

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

All Credit to God

Titus 3:4-7 (NIV)

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.

What role do we play in our coming to believe in Jesus as our Savior, as the one who takes away our sins and fills us with his perfection? Do we have to reach out and accept Jesus into our hearts, somewhat as is depicted by Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* painting in the Sistine Chapel where Adam raises a feeble hand up to God in order to be given life? Is it more that God has to give you this spark of life, grace that starts you on a path of good works that you need to complete in order to be with God? Is it like a kid going to college, where the parents have paid the tuition so that the kid can go to college, but now the kid has study hard and get good grades to honor the payments made? In his letter to Titus, Paul clarifies to his coworker what role we play in coming to believe in Jesus as our Savior.

Now, Paul had left Titus on the island of Crete to organize the church there. If you want to know what the people of Crete were like, Paul paints a vivid picture early in this letter when he wrote: One of Crete's own prophets has said it: "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." (Titus 1:12) To spare you the semantics debate with someone, this word "Cretans" refers to those who live on the island of Crete, not the French word, "cretin," which is pronounced the same and has its own interesting etymology but ultimately became a slang word for a deformed idiot. Basically, those from the island of Crete, those Cretans, by their own estimation, were not good people.

Thus Paul encourages Titus to "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone." (Titus 3:1-2) And before we get too far in our own minds thinking that Paul needs to remind people around us and in our country to be those things, Paul includes himself as a sinner just as bad as the Cretans: "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." (Titus 3:3)

If the Apostle Paul can admit to being foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another, can we claim any different? Can we say that we aren't as bad as those Cretans? That we aren't as bad as the Apostle Paul? Or have I been disrespectful to the rulers and authorities instead of giving them the honor owed them even when I disagree with them? Have I purposefully not obeyed their laws because I thought that they were stupid, that I was above them, that they didn't apply to me? Have I procrastinated on doing what is good, pushing it off for another day so that I could pursue what I wanted to pursue? Have I slandered others because I was hurt? Was I not peaceable or considerate or gentle to everyone?

It's not just Cretans who needed these reminders, and not just those other people out there. We need these instructions because we are sinners, people who fall short in thought, word, and action every single day. A brief reflection on our lives and we see the truth that the sinful mind, my sinful mind, is hostile to God and his Word. It doesn't submit to God's Word, not can it. Surely we were sinful from birth, sinful from the time when we came into being as we were conceived in our mothers. We see that truth in the little ones that we don't have to teach how to be bad; they have that all figured out on their own. We cannot come to God, let alone live these good, peaceable, considerate, gentle lives all on our own.

"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us..." (verses 4-5a) God came to us first, before we could have done anything to cause him to do so. God took the first action, loved us first, while we were still hostile, while we were still sinners, still rejecting him. Motivated by his kindness, his goodness, he appeared to us. He did this when Adam and Eve first sinned. He came to them and didn't wait for them to come to him, because they weren't going to, just as we never would or could make the first move towards God. Adam and Eve tried to hide and cover their sins all up, just like we do as we try to downplay our sins, think that they aren't so bad, think that we were justified in being disobedient, enslaving ourselves to our passions and pleasures, hating others. But God announced right away that he would come and fix this with the offspring of the woman, with himself. That kindness and love appeared in the God Man Jesus Christ. This is God's epiphany for us today.

“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.” (verse 5a) Think of the most obedient things that you do from the money you donate, to charity to shoveling people’s walks and driveways, to the doors you hold open, to the paying of your taxes and obeying of the crosswalk and speed limit signs. These righteous acts don’t save you. Think of the most holy things that you do from the prayers you offer multiple times throughout the day, the daily devotions and Bible readings you do, the tithes you give at church. These do not give you a right standing with God. My serving as a pastor does not save me or make me better in the eyes of God. Our most righteous acts, the most moral things we can do, do not save us or make us worthy of salvation.

Instead, God saves us because of his mercy. Mercy is treating someone not as they deserve to be treated. Just one single sin ever in your whole life means that you have broken all of God’s laws. One single white lie, one single failure to be obedient to our rulers and authorities, one single word of slander, one single thought of hate for another person, means that we should be cast away from God because God does not tolerate sin. He can’t stand to have it in his presence. We deserve to be cast into hell without a second thought from God. But he does not treat us as our sins deserve. He saves us because of his mercy.

“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior...” (verses 5b-6) In his mercy, not treating us as our sins deserve, God comes to us and washes us and makes us new. He scrubs us clean of all of our sins. All that disobedience, all those foolish sins, all that enslavement to passions and pleasures, all that malice and envy, all that hatred, all our failures to be peaceable, considerate, and gentle – all of these are washed and removed from us by God. The Holy Spirit took that old hostile sinful nature and drown in the waters of baptism and he gave us instead a new birth and a new life, filled and covered generously with Jesus’ perfect life, everything he did for us. God the Holy Spirit has freed us from the controlling hostility of our sinful nature and made us new.

God the Father saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, “so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” (verse 7) Because of what our Triune God has done, we are justified by his grace. This means that according to God and his verdict, we are declared not guilty of any of our sins because of what he has done for us. What’s more is that he has put his name on us, the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, given specifically in our baptism. God has adopted us into his family as he has made us holy, perfect, without sin.

Since God has put his name on us and brought us into his family, we are heirs of eternal life. This hope is not just a wish that God might just let us have eternal life with him some day. No, this is a sure and certain expectation because it is all based on what God has done for us. He mercifully made the first move. He appeared to us. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, poured out on us generously by what Jesus did for us in our place. We didn’t do a thing. We can take no credit for how we stand with God. Our standing before God, the removal of our sins, our new life lived for God according to his Word, all of this is what God has done for us and in us. All credit goes to God.

Because God has done this all for us, we now live for him, devoting ourselves to what is good. We don’t do this to earn a place of standing with him, being like the kid who got good grades to honor the parents who paid the tuition. God already got us the good grades. We serve him and follow his Word to be good, to be peaceable, considerate, gentle, to treat others as God treats us because God has made us new and our salvation, our perfection, is already all accomplished by him. This is simply how we live because of how he has made us and changed us by bringing us to faith in him.

What part do we play in coming to believe that God takes away our sin and fills us with his perfection? None, really. All credit goes to God. We are only the messengers of what God has done. We convey this message in words, in teaching, in sharing, in actions like baptizing people and partaking in the Lord’s Supper. God comes to us. God saves us. God makes us new. All credit goes to God for our faith in him and our life lived for him. Amen.