

4. Behaviour that befits the gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Well, perhaps you'd turn with me to Titus chapter 3 again, on page 998. And this evening we come to our fourth and last in this little series of sermons on Paul's letter to his friend and colleague Titus.

I've given the sermon series the title, Behaviour that Befits the Gospel. And I hope that tonight's sermon from chapter 3 will help us to understand that theme a little bit more deeply, Behaviour that Befits the Gospel.

In fact, in a sense this evening, I want to convince you, I want to persuade you if I can, that this little letter is indeed all about behaviour that is in accord with the Gospel.

So let's first of all skim over the surface of the text in all three chapters, if we may, to see how often Paul speaks here of godly behaviour or good works. Good works, I think, is the term that he most often uses here.

It comes first in the very first verse of chapter 1. At the end of the verse, he speaks of their knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness. And godliness means godly behaviour.

[1 : 0 9] In the New Testament, interestingly, we have 13 letters written by Paul the Apostle. All of these letters have a little introductory section, one or two or three verses.

But this is the only one of those 13 letters which includes any reference to godliness or godly behaviour. So in a sense, Paul is announcing his theme at the very beginning. Then look at verses 5 to 9 in chapter 1, where Paul is describing here the kind of men that Titus must appoint to be the elders of the young churches in Crete.

And the overwhelming emphasis of this list of qualities is not on the giftedness of these men, but on their godliness. These men are to be men of a marked godly life.

And then a great contrast is drawn in the next few verses, chapter 1, verses 10 to 16, where Paul says that there are other people about, there are many of them, who are trying to exert influence and leadership in the Cretan churches, but what they are marked by is ungodliness.

Look at the adjectives he heaps up there. They're insubordinate, deceitful, they're windbags, they're greedy, they're lazy, they're liars, impure, unbelieving and defiled.

[2 : 2 6] And Paul sums up their character in the second half of verse 16, where he says, they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

So good work or good works is the very thing of which they are incapable. Then in chapter 2, Titus himself, by contrast, with these false teachers, is to teach Christian behavior, godly behavior.

And that's what verses 2 to 10 are all about, which we looked at last week. And Paul insists that Titus should insist on these things. Look at the final verse of chapter 2, verse 15.

Declare these things, exhort and rebuke with all authority, let no one disregard you. In other words, Titus, my brother, these things are not negotiable. Godly behavior is not an optional tack-on extra.

Where people have come to believe the gospel, it will show, and it must show, in their radically changed living. Then the first two verses of chapter 3, which we'll look at properly in just a moment, they continue in the same vein.

[3 : 35] The Cretan Christians are to live lovely, attractive, courteous lives, lives, in their relationships with the government, with official bodies, and the outside world in general.

Why? Because of the gospel, which Paul explains in the very moving section, verses 3 to 7, which again we'll look at later. And then having finished his explanation of the gospel, in verses 3 to 7, Paul says in verse 8, the saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

Now, Paul is using very strong language. He's saying that a gospel that does not issue in transformed living is no real gospel. And he contrasts this lovely, godly living, when he goes on to verses 9 to 11, with the worthless, unprofitable behavior of the empty talkers and deceivers that he's been writing about in chapter 1.

Now, just notice how often this phrase, good works, is used in the letter. We've noted godliness in chapter 1, verse 1. Then chapter 2, verse 7, addressed to Titus himself, he is to show himself in all respects to be a model of good works.

Chapter 2, verse 14, the people of God are to be, at the end of the verse, zealous for good works. Chapter 3, verse 1, the Christians are to be ready for every good work.

[5 : 08] Chapter 3, verse 8, those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. And then the same idea in chapter 3, verse 14, let our people, that's the Christian people, learn to devote themselves to good works.

So I think we're beginning to get the idea. Just as the word blackpool runs right the way through a stick of blackpool rock from stem to stern, the theme that runs all the way through this letter is the theme that godly behavior, a marked, zealous, careful, thought through, devoted godly behavior, is an essential characteristic of Christian churches and Christian individuals.

So let me try and sum it up like this. The theme of this letter to Titus is good works, exemplary Christian behavior. And there are three aspects of it which Paul teaches. First, it is the fruit of the gospel, its behavior that accords with the gospel and grows out of the gospel.

Second, it is in contrast, marked contrast, with the worthless lives of these false teachers. And thirdly, it is to be lived out for the sake of outsiders, for the sake of the non-Christian world, who are looking on at the Christian church with considerable interest.

Now, if you're an evangelical Christian, a Bible-believing Christian, it's possible that this theme of good works makes you feel just a little bit twitchy and uncomfortable.

[6 : 37] Now, why should that be? Well, for one thing, you're rightly suspicious of a misplaced emphasis on good works. You know that all the non-Christian religions at heart teach salvation by good works, salvation by one's own efforts at being good.

And you know that skewed forms of Christianity teach the same thing. Now, Paul is quite clear in Titus, the letter to Titus, that good works don't earn our salvation. He says it very clearly in chapter 3, verse 5.

He saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy. And yet, despite that, chapter 3, verse 5, this insistent drumbeat about the importance of good works may still leave us a little bit unsettled.

We might also feel twitchy about the theme of good works because we don't want to decline from the real gospel to a mere social gospel. We know of individual churches, perhaps even whole denominations, which once preached the real Bible gospel but ended up essentially doing social work without the gospel.

So instinctively, we want to say, steady on, we're not going down that path, are we? But Paul is not taking us down that path, not at all. He's not dumbing down the power of the gospel in the slightest degree.

[8 : 04] What he is teaching here exactly accords with his teaching in his bigger and better known letters, that we live out the godly Christian life because of what God has done for us in sending Jesus to be our saviour.

The gospel comes first and grips us and we respond. And it then produces the godly life. So the godly life is the fruit of the gospel. Or to use some good jargon words, it's the gospel indicatives that lead to the ethical imperatives.

God has done all this, indicatives. Therefore, we must live like that, imperatives. Good works can never earn us our salvation. But Paul is insisting that good works, the life of Christian behaviour must flow from the fact that we are saved.

Alright, so far that's simply introduction. I've just wanted to highlight the issues and identify the points at which we might be feeling a little uneasy. Now what I want to do now for the bulk of our remaining time is to look just at the first eight verses of chapter three.

And I have one main question which I'd like to put to these first eight verses in chapter three. And that is, what is the relationship between verses one and two and verses three to eight?

[9 : 25] That's where we're going. I think that if we can see how the first two verses relate to verses three to eight, we'll have reached the heart of this little letter to Titus and we'll be beginning to understand why Paul, the preacher of unmerited mercy, is so insistent on the importance of good works.

Let's first notice the first word of verse three. Chapter three, verse three, the very first word, and that is the word for, F-O-R. That word for is one of the commonest and most instructive words in the Bible because whatever comes after the word for explains whatever comes before the word for.

That's exactly the same in ordinary speech, isn't it? I might say, for example, one day, I opened the fridge door for I was exceedingly hungry.

So it's my excessive hunger that explains my opening of the fridge door. That's the same here. Verses three to eight explain verses one and two. Verses three to eight give the reason why Paul says what he does say in verses one and two.

So that's where we're going. I want us to see the relationship between the two. So we'll look first of all at verses one and two under the heading Christian behavior towards the government and towards the world in general.

[10 : 47] So first one first. It's about the way that Christians relate to the government. Remind them, Titus, remind the Cretan Christians to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work.

Now of course it's the Christians on the island of Crete in about 55 AD that Paul has in mind here. And Crete was a notorious trouble spot in the Roman Empire.

The Romans had subjugated the island of Crete in the year 67 BC which was more than a century before Paul was writing this. And apparently ever since Crete had been a pain in Rome's neck.

The people, one ancient historian wrote, this man was called Polybius, Polybius wrote that the Cretans were constantly involved in uprisings, murders and plots of war. Which I think helps to explain why if we look at chapter 1 verse 10, there are many insubordinate people about.

It was something about their nature. And in chapter 1 verse 16, there are many disobedient people as well. We have that famous saying in chapter 1 verse 12, that Cretans are always liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons.

[11 : 58] but Paul insists in chapter 3 verse 1, that the Cretans who have become believers must now be submissive rather than insubordinate, that they must be obedient rather than disobedient to the rulers and authorities, which would be the Roman officials who were running the island of Crete.

Now Paul makes exactly the same point at greater length in Romans chapter 13 and the apostle Peter does the same thing in 1 Peter chapter 2. The apostles were very concerned that the Christians in the early churches should not be known as troublemakers.

Now of course the apostles were prepared to resist authority, to resist the Roman authority where their legislation clearly contravened the will of God. As Peter says in early Acts, Acts 5 verse 29, we must obey God rather than men.

And if you think of it, the reason why Paul the apostle ended up losing his freedom and then finally his life was that he was prepared to preach in the Roman Empire that Christ is a greater Lord than Caesar.

But Titus 3 verse 1 is about Christians complying submissively and obediently to the ordinary government legislation and bureaucracy which is not contravening the will of God.

[13 : 19] And friends, of course, this is still the case today. This teaching applies to us in our relationship to government, to local government and national government. And why do we need to hear it today?

Because we, like the Cretan Christians of the first century, are tempted to be insubordinate and disobedient to the government. And let me give you a very recent example of this from my own life.

We live in Ayrshire and Ayrshire, as you may know, has been divided now into three administrative sectors, North Ayrshire, East Ayrshire and South Ayrshire. We live in North Ayrshire. And about a week ago, I received in the post from the offices of the North Ayrshire Council a large A4 form, about 12 pages long it was, and I was being asked to fill it in.

It was about the use of agricultural land. We have an old farmhouse and there's a few acres of land with it, which are still classified as agricultural land. So there we are in deepest rural Ayrshire and the Scottish executive, via the county council, need to know what use every acre of agricultural land is being put to.

So this form asked me, amongst other things, whether our land is ploughed or not, and if it's not ploughed, if it's pasture, whether it's grazed by cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, goats, poultry, llamas, buffaloes, or whatever.

[14 : 42] Now you can imagine, can't you, my feelings as I opened this letter from the North Ayrshire Council and gazed at this large and detailed form? Was my heart filled with fresh and abounding love for the Scottish executive?

Did I wish to jump into my car there and then and drive down to Irvine and embrace every employee of the North Ayrshire Council with tears of gratitude in my eyes? No, I did not.

The prospect of filling in that form made me feel, in Paul's words, insubordinate, disobedient, and even detestable. I thought to myself, have I got nothing better to do with my time than to fill in this footling, piffling piece of bureaucracy?

Now friends, you'll be glad to know that I did fill it in and I sent it back by return of post. In actual fact, when I sat down to read the form properly, I discovered that only two or three pages applied to me, the rest of it was to people who'd been buying and selling land and selling stock and all that sort of thing, so most of it didn't apply to me.

It only took me about ten minutes to fill it in. But I just used this as an example of how I suspect we all react to government regulations and bureaucracy. We don't like it.

[15 : 54] We tend to feel that it intrudes upon our freedoms and our privacies. Now that's just a light-hearted, trivial example of how we can react to authority.

But let's make no mistake, Paul is very serious about this. This is full-blooded, ethical teaching. Paul is teaching, think of this especially in the context of the Roman Empire, he's teaching that submission and obedience to official regulation is of paramount importance to Christians.

Why? We'll come to that when we come to verse three. So verse one is about Christian behavior in relation to the government. Verse two is about Christian behavior towards the world in general.

people. Now we know that Paul is talking here about relationships towards the outside world rather than just within the church because he uses the phrase no one in the first part of verse two and he uses the phrase towards all people at the end of the verse.

So he's talking about all our contacts with all the people that we have any dealings with. People we meet in our schools and our shops. It will include our relationships with our neighbors, our work colleagues, the people we meet at football matches, the people we talk to on the ferry to Aaron, the people we sit next to on the bus to Strathbungo.

[17 : 17] Everybody is included. Now verse two is the kind of apparently mild, sweet, innocent little Bible verse which our eye wants to slide over very quickly.

It takes us about one second to read, doesn't it? To speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy towards all people. It's the kind of verse that we immediately, when we read it, we pigeonhole it in the be good and be nice category and we hasten on to verses three and four which look much more tasty and interesting.

However, isn't the truth that verse two is a most penetrating verse, a most challenging verse? It cuts us to the quick. Which of us, look with me at the words, which of us has perfectly obeyed the ethics of verse two even for a week, let alone for a year?

To speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

I wonder if it's possible that in our churches we may have agreed to collude with each other in not accepting this teaching. I wonder if we've taught each other perhaps to relish a scrap and to applaud feisty behavior.

[18 : 44] I wonder if it's really quite rare to meet a Christian whose life very closely matches verse two. A Christian of whom we can say he never besmirches the names of other people.

He never quarrels at meetings of the church or other meetings or with individuals. He is the soul of gentleness and courtesy. I've never heard him bad-mouthing another person.

Now Paul cannot be saying in verse two that Christians ought not to oppose theological error or ungodly behavior because Paul is doing both of these things throughout this letter and throughout all his letters.

He cannot be saying that miscreant behavior should not be shown up and exposed for what it is. In fact he does just that in chapter one verse twelve when he exposes the endemic moral failings of the non-Christian Cretans.

Verse two of chapter three cannot be outlawing a willingness to contend for the truth of the gospel. What Paul is outlawing in chapter three verse two is a nastiness, a hostility and rudeness on the personal level.

[19 : 54] What he's urging on us is a compassionate view of all other people. A compassionate view of all other people. It's easy to be gentle and courteous to 98% of the people for 98% of the time isn't it?

It's that last 2% where this verse really counts. Think of the person for example who threatens us in some way or who bullies us. The person who wastes our time or puts pressure on us or tries to manipulate us.

That's the person who strongly tempts us to be rude and discourteous in return. The kind of person who tempts us to say for example, here I am on the phone, I want you to understand that I am not, repeat not, interested in your wonderful free offer to double glaze the windows of my entire house.

Do I make myself understood? Bang! Down goes the telephone. You ever said that? Paul says, perfect courtesy towards all people.

That includes the cold caller salesman on the telephone. It will include the Jehovah's Witness at the front door. It will include the doctor who came up with the wrong diagnosis of your old father's illness.

[21 : 10] It will include the driver who shunted into the back of you at the traffic lights. It will include the weak school teacher in whose class your child had to languish for a whole year.

And any other type of person to whom one is tempted to read the riot act. To be gentle, says Paul, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

But why, we ask, why Paul are you insisting on such an extraordinarily high standard of behaviour? I mean, Paul, brother, apostle, let's face it, the government is often a pain.

Yes, it was harsh in the first century Roman Empire times, of course. But if you, Paul, if you were to live in 21st century Britain, you'd find the pettifogging regulations and bureaucracy sufficient to drive you up the wall.

And as for your second verse, brother, well, I'll bet you a fiver that if you lived in London or in Glasgow in the 21st century, you'd never write anything quite so full on or so demanding. I mean, perfect courtesy towards all people. In a city like this, you must be joking.

[22 : 19] No, I'm not, says Paul. Not at all. It's true that I'm urging a very high standard of behaviour on you, but once you see my reasons for urging it, you will be able to accept it.

Indeed, you'll be very glad to accept it. All right, friends, we must look at his reasons. Verses 3 to 8 spell out the reasons why Paul is so insistent on giving us the ethical imperatives of verses 1 and 2.

So let your eyes rest on the text, if they will, and let me give you a paraphrase of verses 3 to 8 so that I can try and bring out the thrust of it. My reason, Titus, brother Titus, for insisting on this high standard of behaviour towards those who are potentially frustrating and difficult is that God has shown unbelievable gentleness and perfect courtesy towards us, who were not merely potentially frustrating to him, but were downright rebels of the worst kind.

Now, you think of what we were. We were at least as awful as the worst of the Cretans. We were foolish. We were disobedient. We were led astray because we had no moral principle to direct us.

And worse, we were slaves to all kinds of passions and pleasures. We couldn't master ourselves. We were enslaved. Our very humanity was degraded into bondage.

[23 : 52] And our relationships with other people were vicious and brutish. Our whole mindset was filled with malice and envy. We traded, not in courtesy and gentleness, but in hatred.

We hated other people and they hated us back. That's what we were like. But how did God deal with people like that? Did he snarl at us and consign us to the pit?

No. He rescued us. He saved us. When Jesus came, he showed us the full range of his goodness and loving kindness. Well, he couldn't save us because of good works done by us in righteousness.

There are no good works in the lives of those who are in bondage to sin and hedonism and malice and hatred. He saved us purely because of his mercy. He took us, horrible and foul and loathsome as we were, and he washed us clean.

And that's not all. As he cleansed us of our filth, he recreated us. He didn't just patch us up and dust us down or wipe us down with a flannel.

[25 : 03] He placed his very own spiritual being and power inside us, the Holy Spirit, thus causing us to be born again into a totally new world.

We are part of a new creation. We are new men and new women. And he did all this through Jesus Christ. Christ came as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

It was Christ who poured the Holy Spirit out upon us richly. Why? So that we should become heirs of eternal life. And he didn't only wash us and regenerate us, he also justified us by his grace.

That is to say, he declared us to be clothed with a status of righteousness in his sight. Not guilty. Acquitted. Exonerated. So that we should be in a position to inherit the new world and eternal life.

Now Titus, if God has acted with such mercy, with such goodness, with such loving kindness and grace towards people like us who were the slaves of sin and hedonism and malice and envy and hatred, if God has shown that degree of tender-hearted gentleness and perfect courtesy towards us undeserving wretches, should we not show gentleness and perfect courtesy towards all people and especially those whom we find most difficult and most awkward and most frustrating, those to whom we would most like to give a four-penny-one and the chops.

[26 : 40] Do you see how the logic of the passage runs? So let me ask this. Is there someone who is being an absolute perfect pain to you at the moment?

Somebody at work. Perhaps a neighbour. Perhaps even a relative. Paul's word to you is this. Remember what God has done for a verse 3 type of person like you.

And then follow his example. As he has been to you, so you must be to this person who is causing you such trouble and heartache.

Well let me, as we head towards the coffee cups, let me try and express what we're learning from Titus in the form of two principles about Christian behaviour. First, Christian behaviour, or practising the Christian ethic, is always a reflection of the Gospel.

The Gospel, the good news, tells us that God has acted towards us in sheer grace and mercy and love. We have not deserved any of it. We who have rejected God have been rescued by God.

[27 : 58] We who deserve eternal death have been given eternal life. To us who were helpless, hopeless, dying, floundering, malicious, envious, adulterous, greedy, untruthful, lawless, hateful and morally ruined, God has granted forgiveness, new birth, purpose, joy, peace, love and the rock-solid promise of inheriting eternal life.

And our behaviour towards others is a reflection of God's behaviour towards us. And this fact is such an incentive to us to live in a godly way.

If God were only some kind of a moral policeman who had given us only a stern, cold code of behaviour, a bit like the school rules in a Charles Dickens novel, you know the kind of thing, fierce and harsh.

If God's ethics were like that, the only people who could ever keep them would be the most po-faced, grim, legalistic people you could imagine. People who never smiled.

People who never enjoyed a Belgian chocolate. But Christian behaviour is lovely, attractive behaviour because it reflects the character of God and of the Lord Jesus who is so utterly lovely and attractive himself.

[29 : 24] And this is where the incentive lies. As we think often of the truths laid out for us in verses 3 to 7, of our sin and hatefulness and of how God has responded to it, not as we deserved, but in terms of mercy and grace and loving kindness, as we think of all that, our hearts are revived and refreshed.

And we think of our glorious status as heirs of eternal life. We think of the mind-boggling fact that we're not only forgiven and justified, but are born again, regenerated, recreated by God's Spirit who takes up residence in our very minds and personalities.

And we say, yes, of course, this is the way to live. As he has been merciful to me, so I must now be gentle to the ungentle and courteous to the discourteous.

So Christian behaviour always reflects the Gospel. And then secondly, Christian behaviour also adorns the Gospel. Just look back to chapter 2, verse 10.

So that in everything, they, that's slaves, they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour. Paul is writing about the behaviour appropriate to slaves who have become Christians, how they should now be submissive to their masters and well-pleasing and so on.

[30 : 46] But it's that final phrase I want us to notice. Christian behaviour adorns the doctrine, adorns the Gospel. Just to give an example from today's world.

The situation can happen where a person who's not a Christian almost tumbles into a church. There could be somebody here like that this evening.

The person's been walking up and down the street, dreaming of fish and chips and football and his girlfriend. And somebody says to him, out of the blue, why did you come into our church? The service is just about to start. It'll only take an hour or so and there's a nice cup of coffee at the end.

And impulsively, this man or this woman says, OK, I'll do it, I'll come in. And he sits there, perhaps towards the back of the building, feeling a bit nervous, but interested.

He observes the phenomenon of the Christian church in prayer and praise. He tries to join in with the hymns. He listens carefully to the prayers and the sermon. And after the service, as he chats to one or two people over the coffee cups, he thinks to himself, these people are, they're not speaking badly about other people.

[31 : 56] And how gentle they are towards a stranger like me. How delightfully courteous. Their behavior speaks well of the doctrines that they teach.

Isn't that exactly what Jonathan was saying to us earlier? That as he does his work in the lawyer's office, day by day, how does he bear witness? The people look at him and his behavior, as well as what he says.

Now that's how it ought to be. So in Paul's thinking, our behavior is an adornment. It's a lovely word that, our behavior is an adornment to the gospel. So just as a tiara adorns the queen's head, so Christian behavior adorns what the Bible teaches about God our Savior.

Christian behavior displays the beauty of the gospel to the onlooking world, who are very interested. Christian behavior commends the gospel to the world. It stirs the world to ask serious questions about the gospel.

Their behavior is so lovely, says the non-Christian. Now why should that be? I must look into it. You might put it like this, that Christian behavior makes an indispensable contribution to our evangelism.

[33 : 10] When we behave in the way taught in Paul's letter to Titus, our behavior will not on its own, will not on its own explain what God has done when he sent Jesus into the world for us.

There needs to be words as well. There is an irreducible word content to the gospel. Our evangelism centers upon explanation in words of the birth and life and death and resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

No one can understand the gospel without understanding who Jesus is and why he came. But our behavior then adorns the doctrine of God our Savior.

Our behavior adorns the verbal explanation of the gospel. Our evangelism explains that Jesus came to rescue lost sinners, to give them the new birth and to transform their lives.

And our behavior then demonstrates his transforming power and massively aids the credibility of the gospel. Let me quote a few sentences written by a Christian woman named Ann Taylor.

[34 : 21] Ann Taylor is the leader of one of the Girls Crusader Union camps. And this particular camp took place in Devonshire last week. One of my girls was on it and that's how I know of this. But this is part of a letter sent by Ann Taylor, the leader, to people who were praying for the camp.

She says, It is over 40 years now since I went to my first Christian camp. I had never doubted that God existed. But right from the first night at camp I recognized that the leaders were different from anyone I'd met before.

They didn't just believe in God. They knew him personally. Very striking, don't you think? The leaders were different from anyone I'd met before.

So what that girl, now woman, or girl as she was then, what she saw 40 years ago was behavior that befits the gospel. So let's allow this short but great letter to get into our bloodstream.

If our zeal for good works, to use one of Paul's phrases here, if our zeal for good works, if our desire to live out the implications of the gospel has grown dull and dry, this letter should stimulate us, indeed rebuke us.

[35 : 38] If we've lost sight of the beauty and power of a transformed life, let's allow this letter to bring that desire to life again. Paul is our teacher as well as Titus' teacher and he won't allow us to forget the importance of godly behavior.

With all the authority of an apostle of Christ, he insists upon it. as he says to Titus in chapter 2, verse 15, Declare these things.

Exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you. Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray.