

Titus 3:4-7

Reborn and Renewed

Maybe you are not like me, but I've often felt that the New Year was kind of a let-down. You start thinking about that New Year in the months leading up to it with thoughts of all the things you are going to do once the holidays are over. And with that there might be a desire to start something new personally. Maybe you over indulged over the holidays, so you are going to get back on track with eating better and exercising more. Maybe you took some personal reflection, recognized how you treated others in the past year, and you want to improve on that and do better. Perhaps you weren't using your time wisely so you want to schedule better. Maybe it's just the thought that a New Year means a fresh start. But, then the New Year comes. All those things you pushed off now need your attention. Those great grandiose plans for change and improvement sounded nice and were a good idea at the time. But they maybe stay that way: plans and intentions with little follow through. With the word "New" you expect and maybe even want or need a change; but 2019 looks eerily familiar to 2018. What happened?

The apostle Paul is writing this letter to Titus who is responsible for taking care of and leading the church that had been started on Crete, an island located in the Mediterranean Sea. While there, Titus is to appoint elders and overseers of the congregation and straighten out some things that had been left unfinished. And from the letter, it's quite obvious that there was a lot of work to be done. Even the people of Crete recognized how low they had sunk morally. Paul quotes what Cretans say about themselves that they are known as people who are, "Always liars, evil brutes, lazy glutton." If there was a group of people who needed to change, they seemed to fit the bill.

In the midst of this letter of encouragement and instruction to Pastor Titus Paul gives this beautiful message—really our motivation—in chapter 3 verses 4-7.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

We could just leave the words at that. But the question needs to be asked: "Why?" Why did this happen? Why would God do this?

You could go back to the answer you gave in confirmation class, "We are sinners. We needed a Savior. We needed to be saved." But I wonder how often we say those

words failing to grasp what that means personally. It would have been easy for Titus to say, “Yes, this is something that they all need to hear. These people need to reborn, renewed, and they need to change.” We might do that too. We can easily sit here and think about all the people who need to hear these words and should be here today. We know people in our lives who need to make changes with how they live, how they act, how they treat other people. We could even pinpoint exact changes they need to make their lives better and improve. It’s so obvious to us, isn’t it? Like a backseat driver who points out how you missed that turn or how you aren’t paying attention to the car over there, we can sit in the backseat of people’s lives directing how they should turn around their lives and watch out with the decisions they are making.

But don’t forget yourself. Paul doesn’t leave himself, Titus, you or me out of this. In the verse before our reading Paul says: “**At one time we too,**”—it’s not just them out there, it’s you and me too who—“**were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.**” Who of us, being honest with ourselves, could say, “Nope, that’s not me.”? Far more likely we currently are struggling with some of these.

Foolishly we do things knowing you weren’t supposed to, completely aware it was going to hurt you, or could hurt someone else. But you did it anyway because at the time it felt good or made you happy. Foolish.

Who hasn’t been disobedient to God’s Law? Think of the first commandment: fear, love, and trust God above all things. But instead we fear our social status, we love our families and friends more, we trust in money before God. Who hasn’t been disobedient to their parents, to the government, ignoring rules and laws because we didn’t like what they said, insisted they didn’t apply to us, or thought we wouldn’t get caught?

How easily we enslave ourselves with all kinds of passions and pleasures: addicted to gossip, making other people happy, feeling accepted, media, alcohol, tobacco, pornography, work, making money, being busy, and the list goes on and on. Foolishly we might turn around lie and deceive ourselves with the thought, “I can change whenever I want to; I can stop this habit if I really put my mind to it.”

We can find ourselves having hurt-filled thoughts about someone even for the smallest of things—someone cut you off on the road, the line is taking too long, they did not listen to your opinion, etc. We become envious of other people’s lives what they have, what they are able to do, or what they can get by with. We might be hated by someone because of how we hurt them in the past or we hate others for how they hurt you. And then we go on lying and deceiving again saying or thinking, “I don’t hate anyone; I just have a strong dislike for them.”

But don't throw up the walls of excuses to guard your pride and aching conscience. The simple fact is that no matter how many excuses I give, there's still that knowledge...I knew better, I put myself into that situation, I had those thoughts, and I went through with that action.

What makes this all the more difficult is that you recognize those sins in your life. You see where you need to change and how you need to be better. You make the plans and have the intentions. And maybe you do improve for some time. But then, too easily and often too quickly, we fall back into those actions and attitudes we want to leave behind. It really shows how a real change doesn't start from just your determination or wanting to improve. Because the heart is corrupted with sin—as we see with our continued struggle with these things—there is no hope found in ourselves. If the source of the water is poisoned, all the water flowing from it is contaminated too. Sin starts in the heart sinful from the moment of conception, it festers in the mind that is by nature hostile towards God and his Word, and it shows itself in my actions.

And what does God do? God isn't interested in you trying to be a better person or a better Christian, because he knows you won't be on your own. He is well aware that no amount of good deeds could offset and make right the scales. And so, instead, he saved you. He has mercy on you. Mercy is love given to the undeserving. It's love that is given when all the evidence points to you having every right not to show that love. All the evidence points to the fact God shouldn't love us or take care of us. He has every right to judge you with the sentence of "Guilty" and eternity in hell. But instead God shows his kindness and love for human beings in a baby boy born of a virgin in Bethlehem. His kindness and love appears in that man, Jesus, standing side-by-side with sinners at the Jordan River to be baptized. With the voice of the Father speaking and the Holy Spirit descending we know this is no ordinary human being. This is God's Son—true God and true Man—who he loves and with him he is well-pleased. With that water of baptism Jesus is officially and publicly set aside and anointed to be your Savior. He who was never foolish, disobedient, enslaved to sin; who was never filled with malice or hatred came to live for you. Filled with the wisdom of God, obedient to his Father's will, overflowing with love for sinners like you and me, Jesus came and set you free from sin and death destroying the devil's work. Jesus shared in your humanity, taking on flesh and blood, was put to death and rose again to save you. In him you have been justified—declared not guilty of any sinful action—because Jesus willingly received the Father's just judgment on that cross dying for you and your sin.

And now, by his grace he saves you not because of your works or by your determination or desire to be better or different. He saved you through a washing that

works a rebirth and through the renewal of the Holy Spirit; he saved you through baptism. By his death and rising from the grave, your baptism has real power. In baptism you were put to death with Jesus and in those waters you were buried with Jesus in his tomb. Then with Jesus' rising from the grave, you rose with him from the water of baptism a new creation—sins forgiven, reborn and renewed in the Spirit. With the washing of the water—just a few sprinkles—and the Word, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit you were baptized, God put his name on you, and calls you his child. This means that because he was well-pleased with Jesus, he is well-pleased you because you are his own. And as his child he has made you an heir to the hope of everlasting life. Because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.

Being a Christian, a baptized child of God, isn't about you making a personal commitment to a better life. It's not about your promise or intentions to change and improve. Baptism isn't about what you did. It's all about what Jesus did and what God promises. You have been reborn and renewed which means now we do want to live this new life according to God's Will. With sins forgiven, it doesn't give a license to do what we want and to continue to sin; no, that's how your formal self, your sinful self wants to think. Instead we want to live to God's glory. Will we stumble on the way? Yes. As long as we live on this earth we will struggle with sin and against sin. Being a Christian means there will be struggle. But that struggle is a good thing. It's evidence that you have been reborn and renewed. It teaches us to trust and rely on him who saved us. And so we live each day in our baptismal grace confessing our sin, drowning it in that baptism, and being raised reborn and renewed by the Spirit. Then every time you hear those words, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," be reminded of your own baptism. Be reminded that God the Father continues to look on you in the light that Jesus has saved you and says, "You have been changed. You are my son, my daughter, with whom I am well-pleased." Amen.