

December 25, 2005/Christmas Day/David L. Edwards

## Responding to Grace

Titus 2:11-14

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*

### The Gift of God's Grace

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, says The Letter of Paul to Titus. This is a perfect message for Christmas Day. This week I came to cherish this little summary of Christian faith and life. It expresses what God has done for us, for the whole world by making divine grace and love completely available to all. Then it speaks of what we can do in response to that gift. As William Willimon says, we don't come this morning simply to celebrate that birth; we come to ponder the implications of God's invasion of our lives. What does this mean in terms of how we live?

### Our "Personal Trainer"

God's grace is given so that all might have "salvation." Salvation means so many things—wholeness, health, healing, peace, the Hebrew word *shalom* that means personal and social harmony and justice. It DOES NOT mean that we have a "soul" that is "saved" so that we go to heaven. That is not a biblical idea. Salvation means our being restored to the way we were meant and made to be. It is a wholeness bestowed upon us as God's gift and as something that we need to work on and work with as we let it shape and mold our lives.

The text says that this grace of God is "training us." The word used here (*paideuo*) means teach, guide, educate, bring up. It is like having a personal trainer! Our son Kent does some personal training for people, and sometimes when he's in town, he shows Kaye and me a few things. We go to the YMCA and he teaches us some workout routines that build up different parts of our bodies. Two important things about a personal trainer that relate to our text: 1) The personal trainer has a sensitivity to what works best for each person; he or she has an appreciation of the uniqueness of each person; and 2) the personal trainer believes in us, that we have it in us to be stronger, more fit, and healthier than we are. No one is beyond hope.

God knows that we are essentially good; God made us that way! "God looked at everything that God had made, and behold it was VERY good!" (Gen. 1) God's grace and love don't bring us something foreign to our nature. We are not hopeless sinners unable to do a thing for ourselves. God's grace is the helper we need to affirm and restore our true nature, like the personal trainer who works with us no matter what shape we're in.

### The Inward Journey: Our Training in Grace

God's gift of salvation, of wholeness, "trains us" to "renounce impiety and worldly passions, and to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly," says our text. I have tried to re-understand these terms so that they don't conjure up images of puritanical religion that is self-absorbed, judgmental, and full of repressions and obsessions! Overall, I think what is being said here is that if we are to grow in this new life God has given us, if we are to allow our true, God-created nature to emerge and grow, then there are things we give up, let go of, and there are things we hold onto, that we make a part of our lives. That simple.

We are to let go of **impiety** (*asebeian*), which comes from a word (*sebo*) that means worship or having reverence. Impiety is a lack of reverence or awe. It is reducing God to our programs and agenda, making God a tribal or national god serving our purposes. Impiety would be any spirituality that lacks the element of awe and mystery and the humility that accompanies them. Impiety can mean false religion, a spirituality that isn't shaped by who Christ is and what he is really about. It can be, as we see today, a religion that seeks power over people and enters into partnership with political and economic power. Impiety is Christianity without Christ, without his servant spirit, his life, his teachings, his crucifixion.

**Worldly passions?** Passions (*eipthumious*) are our longings and desires. The "world" here doesn't mean the creation, which is good, but the world of human waywardness and sin. Our passions, our longings and desires are an important part of us. However, they can be directed toward this "world" of humanity that has lost its bearings, that has become inhumane, full of greed and the grasping of power. Or they can be directed in ways that foster understanding, peacefulness, and self-giving, toward appreciating and enhancing the beauty of life. It's up to us. But the text says that with the help, the "training" of God's gift of wholeness, we can channel our passions, our longings and desires toward the things that build up life, that nurture wholeness.

**Self-control** (*sophronos*) is a good practice. It does not have to mean keeping a tight rein on ourselves so that we are anxious, uptight, and always fearful of doing the wrong things. That kind of self-control is based upon a fundamental distrust of ourselves. The word used here means a variety of things--self-control, keeping one's head, being moderate, keeping balanced. It does not mean suppressing feelings and desires that God has

built into us. It means knowing and understanding ourselves so that we are not controlled by feelings and desires. It means growing in self-understanding, not making war on our own inner life by berating and beating up on ourselves. Self-control means practicing insight and understanding. It means practicing God's grace and love toward ourselves. What we understand and have compassion for loses its power to control us.

Paul says we are to be **upright** (*dikaios*). I like the word "upright." I did not always like it. It sounded rigid and "holier-than-thou." This week I thought of the word "upright" in a physical way. For instance, in Psalm 1, the psalmist writes that the person who is upright is one who listens to God, who strives to be faithful to God, who tries to do the right thing. That person is like a "tree planted by the waters." The African American spiritual says, "Like a tree planted by the water, I shall not be moved." What if we took this physically as well as spiritually and morally? Kaye and I take yoga classes. There is an emphasis on being solid and stable. When we sit, we sit straight. When we stand in what is called "mountain pose," we stand so that we feel firmly grounded and supported as well as lifted up. Zen Buddhist practice emphasizes the same thing in meditation. Meditation is best cultivated when we sit straight and solid. This promotes awareness, alertness. We feel supported and more in touch with our connectedness to life.

We can learn a lot from this as Christians. What if, for instance, when we feel spiritually depressed, we sit as solid and straight as we can, breathing deeply and fully? Would we not then be more likely to really experience God's undergirding grace, God's restoring spirit coming into us like the air we breathe? In the Bible, after all, "spirit" and "breath" are the same word. I suggest we try working with "uprightness" in this way--sitting, standing, walking like trees planted by the water so that we experience not only spiritually and emotionally but also physically the grace of God that has been given, the wholeness that is already there, our connection with God that cannot be broken.

As for **godly** (*eusebos*), I would like to interpret this as our being transparent to God and empty of self-preoccupation. The word here is from the same root word as impiety, the word that means worship or reverence (*sebo*). But it means the opposite. Godliness is a life of reverence for God, others, oneself, and the earth as God's creation. Today being godly can mean living in ways that are fully aware and respectful of life and the way our own lives are integrally related to all of life. Godliness is reverence and respect in all our relationships. And since the word salvation means the healing of relationships, the harmonizing of life, this makes good spiritual sense. If we are living with this awareness of our interconnectedness with everyone and everything, we are liberated from much of the self-preoccupation and sense of isolation that often plagues our spirits. We

experience salvation, healing, as we become aware of our interconnectedness with all of life.

The inward journey is the way we work with all of this. It is the way we stay in touch with the gift of salvation, wholeness that has appeared for all. The spiritual disciplines of silence, contemplation, prayer, and study are to help us to keep in touch with and be grounded in God's grace. The spiritual disciplines are not laws that we try to obey, with God's grace always there to forgive us when we don't do well. The spiritual life, the inward journey is precisely for the purpose of immersing ourselves in God's grace and letting it shape our lives. We live our lives in this way as we wait for God's ultimate purposes to be fulfilled, for us and the world. So this waiting is not doing nothing. It is being trained, shaped, nurtured by God's gift of grace and love.

### **The Outward Journey: Zealous for Good Deeds**

Finally, the text speaks of the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The defining truth of Jesus is the way he lived and what he taught, his suffering and death at the hands of the lost world of religious and political power, and God's mysterious bringing of new life through the resurrection. The truth of Jesus, which is the deepest truth about us, cannot be killed or suppressed. It may suffer. It may be killed. But it cannot be eliminated. It only breaks through with more grace, more love, more rightness and goodness. Jesus' death and resurrection, as expressed in this text, pave the way for us to follow him, to share his life, so that we can be people who are "zealous for good deeds." Yes, Christians are incurable and obsessive do-gooders! Our growing and deepening conviction of God's grace and love cannot help but express itself in an eagerness to do good things for others and the world. If our inward journey is directed toward going deeper into God's gift of salvation, of wholeness, then we find that we can't wait to do good, to express God's love for the world through the gifts God has given us, through the unique callings Christ sounds in our hearts. The outward journey is an expression of the inward journey. The zeal for good deeds, for the outward journey of ministry and mission, emerges from our inward journey of receiving and being trained by God's grace and love.

Christmas Day can be for us a time of renewing our spiritual journey. The journey inward as we touch God's grace and let it train us, shape us, nourish us. And the outward journey as we seek and live out of God's call to share salvation, wholeness with the world through the uniqueness of our lives and the gifts that each of us has. I think this is what it means that today we do not just celebrate Christ's birth; we ponder and reflect on the difference it can make in our lives.