

Going Down, Reaching Out, and Looking Up in 2021

If you have your Bible please turn with me to Titus 2. Next week the plan is to return to our series Messy Grace from 2 Cor, but I feel like this year especially a New Year's type message is appropriate.

We're almost there – in just a few days 2020 will be in our rearview mirror! 2021, here we come!

I had to laugh when I noticed the title of the first message I preached in 2020: Are We Ready for God To Do Something New in the New Year? I closed the message with these words:

God is always doing something new and fresh. Are we ready for God to do something new in the New Year?

I don't think we were. The something new wasn't what we expected. COVID-19, quarantines, businesses closed, lost jobs. Isolation and loneliness. Loved ones dying alone, unable to be comforted in person by family and friends. As if that wasn't enough for 2020 the year also held protests, riots, a controversial presidential election, foreign hacking of government agencies, and Chinese spies targeting American politicians.

It's been a tough year. It's also been a year of increasing polarization and growing rifts. Probably some in this room or watching online have seen friendships damaged or even destroyed by harsh and divisive words over differences of perspective. It's very unlikely that these things are going to be instantly healed just by flipping a page on the calendar.

Having said that I think most of us agree that 2020 can't end soon enough!

And yet, the question I opened 2020 with is a good question for us to close 2020 and start 2021 with: *Are we ready for God to do something new in the New Year?*

It's a good question because with everything that's gone on, it's easy for our focus to be all about those things, and not on God. What we may miss in all of this is, *what is God doing? What does God want to do?*

I don't pretend to have the answer to that. I'm not going to make any predictions about what 2021 will hold.

It might be a year of recovering from the challenges of 2020, or it might be a continuation of those challenges. It might be a peaceful, uneventful year, it might be the year that ushers in the return of Jesus Christ. It might land somewhere in between. Who knows?

I don't have any predictions for the New Year, but I think the Lord has put a direction on my heart for the New Year. Not a prediction, a direction.

When bad driving conditions causes a car to skid, instructors used to say to "steer into the skid". But that confused a lot of people so now they say look where you want the car to go and steer there. It means the same thing as steer into the skid.

Where does God want the church to go, in bad times and good? Let's keep our eyes on that and steer there. Not overreacting, not underreacting. Steady at the wheel. Not banking on 2021 being better than

2020, not presuming 2021 will be worse than 2020. Eyes on this: Where does God want the church to go? Let's steer there.

Not a prediction, a direction. Actually three directions that work together to get us to a good destination. I've shared it recently: downward, outward, and upward. Downward means deepening our knowledge of the Bible. Outward means sharing Jesus with those around us. Upward means living for the glory of our glorious God.

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I believe we see these three directions in Titus 2. Let's read vs. 1 then jump to verse 11:

2 *But as for you, **teach** what accords with sound doctrine...*

11 *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, **12** training us to*

*renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, **13** waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, **14** who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.*

15 **Declare** these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

1. Going Down in God's Word

That sounds like a negative direction doesn't it? Going down sounds negative. We say, "He's a bit down today." "The quality of that restaurant has gone down." Things are looking up means things are going in a good direction. Things are looking down is bad news. Down seems negative.

But for our spiritual life to flourish upward in a healthy way, our spiritual roots needs to go down.

6 *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, **7** rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.* Col. 2:6-7

The higher a tree grows, the deeper its roots need to go or it will easily be blown over. We are to be rooted in Christ. Anchored in Christ. Like a tree, it's the depth of our roots that anchors the height. Over the last couple years the church has seen the scandal and destruction caused by Christian celebrities whose ministries went high, but whose roots didn't go deep.

Paul instructs a young pastor named Titus in verse 1, "as for you, teach sound doctrine." Paul's saying, "teach the scriptures, teach God's word". In verse 15 he then bookends his instruction by saying, don't just teach God's word, do it with all authority.

This book is true, it's truth. It's inerrant – no errors. No mistakes. It diagnoses the human condition, reveals God's character, offers the way of salvation, and tells us how we should live with complete

authority and truth. So, Titus, when you speak this word, speak it forcefully. With all authority.

Do you know why Paul says to Titus, "as for you, teach God's word"? Because in chapter one he talks about those who are leading whole families astray with false teaching. They're teaching lies and deception but *as for you, teach God's word!*

We don't need trendy messages, we need God's word. "*As for you, teach God's word*".

We don't need sermons that say what we want to hear. We need truth. "*As for you, teach God's word.*"

An important part of teaching and preaching God's word is making the connection between this truth and how we live. This doesn't do us any good if we don't apply it to our lives. So in the verses we didn't read, Paul makes that connection: teach older men to do this, older women to do that, young men to live in such a way and younger women to live in such a way, and servants to live in such an upstanding way that by their lives they make the gospel of the Savior attractive.

Anchoring our lives deeply in the word of God is more than knowing a lot about what the Bible says. It's doing what the Bible says. It's better to know a little and obey what we know than to know a lot and not obey it.

If we don't make the connection between the Bible and our lives, then having a lot of Bible knowledge can actually do more harm than good. If sound doctrine isn't forming Christ in us, it will bring out the worst in us.

Jesus tells us to build our lives on the foundation of the word. Romans 12 tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. That's called life-changing! A renewed mind only comes through God's word.

Direction #1 for Grace is to go down deeper into God's word in 2021.

2. Reaching out to the lost with the grace and salvation of God

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...(vs. 11)

The grace of God has appeared in Jesus, who came to save all people. This isn't saying that every person will be saved, but that all peoples – every nationality and people group – are included in the gospel invitation to believe in Jesus and be saved.

As I mentioned, after telling old men and women and young men and women and servants how to live according to God's word, in verse 10 he says do this to "in every way make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."

I take this to mean we're not meant to be ugly witnesses for Christ. An ugly witness is someone who turns people off to Christ. An ugly witness is someone who will help more people come to Christ by *not* telling people they are a Christian then by telling people they're Christians. I've met people who profess to be Christians who, to put it nicely, don't make Christianity attractive. Smug, sarcastic, mean-spirited, unkind, self-righteous, ungracious isn't attractive.

Sometimes people don't want anything to do with Jesus not because no one has shared Jesus with them but because someone did share Jesus with them and what they saw in that person wasn't attractive. We want to live lives that make the gospel of Jesus attractive.

But it is possible to go too far in the other direction too. We can be so desperate to have people like us and think we're cool, that we try to make the gospel attractive by bending and compromising the hard to hear portions of it.

¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age...

This completes Paul's thought about how we make the gospel attractive. There is a counter-cultural force to this verse. We renounce the things that the world loves. We stand when the world says bow. Not arrogantly or angrily, but not timidly either.

Jesus is our example. Sinners loved him! He was the opposite of a stuck up, self-righteous, religious snob. He was fun to be around. He wasn't legalistic. He wasn't mean. People could tell he honestly cared about them. That's attractive.

But he spoke truth even when it offended. He didn't bow his knee to the cultural pressures of his day, he didn't go along to get along. He had courage, conviction, and spoke truth. And that's attractive too...except to those who don't want to hear it.

And sometimes those who don't want to hear it, when storms and waves hit their lives, realize they need a rock that doesn't shift, a truth that doesn't crumble when things get hard and they may come back and say, "tell me about your Jesus."

Direction #2 for Grace is to reach out to those who don't know Jesus with love, grace, and compassion. There are people in your life and in mine who need Jesus. Let's not miss the opportunity to reach out and share Jesus with them.

3. Looking up for the appearing of Jesus Christ

¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

I love verse 13 cause it's the pivot point for this passage. Waiting for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ isn't just a small aspect of the Christian life, it's where our hearts should be all the time. We should be living in the anticipation of Jesus coming back.

We are waiting for our blessed hope. What is that? The appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ! His return to earth in glory.

So we teach sound doctrine – while we wait for Jesus to return.

We live godly lives – while we wait for the appearing of our Savior!

We make the gospel of Jesus attractive – while we're looking for the glory of Christ to split the sky!

And we can wait eagerly for Jesus' return because we're anchored in Jesus' first coming. He gave himself on the cross to redeem us and save us and cleanse us from sin. We need not be fearful or ashamed when Jesus returns because he has saved us and purified us.

Direction #3 for Grace is looking up for Jesus' glorious appearing – return to earth!

Let me close with this: Jesus saved us in order to make us his own. We are his possession, we belong to Christ. Our lives are not our own, we are his. And he saved us so that we might be zealous for good works. We aren't saved by good works, but we are saved for good works.

What is God doing now, as we leave 2020 and head into the unknown waters of 2021? He is doing good, He is giving grace, He is calling people to trade empty, worldly hope for eternal, kingdom hope. What is God about? He's about His people shining brightly in a dark world.

Let's keep our eyes on what God is doing and steer in that direction.