



## People of Peculiar Goodness

Jonathan K. Dodson | Titus 1:1-4 | April 19, 2020

We're all trying to cope with the impact of the coronavirus. Over the past few weeks we've tried to shepherd you and ourselves through fear, anxiety, sadness. And we're all thinking, When will it end? While understandable, there's a better question to ask. *What* does God want to do in me? *How* will I change through the pandemic? Let's not squander our suffering. Paul's letter to Titus envisions the church *as a people of peculiar goodness, lovers of the good (1:8), models of goodness (2:7), people who live self-controlled, godly lives (2:12)*. A people for whom the truth of what they believe accords with godliness. That's what God wants. How do we not squander our suffering but become a people of peculiar goodness? We need a *Society, a Synthesis, a Source*.

### Society

Paul speaks very affectionately about Titus: my *true child* in the common faith, a *co-laborer* in the gospel. But he begins, [Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect \(1\)](#). Now, if Paul and Titus were so close, why such a formal, lengthy introduction? Well, he isn't writing *just* for Titus but for *the church*. In fact, the letter would be read aloud to all the churches where Titus was appointing elders (5), instructing *men, women, elders, and church members* in how to live as a household of faith. Paul is writing to *an entire society*. Now societies typically organize around a common interest or principle. Something that binds them together. Today, societies and clubs aren't as common as they were 50 years ago. Why? One reason is that we have become so individualistic, so curved in on ourselves, we find it difficult to make serious commitments. Augustine described sin as *incurvatus in se* curving in on the self. Picking up on this idea, Casey Sep, a staff writer for the *New Yorker* observes: [If to sin is to be turned in on one's self then worship is an obvious antidote. Church is where I go to be reminded that the world is full of other people, and that their needs and desires are every bit as urgent and real as mine](#). What do you think? Is she right? Yes, what we're doing today is worship. We're taking the antidote to *incurvatus in se* so we can curve up not in. *No*, we don't gather on Sundays *primarily* to be reminded people are just as needy as us, but to be reminded of *God*. In worship we brush up against something greater than ourselves, the Transcendent, who

makes us *aware* of our inward curvature, exposes it, and then mercifully applies the cure of Christ, extracting that self-centeredness, compelling us to adore him. *God in Christ, not church, is what* puts us in touch with the deepest needs of others, a God greater than all our needs and more gracious than any single one of us. When you're taking that in, it's amazing what you're willing to let go. In fact, when we encounter God's greatness and grace in worship *we're compelled to carry the antidote to others*. We scatter as a Society of saints tending to the needs of the city, not with our own inner resources, but with transcendent resources in Christ. Now how do we do this when we're Sheltering in Place? On a day when I was particularly sad, I decided to leave my bedroom office and walk to the mailbox. I received a letter addressed to Robie and me. I opened it and found a handwritten note from someone telling us how much they sympathized with us, were praying for us and our church. The timing was uncanny. In an instant, my spirits were lifted. I was strengthened to go on serving. How did that happen? This woman stopped thinking about herself, *brushed up against the Transcendent in prayer*, who mystically directed her to my need. Instead of curving in, she curved up to God in prayer, and then out to others. A woman in our church contracted COVID. The symptoms are mild. Doesn't have a phone. So her little society/cg got her a phone, a plan, put together a care package: flowers, cards, food and dropped it off. She cried for joy. Why did they do this? They were compelled by the One they worship, the need-meeting Savior. Write an encouraging letter. Text a person for prayer requests. Call and pray. Carry Christ to one another. Paul writes this letter *for the sake of the faith of the elect*, a society bound together not by wants and needs, but by *God our Savior*. Let's not squander our suffering, but be a people of peculiar goodness.

## Synthesis

Now, what do we carry into the world? What has the inherent value, transforming power, to bend us outward, change us for good? Paul says it's a *synthesis*: the **knowledge of the truth that accords with godliness**. Knowledge, truth, godliness synthesized to change us. **Knowledge**. There's a way to *know*, to learn, that makes godliness an orphan. And there's a way to learn that makes godliness a companion. The Cretans orphaned godliness. We're told they *devoted themselves* to myths—learned—to those who turned them *away from the truth*. See they were always learning but never arriving at the truth, why? One of their own

philosophers tells us, *Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons*. They had a moral laziness, a spiritual lethargy, that kept them from obtaining this transformative synthesis. So Paul tells Titus to rebuke them sharply so they can be sound of faith, transformed in the **truth**. 2<sup>nd</sup>. Now when he says truth, he's speaking of a very specific truth. Like in Col 1:5 "Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel". He's talking about gospel truth. Or Eph 4:21, the truth just as it is in Jesus. It's not enough to learn. To for godliness to be a companion, we've got to learn the truth *as it is in Jesus*. Now I don't know about you, but I've a had hard time learning in the pandemic *except for learning about the pandemic!* Every time I go to read something my desire to learn just bottoms out. But with the pandemic, learning comes easy. We find it easier to bury ourselves in endless headlines, conspiracies, even truths *than to devote ourselves to the knowledge of the truth*. Often the harder thing is the better thing. It's the knowledge of *truth* that produces **godliness**. 3<sup>rd</sup> Godliness is being like God, like Christ, sparkling with his character. Godlike. God is just tells us the truth and merciful, offers the cure. There was a group there, the party of the circumcision, that pursued the truth. Who insisted on the law, but withheld mercy. They had textbook truth, not intimate truth. It's not enough to know the truth; you got to live the truth. You can only go so far studying the gospel; the rest of the learning comes through inhabiting the gospel. It has to **accord** with life: that's the synthesis of these things (learning, truth, life) that produces godliness. When I was getting ready to be a father for the first time, I read articles, books, took classes, interviewed fathers young and old. I learned how to change a diaper, how to soothe a baby, how to discipline and instruct, but it wasn't until I took that precious soul home, that I really learned how to change a diaper, how soothe a baby. Let me tell you textbook knowledge isn't enough. You have to apply it, work into life. The truth has to **accord/synth** with life. It's in the midst of screaming kids, changing headlines, and online work, that the gospel produces godliness. Anyone can be "godly" in a vacuum, but it's in the presence of suffering that godliness truly emerges. So one of the ways I've been coping with all this as we're sheltered in place is to order things, to tidy. I'd come down the stairs from my makeshift office, say hi to everyone, and make them do their chores, start tidying. But then my wife pulled me aside and said when you come down the stairs like that it put me and the kids on edge. So we had a difficult conversation about coping, and it was through that conflict that I learned to lay down my

coping and take up Christ, to be godly. To exchange tidying for truth. What truth? Verse 4: grace and peace come through Jesus. Will you learn Christ more than headlines? Embrace peace more than productivity? It's the synthesis that produces godliness. So now, as I come down the stairs, I place my hand on each person, smile and ask them how their doing and don't tidy (most of the time). And you know what? I'm experiencing a grace and peace order could never give me. Christ *is* better than coping.

### Source

A society grounded in a knowledge of the truth that accords with godliness. Where does that come from? The source, he says, is *in hope of eternal life*, (2). Instead of staring straight ahead at the targets of knowledge and godliness, Paul directs our attention slightly above them, requiring us to lift our head above the targets and fix our gaze not on godliness but on the **hope of life eternal**. Eternal life is quantitative—never-ending days—but it's also, *qualitative*, a quality of life so rich it produces godlike traits, *especially* in trials. What is it? John 17:3: *And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*. Eternal life is *knowing Jesus Christ*. There are some people who when you spend time with them you come back a better person. Your wife is like, spend more time with him. This week I attended an online funeral of a dear family friend, Penny Tousha who was like this. The pastor compared her to a woman in the Bible, who took a jar of very expensive oil typically saved for one's burial, and broke it over Jesus' feet. The fragrance filled the room. This was Penny the pastor said, she gave Jesus everything she had, and her fragrance filled our lives. She had a persistent, constant love for others. And anyone who knew her knew they'd eventually be asked a question, *Are you knowing the Lord? She wanted for others what she wanted most for herself—to know the Lord*, to know Jesus Christ, who was broken open for us, his costly blood spilt for us, to draw us into the fragrance of life-giving communion. Life eternal. Are you knowing the Lord? The merciful savior broken open to give us the cure. A savior, who when you spend time with him, you walk away a better, godlier, person. A person of peculiar goodness. When we huddle around him, we become a society of saints who have something truly unique to offer the world. Let's keep our eyes on life eternal. Let's know the Lord Jesus.

