

# Titus: Grace Dawning From on High

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

## Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we believe, help our unbelief. Amen.

### Scripture: Titus 2:11-3:7 (NRSV)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

...

## SERMON – Titus: Grace Dawning From on High

The tender mercy of Christ was revealed to me this week in a “chance” encounter.

As I was about to go into a store, a disheveled young man approached me, “Sir, can you help me with some food?”

*“What? This isn’t why I’m here,”* I thought to myself.

Focused on my task, I touched my pockets and said I had no spare change. He said, “God bless you and have a good day” and walked away.

As I started opening the door, I stopped in my tracks.

*“Wait a minute John!”* I forgot what I’m always supposed to remember as a Christian. I had just blown off Jesus.

Right before me, *Jesus* was hungry and he was personally asking me for food. I went back outside.

*“Excuse me! Jesus! Come back! Could I get you a sandwich?”*

*“Yes, please, that would be great,”* said *Jesus*.

*“Jesus, stay right here. Don’t leave. I’ll be right back.”*

*“OK, I’ll wait.”*

I came back from Honey Baked Ham a few doors down and Jesus was still there. I had the privilege and joy of giving Jesus a chicken salad sandwich and two Dasani water bottles. Jesus broke bread with me on the sidewalk and we talked for a little bit.

I got to meet Jesus on a Tuesday morning in Tucson—

*and I almost missed out.* Lord, give us eyes to see Jesus.

Grace. Grace is the key to understanding Paul’s letters. Grace is the key to understanding God. Grace is the key that unlocks the door to the abundant life Jesus freely offers. We’ve all been given the key. All we have to do is unlock the door.

Paul says the Son of God is like the sudden breaking in of the dawn’s early light. God is so good, he shined the grace of his salvation upon the whole human race, lighting our darkness. This grace, this dawning from on high, is revealed to us here below in the birth, life, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus—the Son of God.

The word *goodness* used to describe God our Savior in the Greek language is *philanthropia*, a beautiful word for kindness towards those in distress. It's where we get the English word *philanthropy*.

God is not a stingy God. God is generous and lavish in his philanthropic love for us. He holds nothing back. This is grace.

Grace is unearned and undeserved favor.  
Grace isn't a reward.  
Grace isn't something owed to us for hard work.  
Grace isn't a pat on the back or a gold star for a job well done.  
We aren't entitled to grace.  
Grace is a gift from beginning to end, and everything in between.

The Scriptures teach to be human is to be sullied and disheveled by sin. We all need a good spiritual scrubbing by the Holy Spirit. Our forgiving God gives us a divine baptismal bath: Washing us clean. Giving us a clean start, a new birth and a new life. You are a new creation in Christ Jesus!

God's loving-kindness has made us a loving and kind people. The work that God did in Jesus Christ, he wants to continue doing in *us*. So that Christ is formed in us.

In our passage, Paul personifies grace. Grace is a personal instructor for us. Grace teaches and trains us to GIVE UP ungodly living and to TAKE ON a godly life in an often ungodly and unkind world.

*"Man, Woman,"* St. Augustine once preached, *"look away from your sin and look to God."*

Notice that the kindness and goodness of God is NOT the *niceness* of God. God is not nice. That's not in the Scriptures. God is *kind*—but definitely not nice. We're not to be nice either, Immanuel.

The word "nice" originally meant in English "foolish or stupid." To please others, nice refrains from speaking honestly. Nice pretends all is well, when it isn't. Nice enables bad behavior because its afraid of confrontation. Nice gets walked on.

*Kind* is different from *nice* because kindness is both tender AND tough. Kind is forthright—it respects the other by speaking the truth in love. Kind has self-respect also. It's an act of kindness to share the difficult things, rather than pretend they don't exist. That's what God does for us and what we're to do for one another.

Immanuel, don't be nice. *Be kind* to your family and friends.

Be kind to yourself.  
Be kind to strangers.  
Be kind to your enemies.  
Not nice or naive, but *kind*.

By God's grace we've been put right with God. We can be right with others. By grace we're now empowered to live a two-part spirituality, a spirituality that's like the two sides of the same coin. Isaiah puts our two-fold spirituality this way:

"Cease to do evil, learn to do good."

The first part of our two-fold spirituality is called *Via Negativa*, or in English, the negative way of theology. Cease to do evil. *Via Negativa* describes something *by what it isn't*. It's the spirituality of subtraction. Renounce. Refrain. Avoid. Give up evil. *Via Negativa* is the negative side of goodness. It's about what you *don't do*—it's a subtractive spirituality.

The second part of our two-fold spirituality is *Via Positiva*, or in English the positive way of spiritual growth. Learn to do good. This is the spirituality of addition—Instead of merely not-doing, *Via Positiva* extends to others the grace we've received from God.

Paul tells us this regular practice of *Via Negativa* and *Via Positiva*, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, shapes three elements of Christian character in us.

First, SELF-MASTERY.

Some translations say prudence, others describe it as living temperate or sober lives. Self-mastery is emotional, relational, and spiritual intelligence. This aspect of character means that we live Spirit-controlled and Spirit-led lives. We're measured and steady—not impulsive. We die to our egos and invite Christ to live through us.

Second, Paul says that the Christian is JUST.

God has made us right with him—he's justified us. We can now live just lives—where we give back to God and give back to our neighbor their due—which is the ongoing debt of love and the honest to God tenderness and toughness of kindness.

Third, Paul says that we're to be DEVOUT or REVERENT.

This character trait isn't a stuffy piety. To be devout is where you're comfortable in your own skin, you're true to yourself and to God, because you regularly live life in God's company and presence. God rubs off on us. It's a Jesusy kind of life. To be devout is to be not perfect, but genuine and

authentic. Reverence isn't mere civility or just getting along—it's a spirituality of respect in all our dealings, where we can respectfully disagree, while still being connected to each other.

Immanuel, may our church always be a safe place to disagree *and* agree. Where each of us can follow our conscience under the Lordship of Christ and Scripture. May we be a church that practices the spirituality of respect.

To be devout also means being a good citizen. Love your country. Sing patriotic songs. Wave the red, white, and blue. Obey the laws of the land. Immanuel, I'm proud to be an American and I love our country. Good Christian citizens also pray for our leaders—whether we're crazy in love with them or if they drive us crazy. Either way we pray for our leaders.

But always obey your highest leader first—our Lord Jesus Christ, even if it puts you at odds with your earthly leaders or your party.

Speaking of odd, as Christians, we're a different kind of people—we don't fit into the world's mold. Paul says in our passage that we're a peculiar people, a special people who stand out.

The Greek word for *peculiar* or *special* is *periousios*, which means "reserved for, set aside for." The word was originally used for the spoils of war that were especially set aside for the king.

Through Christ, we're:

*the special,*  
*the peculiar,*  
*the highly treasured and*  
*the priceless possessions*  
of the King of kings.

We belong to God. We stick out from the world.

In the pastoral epistles, and especially Titus—we hear something over and over that should define us:

First, grace.  
Second, gratitude expressed in good works.

Paul says that good works add luster and adornment to the doctrine of God. Good works make our faith winsome and noble to the world. Over and over in this short book Paul says:

Be a model of good works.  
Be careful to be devoted to good works—Individually and as a church.  
Good works are beneficial to all.

Immanuel, we have an opportunity to carry out God's gracious call to good works, right now in our city. There's an urgent need in Tucson: the influx of government approved asylum seekers.

Immigration is a complex issue of balancing compassion with healthy boundaries. If it were easy, our country would have solved it long ago. We haven't yet. We have room for growth. Most countries are also struggling with this too. I'm very aware that this is a hot button issue.

But "that strange man on the cross" won't let me be silent.

It was Mr. Rogers who was fond of saying, "if it's mentionable, it's manageable." So here we are now, talking about this. I hope and pray our healthy conversations will continue in Sunday school rooms and at kitchen tables and in our prayer closets. You see, for us Christians, this isn't just merely political. It's a Jesus matter—of loving the least of these.

As we've been reading and watching in the news, there's been a spike in government-approved asylum seekers who are temporarily in Tucson fleeing violence from their home countries, particularly in South America.

These families only stay in Tucson for a few days. They're here to make travel arrangements to live with family and sponsors elsewhere in the country.

The Catholic monastery that was housing these guests is no longer available. And so right now there's literally no room in the inn. No place for our temporary guests to stay. This is a pressing need to help shelter these vulnerable folks. Everyone is swamped—including Border Patrol.

My pastor friends in our presbytery have been stepping up their involvement: St. Marks, St. Andrews, Southside, Trinity, Christ, and others have been stepping up in a big way. Liberals, conservatives, and moderates. They've asked Immanuel for help.

Immanuel, I'm not here to change your party or tell you what policies to have. That's not my job nor my calling. But *I am here* to call you to follow Jesus, and for us together to care for Jesus who is need right now.

You all have been doing so much—but in this moment, more is needed of us, at least in this season we find ourselves in. Little Christs, fellow sheep, we have a job before us, a task, a holy calling. Immanuel, let's help Jesus.

...

*"If you've done it unto the least of these my brothers and sisters, you've done it unto me," says Jesus.*

Let's not leave Jesus with a growling stomach.

Let's not leave Jesus shivering.

Let's not leave Jesus without a roof over his head.

Let's not leave Jesus lost, and alone.

Our leadership is discerning how we can increase our help, in a sustainable and realistic manner, fitting to our congregation. We'll have more opportunities in the future to process these things together.

To close, Paul gives two specific charges in the book of Titus. A charge to the pastor. And a charge to the congregation.

First, Paul's charge to Titus, to me:

Declare these things; exhort and approve,  
with all authority. Let no one disregard what you say.

And Paul's charge to the congregation, to Immanuel:

Let people learn to devote themselves to good works  
in order to meet urgent needs.

**Amen.**

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