

Entrusted with the Gospel:
Studies in 2 Timothy, #5

Gangrene picture

"Grace, Truth and Moral Beauty"

2 Tim. 3:1-9

--CEFC 12/3/17; cf. 6/16/91

As we enter the Advent season,
my mind goes to my favorite Christmas passage.

It comes from the opening words of John's Gospel—

v. 1--"In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

and then v. 14—

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory,
the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father,
full of grace and truth."

It's such a rich statement of what Christmas is about,
and, in fact, what the entire Christian gospel is about—
the gospel that declares that though we had turned away from him,

God the Father in his love and mercy has reached down to us—
he has drawn near to us personally in his only Son, Jesus Christ,
to dwell among us.

The word for "dwelling" here alludes to that tent, the tabernacle of the Old Testament,
in which the Lord once revealed his glory to the Israelites
in their desert wanderings.

Now that dwelling place is a human person—
and that person reveals something of the glory of God—
the majestic radiance of his loving and merciful holy nature—
a glory captured in the expression—"full of grace and truth."

It is a beautiful picture, isn't it.

The glory of God revealed in the world in Jesus Christ,
a glory that is full of grace and truth.

This, of course, is where we get our church slogan, or motto,
or whatever you want to call it,
that we print each week in our bulletin--

We are Cornerstone Church:

*"building a community of grace and truth
for ministry and mission to the glory of God."*

We use this expression because the church is the body of Christ in the world—

The church is to bear witness to Jesus Christ
by proclaiming and embodying the grace and truth
found in Jesus himself.

This community, comprised of followers of Jesus

who are shaped by his gospel,
 is to display something of his glory.
 This community of his people is to shine forth with a moral beauty
 that reflects the character of Jesus himself—
 full of grace and truth.

I have to say, this vision, more than any other,
 is what has driven my calling to be a pastor—
 My heart's desire is to see this church family
 be so shaped by the grace and truth of the gospel
 that it brings honor to God
 in its display of the character of Christ.

I long to see,
 in what we teach
 and in how we live,
 I long to see this church radiate the glory of the gospel
 with the warm glow of loving and life-giving light of Christ.

I say all this because I think this is what Paul wants to see in the church in Ephesus
 as he instructs the young pastor Timothy.

As we have seen already in this letter,
 Paul urges Timothy to hold fast to the truth of the gospel—
 1:13—"**What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching,**
with faith and love in Christ Jesus.
Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—
guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us."

Holding to the truth is important to Paul.
 In chapter two, that we looked at last week,
 in v. 15 he urges Timothy to be a workman
 who correctly handles the word of truth.
 in v. 17 he warns of Hymanaeus and Philetus,
 who have wandered away from the truth.
 in v. 25 he urges Timothy to instruct those who oppose him
 in the hope that God might lead them to a knowledge of the truth.

But Paul is concerned about the truth not out of some mere intellectual interest.
 No, the truth Paul is concerned about affects all of life—
 in his mind, there is an inexorable link between belief and behavior.
 The truth he is concerned about is gospel truth—
 it is the truth that concerns the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ—
 it is truth that saves,
 and it is truth that necessarily transforms,
 for it is truth that comes with power.
 For the gospel, in Paul's mind, is the power of God to save all who believe.
 That's the truth that matters—the truth of the grace of God in the gospel.

Paul is not ashamed to suffer for this gospel truth—

and he says to Timothy—

**"join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God,
who has saved us and called us to a holy life—
not because of anything we have done
but because of his own purpose and grace.**

**This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,
but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus,
who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light
through the gospel.**

And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher" (1:8-11).

Paul is convinced that this grace of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ
necessarily brings new life.

It has power to transform people;
it can revolutionize their lives;
it can make them more like Jesus.

In Titus 2 Paul speaks of this power of God's grace—

"the grace of God that brings salvation . . .

**teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions,
and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,
while we wait for the blessed hope—**

**the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,
who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness
and to purify for himself a people that are his very own,**

**eager to do what is good" (2:11-14),
and that word "good"¹ has the sense of
what is "attractive," or even "beautiful."**

Grace has a transforming power.

It introduces us into a new way of life—
a way of life that is good, attractive and beautiful.

And what would make it attractive—

this holiness which the grace of God creates?

Just look at how Paul describes it--

In 2 Timothy, chapter 1—it involves mercy and peace—v. 2

it results in a clear conscience—v. 3

it produces joy in relationships—v.4

it is expressed in a sincere faith—v. 5

it flows from a spirit not of timidity and fear,

but of power, of love and of self-discipline—v. 7.

And in chapter 2 it involves a rejection of youthful lusts

and a pursuit of righteousness, faith, love and peace,

flowing from pure hearts—v. 22;

and it avoids quarrels,

¹ καλῶν ἔργων.

but is kind to everyone, and gentle in its correction—v. 24.

In chapter 3 this holiness issues in purpose, patience, love,
and endurance in the face of persecutions—v. 10.

And in chapter 4, it gives assurance of eternal hope
in the face of imminent death—vv. 6ff.

Isn't there something attractive about all that?

something noble,

something beautiful, even glorious about that?

Isn't this what human beings and human relationships are supposed to look like?

Paul believes that a right understanding of the truth of the gospel
necessarily leads to holiness, to godliness,
because of the transforming power of God's grace.

"the grace of God that brings salvation . . .

teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions,
and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives."

You could say that grace civilizes us;

it humanizes us—

it restores the radiance of God's image in us.

Grace makes holly.

I think of the words of Jonathan Edwards:

"Holiness is a most beautiful and lovely thing.

We drink in strange notions of holiness from our childhood,

as if it were a melancholy, morose, sour and unpleasant thing;

but there is nothing in it but what is sweet and ravishingly lovely."²

Isn't the word "grace" itself rooted in beauty?

Something that is gracious is considered "elegant," "refined," "lovely."³

That's why Paul urges Timothy to keep the pattern of "sound teaching" he has received—
the expression there is "healthy teaching"—

it is teaching that leads to a healthy body,

a healthy community,

a community in which all its parts work together in harmony,

It is a community characterized by holiness.

But Paul knows that this "healthy teaching" is always under threat.

He knows there are those associated with the church,

like Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered from the truth,

and their teaching does not promote health.

In fact, their teaching was like a deadly disease in the church body—

in 2:17, Paul compares it to gangrene.

² Cited in Brian G. Hedges, *Christ Formed in You*, p. 116.

³ Cf. C. Spique, *The Trinity and Christian Morality*, p. ?.

Gangrene is an ugly disease—
 Fingers and toes, and sometimes whole arms and legs,
 are deprived of proper blood flow,
 and the tissue literally dies,
 turning green or black.
 It can easily spread through the body,
 and usually, the only treatment is surgical amputation.

I have a medical picture that may help to get Paul's image in your head—
Trigger warning—it is ugly;
 in fact, it is downright repulsive.

[Show picture for a few seconds—then take it down]

I wanted you to see that physical ugliness
 because in our passage this morning, Paul wants us to see moral ugliness.

In contrast to the healthy, holy life
 that flows from a reception of the grace and truth of the gospel,
 Paul wants to warn Timothy and us of they kind of life
 that flows from a rejection of the gospel.
Trigger warning—the picture Paul presents is ugly;
 in fact, it is downright repulsive.

2 Tim. 3:1—

**"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.
 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive,
 disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy,
 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal,
 not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited,
 lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—
 having a form of godliness but denying its power.
 Have nothing to do with them."**

Paul gave Timothy a similar list in his first letter to him—

1 Tim. 1:9-11--

there he spoke of "**lawbreakers and rebels,
 the ungodly and sinful,
 the unholy and irreligious;
 those who kill their fathers or mothers, murderers,
 the sexually immoral, those practicing homosexuality,
 slave traders and liars and perjurers—
 and whatever else is contrary to the sound, healthy doctrine
 that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God."**

You have to say, there is something rather extreme about these vice lists that Paul gives us.
 These are dramatic descriptions of evil—
 you might even call them melodramatic—
 the sort of sensational characterization that you might find in a Greek drama
 in which the audience is meant to be immediately repulsed.

Instead of the glory of God revealed in the lives of those transformed
 by the grace and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ,
 we see the sordid, debased and depraved character
 of humanity left to its own devices.
 It's like gangrene.

This is the contrast Paul wants to present. /

"**But mark this,**" Timothy, Paul says—
 take note, be aware, don't be caught off guard--
"There will be terrible times in the last days."

"**the last days**"—
 Paul is not talking about some limited period immediately before Christ returns.
 The New Testament uses this expression to describe
 that entire period that began with the first coming of Christ
 and which continues until he comes again.

You can tell that Paul thought of himself and Timothy as living in the last days in v. 5--
 after telling Timothy what people will be like in the last days,
 he tells Timothy to have nothing to do with them.
 He is describing what is already the case.

We now live "**in the last days.**"
 And in these "last days" we can expect terrible times.

Not that everything that happens in these last days will be bad.
 The moral standards of society do not head inevitably downward.
 There have been times of dramatic revival in history--
 The 18th century revivals in England, for example,
 led to great improvements in the moral condition of that country,
 not to mention the effect of Christianity
 on the moral standards of the Roman Empire itself.

Who knows?
 Maybe the current wave of sexual allegations and their repercussions
 will have some positive effect on our society?

But Paul is saying that until Christ returns, there will always be spiritual challenges--
"terrible times" he calls them.

It's a strong term--
 referring to painful and perilous periods.
 The expression has a hint of violence in it.⁴

Notice that the cause of these "**terrible times**" is not impersonal institutions
 that will stand against the gospel,
 the problem is not inadequate education.

⁴ cf. Matt. 8:28—of the Gadarene demoniac: *χαλεποὶ λίαν* (NIV: "so violent" ESV: "exceedingly fierce").

the problem is not unjust political regimes,
or economic structures, or child rearing practices.

The problem is people--
and here Paul points to the dark side of human existence--
the moral depravity of humanity--
the evil that is at work among us and within us.

In vv.2-4, Paul uses nineteen different words or phrases to characterize
what some people will be like in these terrible times,
but the key to the whole list may be found in the first two and the last two--

People will be lovers of themselves,
lovers of money,
lovers of pleasure,
rather than lovers of God.

This is the root of the problem--
a misdirected love.

Our affections—the things we love—
are the guidance system of our moral lives--
they tell us what we think is worth aiming for.
Our affections direct our choices;
they move us to act in ways that will satisfy those desires,
and this often operates without us even thinking about it.

You could say that who you are is determined by what you love,
because we all live toward what we want.

And the natural man—the person cut off from the knowledge of God—
that person's love will ultimately be self-focused.

Self-centered materialism and hedonism--
their chief love will be what's in it for me—
in terms of personal affluence and pleasure.

The root problem of these people is their affections--
they love the wrong things,
or the right things in the wrong way.

This points to the core of our faith--
that God alone is worthy of our supreme affection--
we were made to seek after God in his beauty and his glory and his grace.
Everything else is limited and short-sighted and ultimately unsatisfying.

We think that more money is what we really want--
but money just leaves us empty.

We think pleasure will make us happy--
but pleasure without a greater purpose is pointless;

it just makes us lust for more—
a higher high.

We think that we should seek simple self-interest--
but in seeking to satisfy ourselves, Jesus says, we **lose** ourselves.

God alone is worthy of our affections.

We will only find our true selves when we find him.

In the last days people will be depraved in their affections.

You could say that all the rest flows from this basic distortion.

Paul lists three characteristics that all speak of arrogance--
they will be "boastful, proud, and abusive"

Without a proper view of God, it can be easy to think too highly of oneself.
They will be self-made people who worship their creator.

And their exaggerated opinion of themselves
will cause them to look down with contempt upon others.

Then Paul lists five characteristics that begin in the Greek
with the negative prefix alpha--
(which corresponds to the English un- or dis-)
suggesting the tragic absence of qualities
which nature alone would lead us to expect.⁵

And all five seem to refer to family life--

They are **disobedient to parents**--

Parents are the first authority one encounters in life--
standing in the place of God in the lives of children.
It is here that moral rebellion first manifests itself.

They are **ungrateful**--

again we think first of the family and the basic appreciation
that ought to characterize relationships there.

They are **unholy**--perhaps better translated "disrespectful" in this context.

They are **unloving**--a word which particularly refers to normal human affection
that in the natural, created order ought to be found
among parents and their children.

Sadly we see more and more in our culture.

the interests of children being sacrificed to the selfish choices of parents.

⁵Cf. Stott, p. 85

And finally, "**unforgiving**"--also translated "irreconcilable" or "implacable"--
signifying a revolt and rebellion so deep
that there is not even the willingness to seek peace.

As one commentator sums it up,
"In an ideal society, the relationship of children to their parents
should be marked by obedience, gratitude, respect,
affection and reasonableness.
In 'times of stress' all five are lacking."⁶

The others terms Paul uses broaden the scope
of these depraved attitudes even further--

They are **without self control**,
they are **treacherous, rash**, even **brutal**--

This is anti-social behavior that acknowledges no responsibility
and which admits no loyalty.
The nobility of human beings is reduced to the level of animals.

It is a dismal picture,
and one thinks perhaps at what you might see
if you went to the Fairfax County Jail--
Sad cases of men who have sunk to the bottom of the barrel.
Paul is not talking about anybody in my neighborhood, we say,
though it might describe some people we hear about in public life.

But Paul, in v.5, puts an unexpected twist to all this--

He says these people that he has been talking about
are in fact religious people--probably even church members!

"**They have a form of godliness**" he says.

We don't know what form it would have taken--
but somehow, their true nature was masked by a guise of religiosity.

But Paul would have us know that it was only the form of godliness,
not the real thing,
and he offers three marks of this apostate piety that ought to tip us off.

1. First it is a religion without moral transformation--
v.5--"**They have a form of godliness but deny its power.**"

Real religion, the religion of the gospel of Jesus Christ,

⁶Stott, p. 85

is not just a matter of talk—
 saying the right thing;
nor is just a matter of ritual--
 going to church, performing your prayers, and so on.
No, real religion is a life-changing dynamic;
 it has a power to transform lives--
it is infused with a moral energy that can revolutionize one's whole being.

Real religion comes with the power of God's Holy Spirit--
 changing us from the inside--
 giving us new affections, new attitudes, new motivations--
 allowing us to escape from the bondage of self-love
 to enjoy the freedom of the love of God.

The form of religion without its moral power is all too common,
 but according to the Bible it is repulsive in the sight of God.

A second mark of their religion is that it is a religion without integrity--

vv.6-7--"**They are the kind who worm their way into homes
 and gain control over weak-willed women, ...**"

There is something deceitful, secretive, cunning about their tactics--
 as they find devious ways to get into the homes of vulnerable people.
They are peddlers of religion, preying on human weakness.
They use misleading and manipulative means
 to charm and then to capture their converts.

Paul specifically mentions "**weak-willed women**"—
 literally "little women" in a derogatory sense—
 perhaps translated "gullible" or "frivolous"—
This is not a general description of women—
 Paul has specific cases in mind in Ephesus.
And they are not without responsibility in this affair.

They are morally compromised--
 "**loaded down with sins and swayed by all kinds of evil desires**"
And they are intellectually incapacitated--
 "**always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.**"

They enjoy the novelty of religious ideas;
 they are curious about the latest religious fads,
 but they show no interest in a real commitment to the truth—
 that results in real convictions that shape their moral choices.

The religious charlatans found such religious dilettantes easy prey--
 exploiting their guilt and their gullibility--
And undoubtedly they were paid handsomely for their religious secrets,

such that their form of religion becomes a means of financial gain.⁷

Few of these religious salesmen go door-to-door these days;
It is far more effective to enter the living room
through the convenience of the television screen.

Don't be taken in by those who practice a religion without integrity.

A religion without power,
a religion without integrity
and third, these people practice a religion without truth.

v.8--"**Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses,
so also these men oppose the truth--**"

Jannes and Jambres are the traditional names
given to the magicians in Pharaoh's court in Egypt
who tried to duplicate the divine acts of power
that Moses performed in his efforts to get the Israelites
released from the bonds of slavery.

These magicians used sorcery to deceive Pharaoh,
and in the same way these false teachers were using religious sorcery
to deceive people in opposition to the truth.

Their minds become corrupted--
and the tragedy is that, as far as the faith is concerned,
they fail the test--
they are rejected.

Their sincerity doesn't matter.
for what they sincerely believed was a lie.

Theirs was a religion without truth.

It's a ugly picture Paul paints here--
These terrible times that will come.

Don't be naive, Timothy.
The road will not be easy--
you will not be unopposed.
Wolves in sheep's clothing will seek to ravage the flock.
"**Have nothing to do with such people.**"
You must purge such evil from within your midst.
Surgical amputation may be the only viable treatment
of such destructive gangrene.

⁷ Cf. 1 Tim. 6:5.

Paul's words seems rather dreary and pessimistic--
but think for a moment how this would also be a word of encouragement
to Timothy.

These things that you see happening are not outside the plan of God--
We've been told that this would happen.

1 Tim. 4:1--"**The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith
and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.**"

Didn't Jesus himself say that many will come in his name
claiming to be the Christ, and they will deceive many--
there would be wars and rumors of wars--
but don't panic, don't be alarmed--
"**Such things must happen**" (Mt. 24:6).

The love of many will grow cold--
you will persecuted and hated because of me--
"**See, I have told you ahead of time**" (Mt. 24:25).

This is all within the sovereign purpose of God--
Don't be surprised.
Don't be discouraged!
The Lord is still in control.

Don't worry, Timothy--
v.9-- "**these [imposters] will not get very far
because as in the case of [the magicians of Pharaoh]
their folly will be clear to everyone.**"

Don't be overwrought if a few gullible people are taken in and led astray;
don't fear even if falsehood becomes fashionable for a time--
the truth will win out--
it always does--
at some point their folly will be clear to everyone.

There is something so self-evidently true about the truth
that one day it will shine.

It is the lesson of church history, isn't it--
Heresy after heresy has arisen,
and some falsehoods seemed to be headed for triumph,
but somehow the truth is preserved,
for at some point God always vindicates his truth.

Here is the element of hope in this frightfully realistic picture
of the world we live in.

The evil around us is only a reminder that these are the last days.
the last days before . . . what?
--before the coming of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom.
Until then, even in the midst of evil and opposition,

the Lord Jesus is in the process of adorning the beauty of his bride, the church,
that she may shine with his glory,
"cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,
to present her to himself as a radiant church,
without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish,
but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:26,27).

Christ is adorning his church with the beauty
that flows from the grace and truth of the gospel--
the beauty of humility,
the beauty of generosity,
the beauty of compassion and kindness and patience and forgiveness,
the beauty of a sacrificial love.
That's the beauty of Jesus Christ himself—
it is the glory of the One and Only from the Father,
full of grace and truth.

John in his Gospel declares---"**we have seen that glory**"—
but he knows that not everybody sees it.
This Word become flesh, he writes, "**was in the world,**
and though the world was made through him,
the world did not recognize him.
He came to that which was his own,
but his own did not receive him.
Yet to all who received him,
to those who believed in his name,
he gave the right to become children of God—" (John 1:10-13).

So I ask you—have you seen the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ?
Have you seen the glory of his humility in leaving his heavenly home
to dwell in this fallen world?
Have you seen the glory of his patience
to put up with human pride?
Have you seen the glory of his compassion
to meet the real needs of suffering people?
and finally, have you seen the glory of his sacrificial love
in dying on a criminal's cross
to defeat the power of sin and death?
That is the glory of grace and truth.
And if you truly see that glory, you cannot help but be transformed by it—
it will be ravishingly lovely to you,
and you will become a lover of God,
it will draw you into a new way of life,

If you do see it now, thank God for his grace in your life.,
for that kind of vision is a gift.

And if you haven't seen it—

if this glory means nothing to you—
then I can only urge you to pray that the Lord in his grace
takes the veil from your eyes—
for it is truly there—and it is beautiful.

Prayer—servers come forward.

You are gracious—
may your grace transform our lives.

May we see the ugliness of sin—
and the beauty of holiness.—
may we long to

Open our eyes to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus—
who loves us with an unfathomable love.

Communion—

We come now to the communion table—
these visible elements—the bread and the cup—
set the grace and truth of the gospel before our eyes.
Jesus—the Lamb of God—
in the ultimate act of love,
giving his life in our place –
a broken body, shed blood—
the perfect sacrifice for our sin.

Do you see it?
Do you have spiritual eyes to sense the beauty of it—
this gospel--
the gift of God's Son for you?

This visible expression of the gospel at this table
is for all those who are a part of Christ's visible body of the church—
the community of grace and truth—
this community of the church is entered spiritually through faith
and is recognized publicly through baptism.

If you have not yet entered this visible body—
If you have not yet put your faith in Jesus,
or if you've not yet gone public as a follower of Jesus
through baptism,
let these elements pass and pray for eyes to see
the glory of what is presented here.

For the rest of us—
take and eat and receive afresh the life of Christ living in us
by the Holy Spirit—
the life that transforms us
into the likeness of his beautiful body.

**The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,
and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said,
"This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."**

**In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying,
"This cup is the new covenant in my blood;
do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."
For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

Benediction:

Entrusted with the Gospel:
Studies in 2 Timothy, #5
Dec. 3, 2017

"Grace, Truth and Moral Beauty"
2 Tim. 3:1-9

We must be realistic about the world we live in—"There will be terrible times in the last days." We can expect people to behave badly. But we must continue to display the beauty of life lived in the light of the grace and truth of the gospel.

**The need for "sound teaching"--
Grace and Truth have the power
to create real beauty.**

**A distortion of the truth and a denial of grace
results in moral ugliness.**

II. Discerning Depravity

in their affections

in the attitudes

in their religion

III. Maintaining our Confidence

"But they will not get very far . . ."

IV. Displaying the Beauty of the Gospel

Discussion Questions:

"Grace, Truth and Moral Beauty"

2 Tim. 3:1-9

- What comes to your mind when you think of "moral beauty"? What examples of moral beauty have you seen or experienced or heard about in the life of our church?
- How is moral beauty connected to the "grace and truth" of the gospel? How does grace have a power to change us?
- Do you have a moral vision such that you see evil as ugly? How do you think we can be distorted in our moral vision? What role does the media play in shaping our moral vision? Consider these words from Alexander Pope:
Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.
- How can we seek to be shaped more fully by the grace and truth of the gospel? What can we do to foster right affections such that we are lovers of the good?
- How should Paul's description in 3:1-9 warn us and protect us? What does it mean when he says, "Have nothing to do with them" (v. 5)?
- Pastor Kynes: "I long to see, in what we teach and in how we live, this church radiate the glory of the gospel with the warm glow of loving and life-giving light of Christ." What would such a church look like in your mind? What could be your part in creating such a church?