

“Grace has appeared” Titus 2:11-15

Tim Anderson 25/12/2020

You better watch out,
You better not cry,
You better not pout,
I’m telling you why.
Santa Claus is coming to town.
He’s making a list.
He’s checking it twice.
He’s gonna find out
Who’s naughty or nice.
Santa Claus is coming to town.
He knows when you’ve been sleeping.
He knows when you’re awake.
He knows if you’ve been bad or good.
So be good for goodness sake.

You better watch out.
You better be good.
Or Santa won’t bring you any presents.

That is my most hated Christmas song.
There’s just so much to hate about it.
For starters, it uses the word gonna –
He’s gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.
That grates.
For seconds, it’s about Santa –
Who is absolutely my most un favourite person at Christmas time.
You see, I think he takes glory away from the Lord Jesus.
People can only be paying homage to one person at a time.
Jesus said, ‘No one can serve two masters’.

If they are paying homage to Santa,
They can't be paying homage to Jesus.
We teach kids to pay homage to Santa.
That means we steal from kids the opportunity to reverence Jesus.
And don't bother telling me
about how Santa was derived historically from St Nicholas.
I know that.

But the way Santa functions today
has absolutely nothing to do with St Nicholas.
St Nicholas would turn in his grave
if he could see what Santa has become in our community.
But my dislike of 'gonna' and my dislike of Santa
are tiny compared to what comes next.
'Santa Claus is coming to town'
turns Christmas away from grace to moralism.

What is moralism?
Moralism is the idea
that we can earn favour with God by doing good stuff.
You better be good or Santa won't bring you any presents.
Your goodness is what makes Christmas possible for you.
Is that true?
No it's a lie.

Christmas makes possible your goodness.
Your goodness does not make Christmas possible for you.
Christmas makes possible your goodness.
Let's look at how Paul puts it when writing to Titus.
"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men."
That's Christmas.
It's about God's grace.
Christmas is all about God's grace.
"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men."

How did the grace of God that brings salvation appear?
It appeared in the form of a baby born to Mary in Bethlehem.
Jesus is the grace of God that has appeared.
Now were God's people being naughty or nice
when the grace of God appeared?
They were being naughty, weren't they?
Their King, Herod was a thoroughly nasty chap.
Their religious leaders were hypocrites.
And apart from a couple of people like Simeon and Anna,
the nation had almost given up watching and waiting
for the grace of God to appear.
They were naughty.
But the grace of God in the person of Jesus appeared anyway.
What does the grace of God that has appeared do?
It teaches us to say, "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions,
And to live self controlled, upright and godly lives.
To debase the message somewhat,
It teaches us not to be naughty but to be nice.
God gives us his grace first.
We get the Christmas present first.
And our response of gratitude is to live to please him.
Rightly responding to Christmas makes us good.
Being good does not earn us Christmas.
God's saving grace in verse 11 becomes God's teaching grace in verse 12.
The grace of God that brings salvation in verse 11
becomes the grace of God that teaches us to say No in verse 12.
It's immensely important to get these two in the right order.
If we tell people directly or imply by actions
That the blessings of God's grace are not for the naughty,
They are only for the nice,
Then we will be keeping people away from Jesus.
Jesus himself said,

“It’s not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.
I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”
The message of Christmas is that grace has appeared.
Grace has appeared to people who were not looking for it.
Grace has appeared to people who did not deserve it.
So let’s make Christmas about grace not moralism.

God’s saving grace that appeared at Christmas is meant to teach us.
So what is Christmas meant to teach us?

It’s meant to teach us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions.

It’s meant to teach us to say ‘Yes’
to self controlled, upright and godly lives.

Ungodliness and worldly passions are descriptors
that are somewhat removed from 21st Century Australia.

I don’t think we can blame our Bible translators for that.

Sometimes words become archaic
and need to be replaced with more up to date language.

But in this case

it’s not that the words have been replaced with newer words.

It’s that the concept itself has been dying out in our culture.

Where people have given up on God,

They are not likely to worry about being godly anymore.

Where people are not focused on God’s kingdom,

They are not likely to be concerned about being worldly.

But we have not given up on God and we are focused on his kingdom.

We need to be taught to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions.

So what are they?

Our passions are our desires.

The things we feel urges to satisfy.

And worldly passions are the desires we have for the things of this world.

Our desire to eat so much that we feel bloated.

Our desire to have so much stuff we don’t know what to do with it all.

Our desire for experiences that excite our senses –
Whether that is skydiving from an aeroplane or lying down at a day spa.
Our desire for power that enables us to control others.
According to Paul, Christmas teaches us to fight worldly passions.
Now I don't know about you,
But there is something of an irony there for me.
Because when I look at Christmas as we practice it,
It would seem to be about indulging worldly passions.
Christmas is the time when too much food is not enough.
Christmas is the time when there are so many presents that our children
can't remember them all.
Christmas is a festival to the great god consumerism –
Which is just a giant invitation to indulge worldly passions.
I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say
That if Christmas is meant to teach us
to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions
And to live self controlled, upright and godly lives,
Then we've actually missed the point of Christmas.

Don't conclude that Paul is discouraging Titus from celebration.
Celebration is a good thing.
If the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared,
Then it's a wonderful reason to celebrate.
Spend some time with the people you love.
Joy and laughter,
Love and friendship,
These are things that God wants for us.
But somehow we have to sever the connection
between celebration and self indulgence.
Personally,
I find that when I give in to ungodliness and worldly passions,
That doesn't help me celebrate God's love for me in Jesus.

Now I don't want to trivialise ungodliness and worldly passion,
But over eating is topical today if not of primary importance.
So let's consider over eating for a minute.

Now this has never happened.

But suppose I celebrate Christmas lunch by eating moderate quantities of
the lovely food on offer.

What will happen?

I'll enjoy the food and praise God for his provision.

And after lunch I might have the energy to play with my children
And celebrate God's goodness to me in giving me a loving family.

I might even be able to have some good conversations with my children
about why Christmas is special.

Suppose on the other hand this is a normal year

And I fall into the temptation of indulging worldly passions.

Suppose I over eat.

What will happen?

By the end of lunch,

The beautiful food won't taste good anymore.

Have you ever noticed that?

It's your body's way of telling you it's had enough.

When you've eaten too much, delicacies stop being delicious.

I'll be feeling bloated,

So I won't feel like praising God for anything.

I'll probably get up from the lunch table

And mumble something about needing a sleep

because I was up so late last night running a midnight church service.

But it won't actually be the midnight church service that is to blame,

It will be the lack of self control.

The service will just be a scapegoat.

I won't have the energy to play with my children,

And more than likely

I'll get grumpy about some minor problem with their behaviour.

You see,
Indulging worldly passions doesn't help you celebrate.
It actually destroys a joyous celebration.
And I've been able to illustrate that without even mentioning alcohol.
Imagine how many Christmas parties today
will be less of a real celebration than they could be.
This is a problem,
We need to change how we celebrate.

But if you want to change how you celebrate –
Because let's be honest with ourselves,
We can't change anyone else,
We can only change ourselves –
If you want to change how you celebrate,
Moralism is not going to help much.
I can stand here and tell you that if you over eat you'll feel bloated.
But you already knew that
because it happened to you last year and the year before that.
Every Christmas lunch you probably tell yourself
you will be more self controlled next year.
Or is it only me?
If you want to change,
You actually need grace.
God's teaching grace.
“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all.
It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions
And to live self controlled, upright and godly lives.”
In 1947 Thomas Chalmers wrote,
“It is very seldom that any of our worldly passions are made to disappear
by a mere process of natural extinction.
At least, it is very seldom that this is done
through the instrumentality of reasoning

or by the mere force of mental determination.

The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of new one.

When admitted into the number of God's children,
Through faith in Jesus Christ,

Then the heart,

Brought under the mastery of one great and predominant affection is delivered from the tyranny of its former desires.

This is the only way in which deliverance is possible.”

In case Chalmers' language was too academic or old fashioned the gist of it this:

The only way to get rid of worldly passions is to replace them with other passions.

They won't die of old age.

You can't displace them by force of will.

Or hearts need something to attach themselves to.

And so that is where Christmas,

Despite all the appearances to the contrary,

Should be able to teach us self control and godliness.

If we focus our affections on the Lord Jesus.

If we fasten our hopes on his coming for a second time,

Then these passions can displace worldly passions.

That is why the apostle continues, after his exhortation to live godly lives, with, “while we wait for the blessed hope –

The glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

He knew that only focusing our affections and longings on God's grace could possibly make us good.

We have to have something to look forward to.

If it's not the glorious hope of the return of the Lord Jesus,

Then it will be the somewhat pathetic hope

of making a pig of ourselves at Christmas dinner.

Or some other equally unworthy longing if you are not given to gluttony.
So the take home message is,
Focus your affections and your hopes where they ought to be –
On the grace of God which has appeared
And on the grace of God which will appear –
And the other unworthy loves and longings
will be displaced from your heart.
It might even help you to enjoy celebrating Christmas
more than you ever have before.
“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all.
It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions
And to live self controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,
While we wait for the blessed hope –
The glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

Have a very happy Christmas!