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HOW SAVING FAITH IS REVEALED AND SUSTAINED

Our church has a certain style of pulpit ministry. Usually, with some exceptions, we end up studying whole books of the Bible or whole doctrines of the faith in a sustained, continuous fashion. And we should probably know *why* we do that. Many churches don't. It takes more time and more work. It certainly *demand*s more of the congregation. It's probably harder for one-time visitors to feel "caught up" with the subject matter on any Sunday teaching time. So why do we do it?

Perhaps the best way to explain our approach is to tell you of an experience I had while on holidays. We attended a fairly large P.A.O.C. church in the north end of Toronto. It was a good crowd. The church was contemporary in style, the same as most churches these days. Colored lights. Contemporary music. Coffee time. Casual dress. Strong emphasis on community and social engagement. They're all pretty much the same. And they're all fine. We do much of that as well.

Then came the message, all spiced up with multi-media dressing. About half way through a text flashed on the screen from a modern paraphrase of the Scriptures: **2 Corinthians 2:7** - "**When people sin, you should forgive and comfort them, so they won't give up in despair**" (Contemporary English Version).

Now, that's a great verse. And it's very true. The pastor labored to make the point that people can become overwhelmed with their own failures. They can come to doubt their own value before God and family and friends. They can wonder about the freeness of atonement and cleansing grace. That's the way the pastor used that verse that August Sunday morning.

And nobody left that church understanding the full impact of what that wonderful verse was really all about. They all left thinking that the measure of the love of Christ in any church was that church's ability to overlook all human weakness and failure. The pastor used that verse to underscore his message that the church, if healthy, was never a place where people judge other members. We all know we're *all* sinners after all. Really loving people just accept and forgive everyone. Just live and let live and let God sort out all our sins.

Which is *sort of* true, but not quite. And if that church had ever taken the time to study *right through* second Corinthians they would have known that the very person Paul was calling them to forgive was the same person he *commanded* them to kick out - kick out and not even have a coffee with - just two chapters earlier.

And because the congregation was obedient and showed *true* Christ-like chastening love, even at great cost, that immoral brother had finally come to recognize, through the painful but Scripturally loving actions of that congregation, that sin could never be tolerated, especially by genuinely loving people. He had been awakened to genuine repentance and forsaken the sin that would have taken him to hell.

Now back to that isolated verse the pastor put up on the screen with yellow and pink bubbles in the background. Now that the people at Corinth had exercised *holy love* for that stubborn brother and he had repented they were to extend fellowship and grace and total acceptance without endangering his soul by thinking his sin didn't matter to God or the church. But that verse should *never* be used to just call a lazy church just to accept and hug everyone regardless of their willingness to accept the Lordship of Christ along with His cleansing, restoring grace. That kind of church would not be a *loving* church at all. It would be a place of accelerated damnation.

So the lesson is, and the answer to our opening question is, we study - as a general rule - whole passages together in their context so we don't use a *verse* from God's Word to cancel out the *teaching* of God's Word. The church may not be as *trendy*, but she will be much *safer eternally* in this way.

Now to our opening text:

Titus 1:1-4 - "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, [2] in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began [3] 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; [4] To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior."

As Paul approached the end of his life he spent much time working with the younger leaders who would carry on the work after he was off the scene. What we call the book of Titus was the second last letter Paul wrote in the New Testament.

Titus was a young pastor on the island of Crete. Crete was a small island (about 150 miles long and 25 miles wide) in the Mediterranean Sea, south of Corinth and north of Africa. Titus had a tough job. The people he led had quite a reputation. Paul mentions it in this very letter:

Titus 1:10-13 - "For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. [11] They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. [12] One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." [13] This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith...."

It's great when your church has such a reputation in the community! Titus must have felt he had an uphill battle on his hands. What hope is there for constructing Christ's Church out of such building material? How can transformation and maturity take place? What is the plan to establish and purify a people of God?

That's what the book of Titus is all about. There are key issues every church must have in place if it is to be strong and healthy. Most of them aren't found in the scads of church growth/management how-to books that flood the shelves of bookstores and pastors' libraries. But Paul will lay these timeless truths out for Titus and for us - if we have a heart to hear the Holy Spirit in His words.

1) **NOTHING CAN BE ESTABLISHED IN A CHURCH UNTIL PEOPLE UNDERSTAND AND EMBRACE THE PLEDGE OF SERVANTHOOD**

There are many concepts of the Christian life in Paul's mind, but it's important which comes to his mind first: **Titus 1:1** - "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ...."

Paul's references to Jesus Christ are abundant. He rarely just talks about God *generally*. He loves to talk about God in Jesus Christ *specifically*. But he can't talk about Jesus Christ - the **Lord** Jesus Christ - without coming to some conclusions about himself as well. If Jesus is Lord, then Paul is a "*servant*" - a *slave*. This is the Lordship of Jesus *applied*. This has to be constantly rethought through because if people start to see themselves as religious blessing consumers in a competitive marketplace of churches rather than servants who are summoned to lay down their lives and their rights the church dies even if it grows very large numerically.

Perhaps if we didn't just sing "**He is Lord, He is Lord,**" but sang, "**I'm a slave, I'm a slave,**" we wouldn't be so apt to acknowledge Him with our **words** while our **hearts** were far from Him - **Matthew 15:8** - "**This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me....**"

So Jesus **notices** those inconsistencies. He's not interested in people **proclaiming** his Lordship. He's searching for people who **demonstrate** His Lordship. And that only happens one way. Jesus isn't the **Lord** until I'm the **slave**.

Remember, Paul wrote those words in a time when **one third** of the inhabitants of the Romans Empire were slaves. People were used to seeing other people march in chains. They saw the brands marking the arms and foreheads as the property of someone else.

That's the picture these churches had in their heads when they read Paul saying "**Paul, a servant - a slave - of Jesus Christ. That is the most distinguishing thing about who I am. That is what shapes every action and choice I make. You don't know me - Paul - at all, unless you know I am a slave of Jesus Christ.**" To not think of servants when you think of the Christian walk is to not think of evangelist when you think of Billy Graham or golf when you think of Arnold Palmer.

There's a simple test to see if you're grasping this truth as fully as you should. If at any time you're feeling hurt because of the tough treatment you're receiving, you've forgotten you're a slave. You are living as though you were a person with your own rights. If at any time you feel the Kingdom is demanding too much of you, you've forgotten you're a slave. If at any time you put your own agenda at the heart of the choices you make, you've forgotten you're a slave.

Yes, the call of Jesus is a call to life and joy. But the call of Jesus is also a **binding call**. There is nothing **optional** in the life of discipleship. Paul knows Titus has a rowdy crowd to pastor. He knows these people are known for being "**liars**" (12). He knows they have a reputation for being "**lazy gluttons**" (12). He knows these people love "**shameful gain** (11)."

What's the problem with people like that? What is the truth they need to hear stressed **first**? They need to know they aren't **free** to live like that if they want to follow Jesus. And Paul reminds them from his own example - his own **life commitment** - "**We're all slaves of Jesus Christ. We can't set our own terms for following Him. We can't just claim all the goodies without learning to bear the walk of slavery. That's what it means to call Jesus Lord!**"

So Paul uses two terms to describe himself - "**servant**" and "**apostle**." But notice, he makes it very clear that while the **second** term he uses to describe himself (**apostle** -verse 1) applies to himself in a very unique way, the **first** term (**servant**) is to be applied universally to **all** Christians: **1 Corinthians 6:19-21** - "**Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.**"

Paul saw people bought and sold every day. That's what slavery was all about. "If you claim Christ at all, remember first and foremost that He **owns** everything about you. You aren't your own anymore. Check with Him before you start living your life. Your time is not yours to spend."

And here is what's beautiful about Paul: I've seen people burn with all sorts of emotional passion about following Jesus. But this isn't just that. This is a man, now on in years, and about to be executed, who **never lost his desire to be a good servant of Jesus Christ**. He still feels the same way about glorifying his Master. There's no cooling or watering down of that sense of **divine call** on his life.

That's what will keep you teaching the same class for twenty years. That's what will make you willing to play second fiddle in your Bible study group without feeling cheated or short-changed. Most of us can live with a sense of call when we're **noticed** as fulfilling God's call on our lives by our peers or when we're only required to sacrifice our rights for short stretches.

But look at Paul. Beaten, imprisoned, whipped, abandoned. And not just once or twice. He lived a lot of his life on the bottom of the dump. And yet his sense of vision and mission is just as bright at the end of his life. From that moment on the Damascus road to his death he could only classify himself as Christ's servant.

Get this part of the story right first. Don't define your Christian life just by what you **do**. That comes later. And, even worse, don't ever define your Christian life by the things you **don't do**. I don't swear, smoke or drink. I don't go to dirty movies. And I try not to watch too

much stuff on my computer or TV that I know would make Jesus weep.

And that's good. But don't start **defining** your faith by a list of things you do or don't do. Start with your whole life - your whole being - as a Christian. Start with what you **are**. Many Christians have a serious identity crisis. You aren't a teacher. And you aren't a pastor. You aren't a carpenter. You aren't an accountant. You aren't a contractor. You aren't a business owner. None of those roles **defines** you.

Get this right. Write it down. **You're a slave**. You have absolutely no **independent rights**. You don't live to establish your own will. You lay down your life every day for your **Master**.

We talk more than any other generation of Christians in world history about our **"relationship"** with Jesus. Usually we put the word **"personal"** in front of it - our **"personal relationship"** with Jesus. Which makes it sound like we have a say in what the terms of that relationship will be. **Personal** is so warm and informal.

And I'm calling you to **get the relationship right** today. It **is** loving and fulfilling and satisfying and, above all, **eternally saving**. True, His commands are not a **burden** because of the overwhelming love His atonement has won from our humble, thankful hearts. But He is still Lord. We are not equals. The Bible says He's not ashamed to call **us** brothers and sister. But I don't call Him "brother Jesus." I call Him Lord - and I have to learn afresh everyday how to **mean it**.

Mark 8:34-35 - "And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.[35] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."

Those verses are **huge**. I hope every young person and young adult will hear Jesus' advice on how to **find yourself**. Don't start with yourself at all. Don't measure out conservative pieces of your life for the religious section of your existence. Spill your life out recklessly as a slave at Jesus' feet. Your heart will start to overflow with a loving **found-ness** you could have never imagined.