

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 8, 2011**

A TRUSTWORTHY SAYING

Titus 3:3-8

MOTHER'S DAY

In honor of Mother's Day, I have to tell you about this conversation overheard between two kids. One said to the other: "I'm really worried. My mom works all day, comes home to make us supper, and then she cleans the house and washes the clothes."

"What are you worried about?" asked the friend. "Sounds to me like you have it made."

"I know," said the first. "But what if she tries to escape?"

Moms, we salute you today. We know that even mothers who don't work outside the home still work all day, because being a mother is a full-time job. It involves making sacrifices on a daily basis – sacrifices of love for the sake of your child(ren) and family. We want you to know how grateful we are that you have not tried to escape! (Though you may have thought about it at one time or another.)

Being a mom is one of the two most important jobs in the world. The other is being a dad. God designed it so that mom and dad would be a team, partners in parenthood, working together to raise godly sons and daughters to serve God's purposes in their generation. If God has blessed you with children, or if God blesses you with children, nothing you do in life will be more important than the investment you make in the lives of your kids. Your children will be blessed. And your Heavenly Father will be pleased.

Nobody (except God) does parenting perfectly. We all make mistakes. But to all of you who are mothers, may your children rise up and call you blessed (Proverbs 31:28) – because you are. We thank God you for.

Now, let's look together at God's Word from Paul's letter to Titus. The Scripture reading is Titus 3:3-8. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

A TRUSTWORTHY SAYING

We associate particular individuals with particular sayings or catchphrases. Yogi Berra, the Hall of Fame baseball player, is famous for lots of unusual sayings, such as: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Or: "It ain't over 'til it's over" – which may be helpful to remember in light of predictions that the world will end on May 21.

Walter Cronkite, for many years the voice and face of CBS News, long known as the most-trusted man in America, would sign off at the end of his news broadcast each evening with the words: "And that's the way it is (for this date)."

As a boy growing up in western Pennsylvania, I listened religiously to broadcasts of Pittsburgh Pirates baseball games on my little transistor radio. I would carry my radio around with me when I went outside to play. I listened to games lying in bed at night. You may not believe this, but back in the 1960s and '70s, the Pirates were actually pretty good! The voice of the Pirates from 1957 to 1975 was Bob Prince. He was a colorful character. When a Pirate hit a home run, Prince would say: "You can kiss it good-bye!" And, at the end of every game the Pirates won, he would exult: "We had 'em all the way!" (Even if the Pirates *didn't* have them "all the way" and the outcome was in doubt until the end.)

President Harry Truman was known for the saying on his desk: "The buck stops here."

A preacher I know ends just about every sermon with some variation of "Lord, let it be so." Have you noticed that?

Then there is the apostle Paul. Several times in his letters to his protégés Timothy and Titus, letters written near the end of his life, Paul used the phrase: "A trustworthy saying." In the Greek, it is *pistos ho logos*. A faithful word.

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance," he says in 1 Timothy 1:15: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst." It *is* a trustworthy saying, for the reason Jesus came into the world *was* to save sinners. Including you and me.

Later, in 1 Timothy 3:1, he says: "Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on becoming an overseer (Greek *episkopos*, which is interchangeable with *presbyter*, the Greek word for elder), he desires a noble task." Not everyone can serve as an overseer or elder in the church. Not everyone is called to serve in this way. But for those in whose hearts God places the call and desire, it is a noble and honorable task.

Again, in 1 Timothy 4:9-10, after explaining in the previous verse that while there is a value in physical training, spiritual training – training in godliness – is of much greater value, the apostle says: "This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe." Dear friends, our hope is in God. Our hope is in the true and living God, who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son to save us (and all who believe in Him) from our sins and to give us the gift of eternal life in His kingdom (John 3:16). This *is* a trustworthy saying.

Paul uses the phrase again in 2 Timothy 2:11, where he introduces what was probably an early Christian hymn. He says: "Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with Him, we will also live with Him;
 If we endure, we will also reign with Him;
 If we deny Him, He will also deny us;
 If we are faithless, He will remain faithful,
 For He cannot deny Himself.

Jesus Christ, true Son of God and Savior of sinners, cannot be untrue to Himself. Regardless of our shortcomings, regardless of our failures to follow Him, regardless of our unfaithfulness, Jesus will never be unfaithful to Himself. He will never be unfaithful to the promises of His Word. He will never be unfaithful to us. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). This is a trustworthy saying. You can bet your life on it.

Then Paul uses the same expression in Titus 3:8. Here, when Paul says, “This is a trustworthy saying,” he is referring not to what he is about to say, but to what he has already said in verses 3-7. This is a trustworthy saying about our need for grace (which is given free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will – which includes me), and the grace by which we are made right with God. I want you to see what Paul says about the way we were in our pre-conversion state (verse 3) and what God in His grace has done both to save us and to change us (verses 4-7).

THE WAY WE WERE

Sometimes, in order to get a clear picture of the magnitude of God’s grace to us, it is helpful to take a look back and ponder what we were like before coming to faith in Christ. That is what Paul does in verse 3. What is striking about this verse is that Paul does not point fingers here. He does not say: “This is what *you* were like.” He includes himself in this description. Not “you,” but “we.”

Paul, you know, was as religious as they come. He had been a devout Pharisee, and the Pharisees were the devoutest of the devout. Gary Demarest described Paul as a religious perfectionist. He was constantly striving to earn God’s favor by his spiritual devotion. But now, in verse 3, looking back, Paul admits his own spiritual futility. He admits the sinful attitudes he harbored in his heart, attitudes which found expression in his own sinful behavior. For all his feverish efforts, Paul was really no different, no better than the rest of us.

What were we like before grace came along to save us and change us? We were *foolish*, which means we were without spiritual understanding. It doesn’t necessarily mean we were not interested in spiritual things. There is a heightened interest in spiritual things in the world today. But it is, for a vast number of people, spiritual interest without spiritual understanding. It is a kind of spiritual zeal, as Paul said in Romans 10, that is not based on true knowledge (Romans 10:1-2). Paul himself was interested in spiritual things. He was zealous for God, but his zeal was misguided – until the day he was apprehended by the Savior and transformed by grace on the road to Damascus. To one degree or another, it is the way we all were. Even if we grew up in the church and went to Sunday school every Sunday.

Next, Paul says, we were *disobedient*. Disobedient to God. Choosing to go our own way instead of following God’s way. You may or may not have been outwardly rebellious, but you know it’s true. It’s true for all of us. In one way or another, we have all said “No” to God and gone our own way (Isaiah 53:6).

And the list goes on: *Deceived* in our thinking. Looking for meaning and fulfillment in the wrong places. *Enslaved* by the desires and lusts of our flesh. Lives marked by *malice and*

envy. Malice is when you wish harm to come on someone. “Envy,” as Rick Warren says, “is resenting God’s goodness to others and ignoring God’s goodness to me.” It is when we aren’t satisfied with what God gives us, and we want what God has given someone else. Finally, says Paul, we were the objects of hate. We were detested by other people. And we hated them right back. We thought we had a right to hate other people.

The truth is, even after coming to faith in Christ, even after experiencing God’s saving grace, some of us may still think we are justified in hating people who hate us or mistreat us. We may still have feelings of envy or malice toward others. We may continue to struggle with fleshly desires and want to overrule God. To one degree or another, the tug-of-war in our hearts continues as long as we live, even after the grace of God takes hold in our lives. But God in His grace does change us. He invites us to come to Him just as we are, and He accepts us just as we are, with all the baggage of our sin and brokenness. But He does not leave us as we are. He cleans us up on the inside by giving us a spiritual bath – what Paul calls “the washing of rebirth (or regeneration)” in verse 5 – and makes us new and different by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. So, even though our transformation into the likeness of Jesus is not yet complete, when you come to Him in true faith, you don’t remain the way you were.

WHAT GOD HAS DONE

Here is how Paul describes what God has done for us, starting in verse 4: “When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us” (3:4-5a). The word Paul uses for love here isn’t one of the usual New Testament words. It is actually a hybrid word, and I think this is the only place it is used in the New Testament. The word is *philanthropia*. Sound familiar? It means “love of mankind” or “love for humankind.” A philanthropist is a person who demonstrates his/her love for people by giving (usually money, usually a lot of money) to help people with particular needs or problems. When you think of philanthropists, you may think of people like Bill and Melissa Gates, or Warren Buffett, or Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, who have the resources to contribute hundreds of millions, or even billions of dollars to charitable causes. Another philanthropist with great visibility today is Ty Pennington, the point man for ABC’s *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* TV program. In every episode, Ty and his team go the extra mile to make life better for one family at a time by providing a new home for folks facing daunting life challenges. If you’ve watched it, you know how amazing it is.

One hundred years ago, one of the preeminent philanthropists in America was steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, who built more than 2,500 free public libraries in communities both here and in his native Scotland, and donated scores of organs to churches as well, including the pipe organ which graced our worship every Sunday at the Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church in Altoona, PA, when I was the pastor there (1986-97).

But the philanthropist par excellence, the One whose love for mankind has no equals, is not named Gates or Buffett or Carnegie or Rockefeller. It is God our Savior, who took on our flesh and blood and came to live among us when the time was right, and gave His life for us on the cross to save us from our sins. He did for us what we could never accomplish ourselves: He saved us. He did it. It was all His doing. It certainly was not because we

deserved it. It certainly was not because of any merit or moral purity on our part. As Paul says in verse 5, it was “not because of righteous things we had done.” In the sermon he preached at our presbytery worship service in Pittsburgh last weekend, Bruce Bickel said that the only thing we contributed to our salvation was our sin. That is true for me. It is true for all of us. Our salvation is all from God. It is all by God. It is all by His mercy and grace. It is the supreme example of philanthropy. For who could ever love humankind, and who could ever love each one of us, more than God Himself? And who could ever give us a greater gift than Jesus, the sinless Son of God who willingly took our sin upon Himself in the ultimate act of love, so that, “having been justified (declared righteous) by His grace, we might be heirs” of heaven itself, “having the hope of eternal life” (3:7)?

I have such a deep respect for those of you who serve or have served in our nation’s military. We are profoundly blessed by your service and sacrifice. I recall a recruiting ad for the Marine Corps, with a sword in it, and beneath the sword were the words: “Earned, not given.” The point, of course, is that it is not easy to be a Marine. Not everybody qualifies. Not everybody can cut it. Not everybody has what it takes to be a Marine. I don’t. I would never have made it. They don’t just give you the title of “Marine.” You have to earn it. It is earned, not given. Ditto that for Navy SEALs.

But the message of the gospel is that salvation is given, not earned. Our justification – being declared righteous and not guilty in God’s sight – is not something we earn. It is not the result of our own efforts or hard work. It is not because of any good or righteous things we have done. It is not something given to those who can show that they deserve it. No. It is a gift of grace which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. It is a gift from God, the great Philanthropist.

This, says Paul, is “a trustworthy saying” (3:8a). This is not merely an interesting theory for theological debate. This is one of the essentials of the faith. You can count on it. And it has practical implications for the way we live.

Paul gives Titus (and us) this beautiful summary of the gospel of grace. And then he says to Titus in verse 8: “I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have trusted in God (and His grace) may be careful to devote themselves to doing good works.” Good works will never save us. We can never earn God’s favor by our acts of righteousness. But grace leads to good works. Grace changes us. Grace leads to godly living. Grace leads to a life of practical philanthropy in which we both show and tell God’s amazing love for humankind.

This *is* a trustworthy saying. May it be so in us, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.