

Certainty in a World where Everything is Relative

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening. It's lovely to be with you again. Thank you for the invitation. And for those of you who do remember in your prayers the work of the Christian unions or the outreach of the Christian unions, thank you for that. I'm the team leader for the staff and relay workers in Scotland. And there are Christian students serving Christ together in 19 Christian union groups across Scotland, many of them at this time of year inviting their friends to carol services. And that obviously is a wonderful opportunity for students who don't know the gospel to hear the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ and to perhaps engage with the significance of the gospel. So do pray for them at this time of year, the next two weeks especially.

We're going to look at this idea of the fact that we believe certainties, that we base our lives upon certainties, but we do so in a world of relativism. We have an increasingly strong tendency in our culture for people to say that anything is okay, anything is acceptable, anything is allowed unless you're certain about it. And that is the kind of conversation that we are increasingly exposed to. And that of course brings us into an enormous situation of clashing and tension when we are wanting to proclaim a gospel which is full of certainties to our culture that doesn't want to hear or believe in certainties. The tendency might be for us to think that that situation is getting worse and worse and worse and that what we are facing is unique in human history. I don't think it is. I think it's actually the norm. And I think what we are growing out of in our Western British culture is a kind of protected and abnormal situation where there was a Christian legacy or a legacy of Christian belief that is now, of course, running out and no longer there. And I suspect the situation that we're in today where our culture doesn't want to engage in the certainties of the gospel and even objects to the idea of their being certainties when it comes to spiritual and moral things.

I suspect that if you took the world as a whole and history as a whole, what we're facing today is actually normal and actually common throughout many cultures of the world. So that's just an introductory thought. So maybe what we're facing is faced by brothers and sisters the world over. And has been down through the ages of history. One of our Christian unions in England had lined up the, you might have read about this in the Spectator, had lined up their carol service to be held in Derby Cathedral. And Christmas being historically a bigger cultural thing in England than it ever was in Scotland, the CUs quite frequently pack out these vast cathedrals with students for their carol services. And hundreds and hundreds of students have an opportunity to hear the gospel.

[3 : 3 9] However, plans have run amok in Derby because the cathedral authorities have banned the preacher whom they had asked to come and be their speaker at the carol service. He's an Anglican vicar in the Anglican church.

You'd have thought that there wouldn't be a problem, but is known, of course, for preaching the gospel as you and I would understand it. And so the cathedral doesn't want anything quite as certain or solid or clear presented. And the reason given, well, any preaching in the cathedral might be thought to be approved of by the cathedral. Isn't that extraordinary? So, well, maybe it's not. Maybe it's entirely believable and probably more likely. But that's the kind of situation that we read about all the time, we hear about all the time, and we sense that Christians who put their beliefs out there into the public square are going to face an increasing amount of hostility from our relativist culture. The section of Psalm 119 that was just read for us includes this verse, number 95, the wicked are waiting to destroy me. That's a statement of the ultimate oppression, isn't it? The wicked are waiting to destroy me. The psalmist felt that. And yet he goes on in the second half of the that very verse to say, but I will ponder your statutes. Isn't that a lovely description of what the Christian does when faced with a hostile culture that does not accept the sovereignty or the gospel of God's grace and knows it. But the Christian says, but I will ponder your statutes. That's got to be something of our prayer that we would be like that, and that we would adopt that posture before

God in our culture. Turn with me to the New Testament, though, because we're going to spend most of our time this evening thinking about these verses in Titus. Titus chapter 2 and verses 11 to 15. It's a lovely little gospel summary, indeed a great little text for Advent Sunday that describes the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ in doctrinal terms. For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. That's the gospel, isn't it? The grace of God appearing in Jesus Christ. And over the coming

Sundays, this is our message, this is our opportunity, this is the certainty that we want to make known to our relativistic culture and to our friends who have no idea that there is a foundation so solid that they could be brought to stand on. The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.

It, the gospel of grace, teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, and that is negatively, say no to these things, but positively, the verse goes on, 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. It would be hard to write a more succinct, Christ-centered summary of the gospel. We have Christ's coming into the world, his dying on the cross, and his second coming on the day of judgment, all perfectly put and all described in terms that enable us to see the huge need for living Christian lives in the present age.

[8 : 16] Indeed, that is, if you know this little letter, the whole message of the book of Titus. Titus, this three-chapter letter to this young pastor who's battling away in Crete, Titus, the letter, interweaves teaching and living, teaching and living, teaching and living, all the way through the letter. Many of the New Testament letters have a great big long section of teaching, and then a section on living, Romans 12 to 16, and so on. Many of the letters are like that. But Titus interweaves teaching and living all the way through the letter, and his big emphasis is that the gospel that the gospel that Titus proclaims, the certainties that he teaches, have to be and must be and need to be adorned with lives, Christian lives, that reflect and mirror the teaching of the gospel. Let me just try and show you that briefly in the letter. And if you look with me to chapter 1 and verse 9, he must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught. Why? So that he can encourage others by sound doctrine. That is, his teaching has to have an outbox in the lives of others. Here's another example in chapter 2, verse 5.

To be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind and to be subject to their husbands. Why? So that. What are these lives for? So that no one will malign the Word of God.

Look down to chapter 2, verse 9. Now speaking to slaves. Teach slaves to be subject to their masters and everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted. Why? Why are slaves to live like that? So that, in every way, they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive. And so on. There are many examples like that. You can go through the letter and look for the phrase, so that. It comes again and again and again and again. Live this way as those who have been, as our passage says, purified for Christ, a people that are his very own. A people that are his very own. Live this way as these people so that the world can see the transformed life and think about the certainties of the gospel as a result.

I suspect it's true to say that most of us, if we were to have a conversation with friends or neighbors who don't believe the gospel, I suspect that quite quickly the conversation would either get onto the topic of how do we know that our religion is true or any better than anyone else's religion. Or, maybe even more likely, it would get onto the topic of marriage and sexual morality and sexual behavior and sexual relationships. And where is there more relativism in our culture and society today?

[12 : 25] And there, one of those two topics, I imagine, would come up pretty quickly. And our fear as Christians, if we're engaging in those kind of conversations, well, what is your fear?

When would you start to find the conversation getting difficult? When would you want to be praying, Lord, could you just let the ground swallow me up now because I don't know what to say next? When would you find yourself saying, ah, I don't know the answer to that? It might be when the person starts accusing you or the Christian church or Christianity in general of being one of two things, either judgmental or hypocritical.

Because there's nothing our society likes to do more, right from the headlines down to the man in the street, than to debunk the gospel by pointing at what it calls judgmentalism or hypocrisy. Is that right? If they can throw those assertions at Christianity, then they can disregard the convictions and the clear doctrinal beliefs of Christian people.

[14 : 08] And the whole push and thrust of this letter to this young pastor is that he must teach and encourage to live in such a way that that can't happen.

Listen to the verbs that Paul uses as he writes to Titus.

He says these are all the things that Titus has got to do there in Crete. He says he's to encourage people. He is to refute. He is to silence people.

He is to rebuke. He is to teach with all authority. He is, at the end of our passage, not to let anyone despise him. He is to remind and stress and warn.

These are all really, really strong, active, verbal teaching verbs, aren't they? Titus, you must put your message over so strongly.

[15 : 14] And you must tell people what is right and what is wrong for Christianity and for Christian living in such a way that there can never be any doubt about the certainties of the gospel.

You must keep doing that. Because if you keep doing that, the witness of Christian people's lives will be irrefutably adorning the gospel the church believes.

Do you see that? It's a very strong letter to put a really strong spine into this young pastor. And that so that the church can be demonstrably in line with what it believes.

Let's go back to our passage. Here are the certainties that we believe. The incarnation, verse 11, the grace of God has appeared to all men.

Now that's as true today as it was when Paul wrote that. The news of the appearing of the Messiah King and the coming of the grace of God into this world has been heralded for 2,000 years and believed by millions.

[16 : 40] There is no figure in the whole of history more greatly publicized or revered than our Lord Jesus Christ. He has appeared to all men.

His grace. The gospel has been enfleshed, incarnated in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. And this gospel, this Savior, once he has a grip of someone's life, teaches people, as Paul says, to say no to certain things and to live in a certain way.

So we have the incarnation. We also have the great certainty of the second coming. Verse 13, while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There is probably no Christian doctrine more scorned or disbelieved than the doctrine of a last day of reckoning, a day of judgment.

The idea of heaven and hell being two eternal realities, destinations that all human beings who have ever been created in the image of God will be spending eternity in.

[18 : 05] Nothing would be quite so offensive to our culture than the idea, the solid idea of a Lord who will be judge, who is Savior and who will be judge, and who will discern rightly between all human souls.

Oh, I don't want to believe in a God like that. Hell, what kind of God would allow that? That's almost more than sexual morality.

The Christian teaching of marriage would be even more unacceptable if the idea wasn't even laughable to believe that a judgment and heaven and hell exist.

And yet we are those who wait more than we wait for anything else, for the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

That is our hope, the writer says. The blessed hope that is ours. That is our goal. That's what keeps us going. That's what we look forward to.

[19 : 21] That certainty. Oh, I don't want to believe in a God like that. God says your friend over the garden gate. Just recently, there was a discussion in a primary school management team about whether or not to invite the local minister to come and do a Christian assembly.

And one person said, no, I don't think we should because I used to go with my child to a playgroup in that church, and I didn't like some of the things that I saw on the church walls.

And so the Christian teacher said, well, what things? And she said, oh, you know, Jesus being the only right way and that kind of thing, that kind of thing, that kind of certainty that we surely wouldn't want our children to hear.

Then someone else said, well, maybe we could ask him to come and do a Christian service, but just not speak from the Bible or mention the Bible. And the Christian said, you can't ask a Christian minister to come and speak and not speak as a Christian minister.

And this conversation went round and round. I can't remember what was decided in the end. He wasn't coming anyway. Because there would be too much certainty. Even certainty about Christmas is suspicious.

[20 : 45] Even that, because people have so little clue about what the gospel is. And yet here, Paul says to Titus, no, the grace of God has appeared to all.

We are waiting for Christ to come again. And in the meantime, we must live upright, godly lives. Self-controlled, upright, godly lives.

We've got the incarnation, the second coming, and thirdly, the meaning of the cross. Look at verse 14. The Christ who comes again is the one who, verse 14, gave himself for us on the cross to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

The Christ who will come and judge is the Christ who died for us to redeem us, his people, from all wickedness.

So we must live as if that were the case. We must say no to ungodliness. We must say no and help one another to do so.

[22 : 06] We must say no to worldly passions. And we must live self-controlled, upright, godly lives. Our living is the only undeniable certainty that unbelievers have access to if they are going to believe the gospel.

Or our living will be a denial of the gospel. One or other is true, isn't it? These, then, says Paul in verse 15, are the things you should teach.

The incarnation, the second coming, the meaning of the cross. These are the things you should teach. Encourage, rebuke with all authority. Don't let anyone despise you when you teach these things.

That's a very brave thing to say, isn't it, in our culture? Don't let anyone despise you. If I go out and say to the man in the street, this is what I believe, he's likely to despise me. But if we make the gospel known to people who know us, and who have a window into our lives, and who know how we've treated them, and who know how we've expressed care for them in their lives and situations, then it's much harder for them to despise you, or the gospel.

And actually, our culture unwittingly gives us an opportunity here. Because when someone says, at one mention of the second coming, or a day of judgment, you know when something appalling happens, and people are wringing their hands and saying, how can this kind of evil take place?

[24 : 06] I just saw that there was a film released, I've not seen it yet, but it was recommended to me, a kind of documentary-type film of the appalling events of the 22nd of July in 2011 in Norway, when 77 people were killed by one person.

That's the kind of catastrophe that plunges people into these conversations. There is no justice then. And we are the ones who say, oh, yes, there will be.

Yes, there will be. There is a day of reckoning, and that person, along with every other human being, will stand before a judgment seat. I believe. Oh, I don't want to believe in a God like that. Oh, well, we say, what if it's true? We maybe don't want to believe in it, but what if it's true? Surely, surely you would give credence to the fact in our society where everything is fine that maybe my beliefs are fine as well.

Are they not? And we can win them onto their own ground of supposedly giving every viewpoint an airing and a legitimacy.

[25 : 24] Oh, is my belief the only illegitimate one? I think it would be rather good if there was an ultimate day of reckoning and all evil and all punishment was given out in a perfect, righteous manner so that every lip was silent and nobody even wanted to issue an appeal because everybody the whole world over can see the justice of what's being done.

That would be quite good, I think. Isn't it? Isn't that not what we long for? And the conversation can go on like that. And you can say, well, maybe you should consider the certainties that I believe. I wouldn't like to live without them. Living with certainties in a world of relativism is what the Christian life is and always has been.

But gospel and gospel living, gospel and godliness must be, as the New Testament always says, hand in hand, glued together fast.

If doctrine isn't producing godliness in our lives, then it's not doctrine worth having.

[26 : 58] Just jump with me before we finish to Titus' next, or to Paul's next little gospel summary. And this is where he puts judgmentalism to bed.

Look at chapter 3, verse 3. At one time, we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.

We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But, when the kindness and love of God, our Savior, appeared, he saved us.

Not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. That's the end of all judgmentalism, isn't it? Or should be. We can never say to someone with a holier-than-thou attitude, looking down our nose, with pious righteousness at anyone else, that our way is right because we are better.

No, our way is right, and we were without hope. We were and are no better than anyone else, because the certainty that we believe in is the certainty that the mercy of God alone is the thing that has touched us and changed us.

[28 : 32] not my righteousness, precisely not that. Friends, let me encourage you.

If you speak without judgmentalism, which the gospel gives us no ground to have, and if we speak without hypocrisy, which the gospel empowers us to do, then the certainties by which we live and hope are very, very attractive to a world that is at sea, to people who do not know where they are, or what they know, or what anyone knows, or what they believe, or what anyone believes.

We know that the gospel is supremely attractive, because the Lord Jesus Christ is the only Savior, and he's come to live in the likes of me by his Spirit.

We know that. And so to live in a world of relativism is our highest calling and our greatest joy, even if, like the psalmist, we think the wicked are just waiting to oppress me, but I will consider your statutes.

Amen.