

Exegesis of Titus 3:1-7

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Finished Translation of Titus 3:1-7

1 Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work,
2 to speak evil¹ of no one, to be peaceable, tolerant, showing all humility to all people.²
3 For even we ourselves were at one time foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts
and pleasures, spending our lives in wickedness and envy, being detestable,³ hating one another.
4 But when the kindness and love for humankind⁴ of our savior God appeared,
5 he saved us⁵, not by works of righteousness which we ourselves⁶ have done, but according to
his own⁷ mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewing⁸ of the Holy Spirit,
6 whom he abundantly poured out upon us through Jesus Christ our savior,
7 in order that, having been justified⁹ by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope
of eternal life.

¹ The Greek word here is βλασφημεῖν ('blaspheme'), which primarily means 'to demean through speech'. The English word 'blaspheme' would more properly be used only when this Greek word is in the context of 'reviling transcendent entities or authorities'.

² The Greek word ἀνθρώπους ('men') is here translated 'people' in order to conform to more gender inclusive language. The author of this letter did not intend for the readers to 'show humility' only to 'male humans', but meant all categories of human beings.

³ Although many modern Bible versions translate this word as 'hated', the Greek word στυγητοί is a completely different word than the one following it (μισοῦντες), which more appropriately means 'hated' and is commonly translated that way. The word 'detestable' is used here in its true sense, ('to feel abhorrence for' or 'hate'), and helps the English reader to distinguish it from the following word.

⁴ Many modern Bible versions merely translate this word as 'love'. However, the Greek word φιλανθρωπία is not the normal word for love. It is only used here and in Acts 28:2 and clearly means love and kindness shown to humans.

⁵ In the Greek text, the phrase 'he saved us' is positioned after the phrase 'according to his mercy'. However, the two phrases 'not by works' and 'according to his mercy' are in very close proximity to the verb 'appeared'. When left in that order in English, it is possible to misinterpret the phrases as modifying the verb 'appeared' rather than modifying the verb 'saved', as they properly do.

⁶ Although the Greek does not specifically include the word 'ourselves', the mere inclusion of the redundant word ἡμεῖς ('we') is emphatic; its position at the end of the relative clause also helps to bring out this emphasis. The English word 'ourselves' best shows the contrast being made in the Greek between 'our works of righteousness' and 'God's own mercy' (see note below).

⁷ The word ('his') is in an emphatic position in the Greek (as a genitive coming before the noun that it modifies and being in the attributive position). The inclusion of the English word 'own' helps to show this and also helps to highlight the emphasis being made between 'God's own mercy' and 'our works of righteousness' (above).

⁸ In Greek, the words λουτροῦ ('washing'), παλιγγενεσίας ('regeneration'), ἀνακαινώσεως ('renewing'), and πνεύματος ἁγίου ('Holy Spirit') are all genitives following the word διὰ ('through'). A number of Western manuscripts, including many Latin manuscripts, repeat the word διὰ ('through') and insert it before the word πνεύματος ('spirit'). This is an attempt to clarify a difficult construction and interprets the phrase διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου ('through the Holy Spirit') as parallel and exegetical to διὰ λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας καὶ ἀνακαινώσεως ('through the washing of regeneration and renewing'). The omission of the second διὰ ('through') is preferred since it is the shorter and more difficult reading and because the majority of the best Pauline manuscripts support it. Although the inclusion of this word would cause a difference in translation and possibly in emphasis, the overall meaning of the passage would not be changed significantly.

Historical Situation and Literary Context

The New Testament Epistle to Titus was written by the Apostle Paul (1:1) to one of his ‘true sons’ in the faith, his co-worker Titus (1:4). Although Acts 27 records Paul stopping on the island of Crete as he was being taken to Rome, it is presumed that he and Titus later journeyed to the island and spent some time preaching the gospel there. This could have been after Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome, recorded in Acts 28. Paul had left the island, after presumably founding the church there, but instructed Titus to remain behind in order to complete some unfinished business and to appoint elders in the newly formed churches (1:5).

Titus was one of Paul’s most trusted fellow-workers¹⁰. He was a gentile Christian and also mentioned as one of Paul’s traveling companions along with Barnabas.¹¹ Titus was even entrusted to act as Paul’s representative to the Corinthian believers at a time when the Corinthian church was struggling with some serious problems (such as division, fornication, and improper use of spiritual gifts) and was being tempted to question Paul’s authority. Titus took on Paul’s own care for the Corinthian believers and was received by them as Paul’s true representative.¹² “Titus figures prominently as Paul’s strong right arm in his relationship with the Corinthian community after his founding visit there, as is attested by 2 Corinthians.”¹³ As such a trusted worker, Titus was left on Crete to finish the work there after Paul journeyed on.

The island of Crete is the largest in the Aegean Sea and one of the principal islands in the Mediterranean. It seemed to have quite a large, organized civilization present from an early stage of Greek history. In their early history they were quite a sea power and their ports provided

⁹ In Greek this is a causal participle (δικαιωθέντες) and might instead be translated ‘because we have been justified’. However, since a participle can have other nuances and the author did not specifically include a causal conjunction, the translation is left with the ambiguity of an English participle.

¹⁰ 2 Cor 8:23.

¹¹ Gal 2:1,3.

¹² Cf. 2 Cor 8:17 and 7:13-15.

¹³ David Noel Freedman, ed. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Titus” (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:581.

refuge for sailing vessels even through the New Testament period.¹⁴ The Cretan poet, Epimenides (ca. 600 B.C.) described all Cretans as “liars, vicious brutes, [and] lazy gluttons”¹⁵ (quoted in both Titus 1:12 and Acts 17:28). “This description is recorded in several ancient sources, e.g., Livy *Epit. Per.* 44:45; Callimachus *Jov.* 8; and Plutarch *Aem* 23.”¹⁶ Apparently the Cretans tended to be pleasure loving and formed somewhat of a base society.

In the second century B.C., a formidable Jewish contingency appeared on the island of Crete. When the Greeks there began to oppress the Jews, they appealed to Rome for protection (141 B.C.). The Romans previously had “found the Jews among their most devoted supporters in their subject states”¹⁷ and thus considered them as loyal subjects. From that time on the Jews flourished on Crete and are even mentioned among those in Jerusalem at Pentecost in Acts 2:11. Rome eventually made war with Crete and the island was ultimately annexed as a Roman colony in 67 B.C.

When Paul left Titus on the island of Crete in order to direct the ministry there, one of his jobs was to counteract the Judaizers who were speaking evil and leading people away from the Christian faith. These Jews apparently formed quite a large force and Paul referred to them as “many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision” (1:10). It appears that even these religious Jews had taken on the disposition that Epimenides had described of all Cretans, since it is in the context of these Judaizers that Paul quotes this saying.¹⁸

It seems that Paul’s purpose in writing this letter to Titus was due to a number of circumstances. First of all, he reaffirms the reason that he had left Titus in Crete initially, which

¹⁴ Cf. Acts 27:7-12.

¹⁵ Titus 1:12. Unless otherwise noted, the scripture verses contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

¹⁶ David Noel Freedman, s.v. “Crete”, 1:1206.

¹⁷ James Orr, ed. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. s.v. “Crete”, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972).

¹⁸ Titus 1:12.

was to appoint elders in the newly formed churches (1:5). He takes this opportunity to remind Titus of the proper qualification for these elders (1:6-9). He then warns Titus about counteracting the deceptive speaking taking place by the Judaizers (1:10-14). After further exhortation and instruction, Paul finally informs Titus that he will be sending some other workers to take his place on Crete, and asks Titus to join him for the winter at Nicopolis (3:12).

The Meaning of Titus 3:1-7

How the Passage Fits In to the Book of Titus

Understanding the themes of Titus will help to enlighten how the passage in 3:1-7 fits into Paul's overall instructions and the arguments he is making. Firstly, Paul highlights the errors of false teachers (mainly the Judaizers) and the church leaders' proper response to them. He then explains the strict qualifications for church leaders in light of this opposition. Next he gives detailed regulations for the conduct of believers. Finally, he gives a strong Christological basis for the saving work God has done and our hope of eternal life with him.

Besides these overall themes, a couple other important topics related to the behavior of believers keep showing up throughout the structure of this book. First of all, Paul emphasizes the importance of a person's speech, and contrasts proper speaking (cf. 1:3,9,13; 2:1,8,15; 3:1-2) with divisive and damaging talk (cf. 1:10-12,16; 2:3-4,9; 3:9-10). Paul also writes a great deal about the significance of Christians living a proper life. This proper life manifests the reality of the gospel message they have heard and is profitable as a testimony to non-believers. Along these lines, Paul mentions 'good works' six times in this short letter (1:16; 2:7,14; 3:1,8,14).

Before looking at the details of Titus 3:1-7, it is first important to consider its place in the overall context and outline of this letter to Titus. The main structure of Paul's letter to Titus is fairly typical of Pauline style. He starts with a short greeting, but without the normal thanksgiving section that he usually includes in letters written to churches, he launches right into

the purpose for his writing. This is the same format as is his first letter to Timothy, which was probably also written about the same time in Paul's ministry.

Paul first reminds Titus that he was left in Crete in order to appoint elders in the newly established churches there. He describes in detail that kind of person who is qualified to be an elder, including both moral qualities and godly lifestyle (1:5-9). Paul then contrasts the godly character of church leaders with the rebellious nature of the Jews on Crete who were deceiving whole households and leading them astray from the Christian faith (1:10-16).

In contrast to the way in which these Judaizers live, Paul then explains how Titus should instruct each member of the household how to live in a way that exemplifies the proper, godly teaching that they have received (2:1). He gives instructions to older men, older women, younger men, younger women, and slaves. The point of these instructions on godly living is "so that the word of God may not be discredited" (2:5) but rather "that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior" (2:10).

Coming to the exegetical passage for this paper (3:1-7), Paul's exhortation now turns from instructions to each member of the family for godly living, to instructions for all Christians in general. He starts off talking about how Christians should submit to government authorities and then continues to explain how Christians should treat all humans with kindness and respect. The reason he gives for us doing good to others is that we ourselves were once in the very state of deception and bondage that they were in. It was only God's kindness and mercy that saved us from that condition. Therefore, our godly living and kind deeds to non-Christians will verify the worth of the teaching we have received and will profit others by bringing them to faith in Christ.

It is only a divisive person that will continue to be involved in foolish controversies and arguments about the Jewish law. After briefly explaining how to handle such a divisive person

(3:9-11), Paul ends the letter as he normally does with some practical details about the others working with Paul and Titus, one last exhortation, and a final greeting to those with Titus (3:12-15).

Detailed Development of the Argument in Titus 3:1-7

Paul starts this passage with the word ‘remind them’ (3:1). This implies first of all that Paul (or other co-workers with him) have already talked about these matters to the people in Crete. It also indicates that Paul is giving these instructions to believers there and not to non-Christians who have not heard this message yet.

The main point of this passage is found in verses 1-2 where Paul instructs Titus to remind the believers about the proper kind of godly living. The rest of the section gives the reason and foundation for why such a living is proper and how such a living is possible. Paul argues that such a godly living is only appropriate based upon our own previously deceived condition as unbelievers and the kindness that God showed to us in saving us and giving us eternal life.

The first item that Titus should remind the believers is that they are to be properly subject to civil authorities and rulers (3:1). Throughout the book, a submissive attitude toward rulers is contrasted with Judaizers and non-Christians who are ‘rebellious’ and ‘insubordinate’ (cf. 1:6,9; 2:5,9). The Cretans may have had the tendency to despise the Roman government since they had been annexed as a part of the Roman Empire in a hostile fashion only a century earlier.

Not only should believers have proper respect for governmental authority, they also should treat their neighbors and all people (especially non-believers) with proper respect and kindness (3:2). Paul mentions here two themes he has talked about throughout this letter: believers should be prepared and ready to show good works to others, and they should speak properly about others, not speaking evil about other people.

At this point, Paul changes in his writing to the first person plural, referring to an inclusive 'we', both author and audience. (This language is adopted in following his argument.) He starts verse 3 with a causal conjunction ('γάρ', 'for'), thus intending to show the reason why Christians should be obedient to the government and kind to all people. The last thing he mentions before this sentence is our humility as Christians; he now explains the reason that this should be our attitude toward others. At one time we also were unbelievers and lived lives just like they are now. The kind of words Paul uses here do not attempt to belittle and condemn us for being unbelievers at one time. On the contrary, they operate to show us that our actions and lifestyle was unintentional. We, like they, were deceived, led astray. We, like they, were in bondage with no way of escape. Not only personally were we slaves to our lusts and were merely living for our own pleasure, the relationships that we had with other people were ones of hate. We were lost, foolish, in bondage to our own appetites, hated by others, and hated those around us. This reflection on our own prior condition is meant to make it easier to be kind to others who are still in this dreadful situation.

How did we change this situation? Do we have the right to be proud about our efforts to set ourselves free from bondage and change our relationships with others? Absolutely not. In response to our despicable situation, God's kindness and love appeared and he instigated the action to save us (v. 4-5). Here the emphasis is on God's love, kindness, and mercy along with his initiation to save us. This section further explains why we have no ground to be proud of our current condition and why we should do good works for others. The believers are being asked to live out to non-believers the very attitude of kindness that God showed for us when we were in that condition.

Furthermore, Paul explicitly says that our salvation was not by means of any works that we did (v. 5a). On the one hand, negatively, this was something that we could not accomplish by good works. Although we are to perform good works, these works do not operate so save us from our sinful condition. On the other hand, it was positively a work that God took on to save us from our wretched condition.

The means he used to save us was by regeneration, which washed us from the past. Not only were we cleansed from our past by regeneration, but God also made us new by the Holy Spirit (v. 5b). Being made new and having the Holy Spirit poured out upon us in an abundant manner (v. 6), we have thus been amply supplied and empowered to live godly lives, being subject to the government and doing kind deeds for others. Because of God's work of justifying us, the ultimate outcome of God's work of salvation was to make us heirs of eternal life (v. 7). We are now living with this glorious hope. So ultimately his merciful work over our lives affects both our lifestyle and our destiny.

Verse 8 then makes the statement, "Faithful is the word." Although this is technically not a part of the passage being considered in this paper, it probably should be considered as the phrase that ends this section. Paul uses this same phrase five times¹⁹ in the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus). In each case it either begins or ends some sort of formulaic saying that seems to have been a common saying among the Christians. The credal formula here most likely is made up of verses 4-7 and was probably repeated in the early church as a way of recalling God's saving work (v. 4-5) through Jesus Christ (v. 6) by means of the Holy Spirit (v.5). Even though part of this section seems to be a traditional Christian formula, its language is precisely the same teaching, and even the same wording, commonly used by the Apostle Paul.

¹⁹ 1 Tim 1:15; 2:9; 4:9-10; 2 Tim 2:11-13; Titus 3:8.

The Theology of Titus 3:1-7

The theology in this passage is very similar to Paul's theology throughout the New Testament. In talking about our salvation, he mentions God's kindness and grace, our justification through Christ, and the operation of the Holy Spirit. However, there are a few differing points that provide insights that may not appear so clearly in other passages and some of the items that are left out of this passage speak almost as loudly as what is included.

Although Paul surely argues very clearly in Titus 3:3 that we were sinners, in describing our condition he does not mention the word 'sin' or any of its derivatives. It is also interesting that he does not mention our sinful life as one that is breaking any commandments or the Law of the Old Testament. He instead describes our sinful condition as living ignorant and foolish, miserable, hating, and being in bondage to our own passions. This is not altogether uncommon when Paul is cataloging wicked deeds, but he often speaks of salvation couched in terms of sin and the Law.²⁰

It is also worth noting that in this passage, and indeed throughout this letter, Paul puts an emphasis on doing good works. Although Paul does speak about doing good works elsewhere in his writings,²¹ it seems that his emphasis elsewhere is so much on the matter of grace that one may miss the balance he gives on letting grace be manifested as good works. The use of this phrase "good works" in this book helps to explicitly clarify Paul's view of grace and works. The phrase is not mentioned in the context of our justification or salvation. In fact the only other time in this book that 'works' are mentioned outside of doing 'good works' is where Paul specifically says that it is 'not by our righteous works' that we are saved (3:5). The 'good works' are meant

²⁰ Cf. Rom 3:21-14; 5:12-15; 8:1-4; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 2:16-21; 3:21-22; Eph 2:1-5.

²¹ Cf. Rom 2:7; 13:3; 2 Cor 9:8; Eph 2:10; Col 1:10; 2 Thess 2:17; 1 Tim 2:10; 5:10; 6:18; 2 Tim 2:21; 3:17.

to be profitable (v.8) to people who see our works and they give credence to the gospel message we have believed and testify to God's saving power.

In describing the means of the salvation God has provided for us, Paul here seems to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit more than in many salvation passages. He speaks of the 'renewing of the Holy Spirit' (3:5) and then mentions that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us richly (3:6). Even though he does mention our justification, he does not mention the 'cross' of Christ or the 'blood' of Christ as he often does. For whatever reason he did this, it has the effect of leaving the emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the means by which God's salvation through Christ is made affective in a believer's life. Paul often talks about the Holy Spirit in terms of the one by whom we are sanctified (Rom 15:16), or by whom we were 'sealed' (Eph 1:13; 4:30), or living by his power or authority (Rom 15:13; 2 Tim 1:14; 1 Thess 1:5; 4:8). Here the Holy Spirit's role in salvation is highlighted.

Furthermore, he uses two unique phrases: the 'washing of regeneration' and 'renewing of the Holy Spirit' (3:5). Paul has only one other time used the word 'washing' (in Ephesians 5:26 referring to the 'washing of water by the word') and this is his only use of the word 'regeneration'. Some have wondered if this phrase in Titus 3:5 refers to baptism. That seems highly unlikely, but rather it points to the fact that regeneration brings about a cleansing of our entire being from our old manner of life. Furthermore, Paul only uses the word 'renewing' one other time (in Romans 12:2, "be transformed by the renewing of your minds"). Renewing refers to an ongoing work and is here prescribed as a work of the Holy Spirit. These two phrases help to emphasize and clarify Paul's theology regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in regard to salvation.

So, although this passage is ‘Pauline’ in terminology, it does illumine Paul’s theology in a number of ways. It emphasizes that a believer’s knowledge of their past life of sin should help enable them to live in a kind and understanding way toward unbelievers, knowing that they too were unbelievers before God’s kindness saved them. But it also shows that Paul is not bound to use the term ‘sin’ when referring to a person’s wretched condition before they experience God’s salvation; instead he may just explain the kind of dreadful situation to which they are in bondage. This passage sheds light on understanding Paul’s view of the importance of the Holy Spirit in applying God’s salvation. Ultimately it helps to make crystal clear Paul’s doctrine regarding good works. Good works are not the means of salvation, they are a testimony to God’s saving work and they are to cause unbelievers to want to hear the truth of the Gospel, which they see being lived out in Christians. It seems that Paul was saying the same thing that James was when he said, “faith without works is dead”.²²

²² James 2:26.

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