

# Priorities for the Church

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Okay, Titus, as you see there, if you've got your Bible open, in front of you is a fairly short letter. It's the second shortest of Paul's letters in the Bible, just three chapters long.

And yet it has got Paul's second longest introduction in terms of who he is, what's his role, what his purpose in life is. This short letter, but this relatively long introduction, and that's what we're going to be looking at this morning as we introduce ourselves to Paul.

And it's a good question for us to start with as we get stuck in to Titus. Why does Paul give this longer introduction here compared to what he writes elsewhere?

Why is this introduction that bit lengthier than in so many of Paul's other letters, even though those letters themselves might be a bit longer? Well, it's not because Titus doesn't know Paul.

Paul is not introducing himself to Titus. Paul has been, as we said, a mentor, a spiritual leader to Titus, to Titus, my true child in a common faith, as Paul says down in verse 4.

[ 1 : 1 0 ]     So Paul and Titus have been kind of ministry colleagues. They've worked together a lot. So Paul is not introducing himself to Titus, but Paul is wanting Titus to remember what he has seen of Paul, what his vision, what his purpose, what his calling as an apostle has been all about.

And that is so that these same emphases can then be built into Titus' ministry, and through that can then be part of the DNA of this church in Crete that Titus has been given responsibility over.

So these opening verses aren't just kind of pleasantries or formalities. They are laying out priorities, giving some of the big picture of what the church is to be all about.

And we'll see over the next few weeks how these foundational ideas that we're going to see this morning crop up again and again. It's so important, these verses in this letter, and therefore so important verses for the nature of the church, any church.

A church like ours, the local church, wherever it's found, because that is what this letter is all about. So then what is Paul committed to? What does he want Titus and other church leaders committed to?

[ 2 : 3 0 ]     And as such, what should the church itself be committed to? Two headlines laid out in these verses. And the first one is this, a church committed to the faith and knowledge of the truth leading to godliness.

A church committed to the faith and knowledge of the truth leading to godliness. So let's have a look at this introduction then. How does Paul introduce himself?

He begins with two terms, two kind of job titles. Verse 1, he is both a servant of God and he is an apostle of Jesus Christ. These two terms emphasize both his humility.

Paul is only ever a servant of God. He's only ever doing God's work. He's carrying out God's purposes. Paul does not have an over-inflated opinion of himself.

He is this servant giving his whole life in obedient service of God. And yet he also highlights his authority, that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ.

[ 3 : 34 ] The way God has given him to serve is this particular role of apostle. The apostles were those specific men, 12 of them, that we read of in the New Testament, who Jesus handed the baton onto when he returned to heaven.

And so there is this real authority. There is this real weight behind what Paul says. These aren't his kind of idiosyncratic ideas about what a church might look like.

No, this is God's approved apostolic teaching on the matter. This is Paul giving instruction on how Jesus wants his church to be built, on how Jesus wants his church to look.

So this is serious stuff to take in mind. A servant and an apostle. Those are the job titles. What about then the job description? What's the aim of these roles? Well, they're both to the same end.

And this will be our first point, really. We see that in the second half of verse 1. For the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness.

[ 4 : 39 ] Paul says he's given his whole life in service to God. He's been given this apostolic authority from Jesus himself. And this is all for the sake of God's people, he says.

Building up their faith, that means their trust in the gospel. And their knowledge of the truth. That means their understanding of the gospel. That gospel which accords with godliness.

That means a commitment to the gospel that works itself out in a godly life. In practical good works. And that is a massive theme of this letter.

That the gospel that saves people. The message of Jesus who died on the cross. Taking the penalty for sin. So that those who trust in him can be forgiven.

Can be God's people now and forever. That the gospel that saves people is also that same gospel that transforms people. To live godly lives.

[ 5 : 41 ] To live lives marked by good works. Not that these works are what saves them. But these are the natural outworking of the gospel. The truth that accords with godliness as Paul writes here.

In chapter 2, Paul will say Jesus gave himself to redeem a people. That's the gospel. Zealous for good works. The outworking of godliness. Again in chapter 3, that for those who have believed in God.

That's the faith in the gospel. He says may be careful to devote themselves to good works. That godliness in conduct. So a huge theme of the letter.

The gospel leading to godliness. And that's why we've ended up with this slightly kind of wordy title for our first point. A church committed to the faith and knowledge of the truth leading to godliness.

It's very tempting to kind of separate those things out. Let's talk about faith. Let's talk about knowledge. Let's talk about godliness. And yet Paul's emphasis here is that those three are so tightly interwoven that we don't want to separate them.

[ 6 : 49 ] And actually the way Paul kind of structures this letter to Titus is going to show us how that all works out in different areas. Particularly in the church, in the home, in the world over the next few chapters.

So we're going to be looking at those in a bit more detail in the weeks to come. But Paul is saying to Titus, that's what my ministry has been about. The faith of God's people and their understanding of the truth of the gospel that leads to godliness and a transformed life.

And remember Paul is saying that's what his ministry has been about. Because that is what Titus and other church leaders need to be all about. Because that is what the church itself is to be all about.

The church back in Crete where Titus is based. But also the church here today in Haddington. And every church at every age that holds to the truth of the gospel. A faith and understanding of the gospel that leads to godliness.

And so Paul's description here perhaps kind of blows apart that dichotomy we sometimes have of what we would maybe think of as a kind of an academic church.

[ 7 : 56 ] Or the church that takes the Bible seriously. As opposed to maybe a more active church. A more outgoing church. Who are out there doing stuff. Well Paul says you can't have one or the other.

He says we need to be both of those things hand in hand. A church committed to the Bible. A committed to the gospel. To deepening our faith. To growing our understanding.

To getting to know God and his son Jesus Christ more through his word. As James was just mentioning to us all earlier on. That is vital because Paul says that is the kind of church that will be full of people living that out in the world.

Living that out in their day to day lives through godliness and good works. Paul is going to make the point again and again. You can't have that fruit without that gospel root first of all.

It is the truth that leads to godliness. So that's a really big theme of this letter. So I want to kind of labor that point. Even though in some ways that maybe sounds fairly simple doesn't it?

[ 8 : 59 ] Perhaps you're sitting there thinking well this is not a groundbreaking description of the church. And this isn't particularly a new idea. And yet the fact that Paul writes to Timothy to remind him of this.

To remind him so thoroughly of this. Is because although it might not sound particularly surprising. The fact is that actually churches don't end up like that by accident.

This is not the natural direction that any group of people drift into. A commitment to the gospel leading to godliness.

This is something that takes deliberation. This is something that takes organization. This is something that takes effort. And that is what Paul is writing to spur Titus and the church onto.

And there are plenty of churches around the country and around the world. Where this focus on the gospel leading to godliness is no longer a defining marker of that church. Where faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[ 10 : 00 ] And the knowledge and understanding of that gospel truth has been pushed to one side. Has been allowed to wither and die. And as such any godliness in terms of living the way the Bible sets out.

That godliness has gone with it. And we'll see specifically next week how Paul gives Titus the structure of the church. With elders and what sort of people they should be to keep the church on this kind of gospel and godliness track.

Because as we said it's not the natural direction of travel. It's like when you're kind of driving your car. Don't do this for long. But you know when you kind of take your hands off the wheel. The car doesn't just keep on going in a straight line.

You gradually kind of drift to one side. You don't just automatically end up where you want to go. You gradually perhaps even imperceptibly kind of change track a little bit.

And that is why Paul is writing this letter. That is why it's not just a letter to new churches. It's a letter always to come back and check that we are still on course as a church.

[ 11 : 04 ] And one of the reasons why that's so important that we see in this letter. The reason it's so easy to slip off that track is because it is so different to the world around us.

Titus as we've said has been left to establish this church in Crete. And Crete at this time is a pretty infamous place. And so you can see that down in verse 12.

Paul quotes from a poet from Crete called Epimenides. It says, One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.

I'm not sure how popular he was in Crete after he'd written that poem. But even that is how the people are speaking about themselves. And in fact, across the whole of Greece, to call someone a Cretan became a kind of slang for a dishonest or a cheating person.

And so Crete was known for and actually in some ways proud of being an immoral place. And so the godliness this church is being called to live out is something that is going to make them stick out.

[ 12 : 08 ] It's not going to seem natural to those around them. It's not going to be just a little kind of tweak here and there compared to what their neighbors are doing. It is going to be a radically counter-cultural way of life that marks a divide between them and the world around them.

And again, that's one of the things that makes this an eternally relevant letter. More and more in our society, we need to recognize that really being shaped by the gospel in every area of life, as this letter is going to speak about, is going to be something that makes us stick out.

If we're living out the gospel, it really will mean that our lives, our priorities are fundamentally different from our neighbors. One of the things at the start of a new year that I think is really good for us to be aware of, to take seriously, is the fact that actually all of us are shaped, even as Christians.

We are shaped by the world far more than we might recognize or than we might like to think. We are watching the same programs. We're being taught by the same teachers.

We're taking in the same messages. Day by day, we are seeing and having reinforced and modeled for us the world's way of doing things, the world's priorities.

[ 13 : 36 ] And it's so easy for us to just follow then in the world's footsteps. And yet Paul is saying we're not to be shaped by the world. We're not to be taking our standards from the world.

Our goal isn't to be like the world, but just a little bit nicer. Instead, he says we're to be people who are deeply immersed in the gospel, a completely different foundation from what the world is standing on.

And that is what is shaping us for lives of godliness. Paul's picture for the church, Paul's hope and his command even, we could say, for Haddington Community Church in 2024 and beyond is to be a church committed to the faith and knowledge of the truth of the gospel, leading to godliness, even though, or perhaps especially because, that will make us stick out, living differently from those around us.

Not to be a church who are just kind of playing around. Not to be a church who just get together to say nice things and sing a couple of songs on a Sunday. Not to be a church just made up of a sort of surface level niceness.

But when you scratch that away, there's no gospel depth underneath. But to be a church made up of people going deeper and deeper in the gospel, growing more and more in their love for Jesus, taking him seriously as the most important thing in their lives, and then characterized by the good works which that leads to.

[ 15 : 08 ] Okay, so that's the first half of what we're looking at this morning. And in some ways, that's quite general, isn't it? The rest of the letter is really kind of going to bed that in and give us some specific examples of that, how this gospel truth is protected and passed on and works itself throughout a church and the outworking of that in different areas of life.

But all under that big desire Paul introduces here of a church committed to the faith and knowledge of the truth, leading to godliness. Okay, well, the second thing then what we're going to look at, which is really the kind of the other half of this passage and really follows straight on from what we've just seen.

But our second point is this. Paul is seeking for Titus to build a church confident in the eternal life promised by God. We see this in verses 2 and 3.

A church confident in the eternal life promised by God. Let me read those verses again quickly, 2 and 3. He says, This is all done in the hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.

Basically, Paul is saying that all he's said so far, all he's talked about is his service in apostleship for the faith and knowledge of the truth that brings godliness and good works.

[ 16 : 34 ] All of this, he says, is done in the hope of eternal life. All of this is done. It's worthwhile. It makes sense because there is this eternal life to come.

And again, this eternal life is going to be a repeated feature in this letter as it actually is in many of Paul's letters. Paul wants the church to be looking ahead to the eternal life that is theirs through Jesus as that's going to shape how they live in the present.

And so it's really the question for those in Crete, and it's a question that we might share as well today, is this. Why would we bother building our lives on a different foundation?

Why would we bother living in a different way? Why would we commit to a life of godliness, as the Bible lays it out, in a society that is organized around and respects and rewards even a very different type of behavior, a different way of life?

And perhaps especially if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, if you're kind of asking questions about what does it mean to follow Jesus, that would be a great question to ask. Well, why would I bother? And the answer that Paul gives us here, the answer is because there is eternal life to come, that all of this is done in the hope of eternal life.

[ 18 : 01 ] And Paul wants us then to be confident in that eternal life. This eternal life isn't a vague thing. It's not maybe it'll happen, maybe it won't. But this eternal life, the hope of eternal life, is a certain thing that means we can commit everything to it in the present, knowing that it will not fail to come to pass.

It will not let us down in the future. Now, remember here that that word hope, it really carries a different sense in the Bible to how we often use it nowadays.

In the Bible, a biblical hope is something that we don't yet see and yet something that we can fully rely upon. And so Paul really underscores in these verses that this eternal life is something that we can be certain in.

First, Paul says, verse 2, that it is something which God, who never lies, promised from before the ages began. Now, Crete, as we've already said, was a place where people were renowned for being pretty lax when it came to matters of truth.

In fact, they were notoriously dishonest. Now, remember Epimenides in verse 12, Cretans are always liars. That's a fairly blanket statement for you, isn't it?

[ 19 : 17 ] And so Paul underscores here that in this world, in this culture, where everything is to be taken with a pinch of salt, to say the least, that actually this promise of eternal life is from God who never lies.

It is what he promised from the very beginning, that this is the consistent promise of an always true God. You might not be able to rely on the things of the world around you, Paul says.

People might let you down. People might say one thing but mean another. People might say one thing but not follow through with that. That was the case in Crete, and I'm sure that we all also kind of recognize the reality of that in our lives as well.

And yet Paul is saying, but this eternal life, this hope of eternal life, you can rely on that because God has promised it, and God never lies. And he goes on to say even more than that in verse 3.

It's not just what God has promised in the past, but that now at the proper time, God has revealed in his words, specifically in the preaching of his word, Paul says, the certainty of this eternal life as the gospel is taught.

[ 20 : 29 ] Again, the gospel message of Jesus, who died and yet rose again, is the guarantee, the confirmation of this eternal life for all who have their trust in him.

The hope of eternal life is something we can be confident and certain in and strengthened as we hear Christ preached week by week, his life and death and resurrection.

Paul says that as we gather, as we live among one another as a church community, there should be this constant note reminding each other of the certain hope of eternal life.

And that is what makes sense of then how we live in the present. And so let me kind of ask you this question. This is a question I was thinking of myself as well. How often are you? How often am I? How often are we thinking of eternity?

How often is that something that we speak about with one another, whether in our families or as a church family? How often are we reminding each other of that incredibly good news, a certain hope of eternal life?

[ 21 : 34 ] That is good news that no other approach to life is able to offer. How often do we allow that to shape our priorities? I was thinking back and throughout December, I remember a lot of conversations I had with people where we were both talking about how we were looking forward to Christmas, looking forward to the holidays, looking forward to a break.

That was what our short-term hope was in. If we could just stagger to the Christmas holidays, then everything would be fine. I don't know why we thought the Christmas holidays would be relaxing in any way whatsoever, but that was what our hope was in for that short term.

And so it made sense that we were talking about it. It was a tough week of conversation. Well, how much more? How much more if our eternal hope is in eternal life?

If the hope for our whole existence is in the eternal life that God has promised, how much more should that not be a natural thing to talk about?

My kind of suspicion is that if we started speaking to one another, or we worry that if we speak to one another about eternity, about heaven, about the new creation, that people would think, well, that's a bit of a strange, tough area conversation to bring up on a Sunday.

[ 22 : 47 ] And yet actually, my conviction is, and I think Paul's conviction is, that should be the most normal thing in the world for us to be speaking about. Because the whole of our lives is lived in the hope of eternal life.

And so let's encourage one another in that. And so these verses together give this incredible picture of a church that is this kind of inherently future-focused church, never losing sight of that eternal life that Christ has won for us in the gospel.

The eternal life which we will enjoy with him forever if we confess our sins, accept that forgiveness he offers, the certain hope of the eternal life that is still to come.

But these verses show that it is that church living in the hope of eternal life that is the same church that is devoted to the gospel and to good works in the present that is living out that godliness in our day-to-day lives here and now, in the church, in the home, in the places we spend our lives.

Those things, that the future and the present are not intention. No, the fact is we're only able to do that. We're only able to live that godliness out in the present if we are really confident that there is that eternal life with God when Jesus returns.

[ 24 : 10 ] And so as we kind of draw to a close, let me give a kind of an example, I suppose, of how these fit together, an example that would have been a big one for the people in Crete and is still a good example, a good challenge for us today.

The challenge of honesty. How important is it to be a people who are honest, who tell the truth? And the fact is if this life is all there is, why not just say, you know, whatever makes the situation easier, whatever makes me look better, whatever hides my weaknesses and failures, whatever helps me kind of get ahead, if this life is all there is, maybe honesty, maybe godliness in that way isn't the best policy.

And yet if we're certain of that eternal life to come, then honesty, then modeling ourselves on God who never lies and who we're going to spend eternity with, and that is our priority, whatever the consequences of that, however costly that might be here and now, because we have that eternal prize and that eternal reward, we can pay that price in the present because there is that perfect eternal life for us in the future.

And we can apply that logic to lots of different areas of godliness, of the godly living that the gospel leads to. It says we remain focused on and confident in that eternal life that Jesus brings.

That's the only way that we're able to be shaped by the gospel truth that leads us there rather than being shaped into the likeness of the world around us with its focus on the here and now.

[ 25 : 49 ] It says we're confident in what's to come that we can start putting that into practice here in the present. So Paul wants a church confident in the eternal life God's promised to rejoice in that good news and through that live lives of godliness in the present to the glory of God.

And so there we go. There's really the opening, the introduction to Paul's letter to Titus, a timeless letter that we'll dig into more over the next three weeks, laying out how the church should operate so that it can bring God the glory that he deserves, both as an institution, a kind of a gathering, on a Sunday, but also as an organic body of people, followers of Jesus, scattered throughout the week in their day-to-day lives.

But a church committed to the faith and knowledge of the truth leading to godliness. A church confident of the eternal life promised by God. That our church will be led and organized in a way that is constantly calling us back to those priorities.

And that we as God's people will be constantly reminding and encouraging one another with that good news and with that call to live for him. Let's pray together.

let's pray together.