will happen, and God is incapable of lying.* Biblical hope is grounded in that sure word from God, and our realization of that expectation is tied to our action of holding fast in faith to what God has said. Because it is in the future, I must wait for it to appear. But because it is certain, I wait with confidence, knowing that God is good; he will not prove false.

[Slide 24]

The first time Paul mentions “hope,” he identifies the object of our hope—the future good thing for which we are waiting with confidence—as the return of Christ (2:13). Our expectation of Jesus’ return is not a dream that someone told someone else and it became a popular notion to hold onto in the church. It is the promise of God that Jesus would return to reign over this world and transform all that is now wrong and make it right.

The second time he mentions “hope” it is a different, though related, object: “eternal life” (3:7). That for which we are waiting with confident expectation of good to come is to receive our spiritual inheritance—life forever in the presence of God.

[Slide 25] *Being good now—living in hope*

The realization of both of these two connected and related hopes is conditioned upon our being transformed so that we become “good.” We live now, in the present evil age, in such a way that we are anticipating that day. Our lives display the quality of that which is yet to come, that for which we are waiting, because God has already begun his good work in us. We hope for the return of Jesus, we hope for his reign over this world, for the exaltation of what is good because we are currently living under his reign. We are currently exalting what is good in our own lives as we submit to his kingship over us now. We hope for the



life of heaven, life everlasting in the presence of God forever, freed from the presence of sin and evil because we are currently living by the life of God in this present world. We experience his presence, we seek his goodness, we desire to be with him now. Our lives anticipate that which is to come—and thus we begin to realize our hope even now; even though it is only partial, it is nevertheless real. That hope is the end to which we are heading. We are pursuing what is good now because that is where we are going. We want what is good because we have been changed by Jesus, transformed by his Spirit from what we were to what we are and what we will yet be.

[Slide 26] *Refusing good?*

One of the things that is almost incomprehensible to me, and yet I know it is undoubtedly true is this: there are people who will be shut out of the kingdom of God, who choose hell over heaven, because they have no desire to be in the presence of God. If you don't like goodness, why would you want to be surrounded by it forever? Now, I do understand how people who are spiritually and emotionally (and intellectually) damaged can reject the goodness of God. Because they are wounded, they don't believe that they belong in God's presence, and so they refuse the love that is offered to them, thinking that they "belong" in a life of pain, misery, self-loathing, and evil. But God still offers his love, still offers mercy, still offers himself as the one who can pierce through that lie and bring healing to your mind and your heart. The Holy Spirit can still change you, can replace that self-loathing with gratitude for who God has made you and how he has changed you; he can transform you from someone who hates what is good and wants only to live however you please into someone who loves what is good, and is growing into the image of Christ, with your heart set on pleasing him.

[Slide 27]

But it takes a rebirth—a new start. It takes turning away from the path of self-destruction you're currently walking on and letting God give you a new start on a new path. He wants to restore you to what you were always intended to be, instead of the thing you thought you had to be. It takes letting go of the control of your own life and surrendering to Jesus. Don't worry; he won't hurt you. He is good, all the time. And what he will do for you will bring you immeasurable good.

We're talking about having an experience, a genuine encounter with the only God there is—not the idea of God or someone's religious or philosophical system, but the God who created the world and sent his Son to die for your sins so that you could find out what "good" really looked like; so you could become a truly "good person." It takes an experience with the risen Jesus; not just going to

church, not just mental assent to some doctrines or slogans; not just a system of moral improvement; not just trying to be gooder. But coming to Jesus as you are right now and letting him have everything you are and everything you wish you weren't but are. Let him show you what "good" really looks like. Let him make you a "good person," someone who is in the process of being transformed by the Spirit of God, made ready to live in the kingdom of God and the presence of God forever; someone with a hope that is real.

**[Slide 28]** *Transition to communion*

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]*

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have come to know God through him. Jesus showed us who God is; he translated God for us. Nowhere do we see God more clearly than in the person of Jesus. And nowhere do we see what "good" is more than on the cross. The self-sacrificing death of Jesus for us is the ultimate picture of good, of love, of truth. It is the picture of God's grace, the gift of God that made salvation available to everyone.

And because Jesus not only died, but rose from the grave, you can experience his love today. You can speak with him, and he will answer. You can ask him to forgive your sins, and he will come into your heart and live in you.

If you do not know Jesus as savior, if you have not surrendered your life to him, you are missing out on the greatest gift that God has ever given. Why would you not want to know the best "good" that there is? Forget the things that the world tells you that you ought to be going after (money, pleasure, power, fame). Those are empty pursuits that won't satisfy your inner desire to know love, discover the truth, and experience what is good. Let Jesus transform you. He died for your sins, so that you could be free from them. Communion is our remembrance of that fact, a way to say again with cup and bread that we have chosen to turn from pursuing life on our own to pursuing the things of God, the things that are good.

*Benediction /Blessing*

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

*[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]*