

Homiletics Analysis: Titus 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Titus 3 brings Paul's letter to its practical and theological climax. The chapter moves in three distinct phases. The first (vv. 1–2) issues direct imperatives for how believers are to conduct themselves in the public square — submitting to governing authorities, being ready for every good work, and maintaining a posture of gentleness and non-contentiousness toward all people. The second and theologically load-bearing phase (vv. 3–8) grounds those imperatives in a sweeping statement of what God has done in salvation: “we ourselves were once” the very kind of people we are now called to treat with patience and goodness (v. 3), but God intervened — not on the basis of works, but according to His own mercy, through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, poured out richly through Jesus Christ, so that we might be justified by grace and become heirs of eternal life (vv. 4–7). This is among the densest soteriological statements in the Pauline corpus. The third phase (vv. 8–11) closes with instruction on what Titus is to emphasize, what he is to avoid, and how to handle a divisive person — underscoring that sound doctrine has practical and ecclesial consequences.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two deeply intertwined things through this chapter simultaneously: first, to call the Cretan churches to a visibly different public life — not as a performance of virtue, but as a natural expression of what grace has done to them; and second, to ensure that the gospel logic undergirding that life is clearly understood, confessed, and protected. The intent is not merely behavioral change (vv. 1–2 are not self-standing imperatives) and not merely doctrinal clarity for its own sake — it is the formation of a community whose observable life in the world is inseparable from, and continuously fed by, the grace that saved them. Wherever believers forget who they were before grace intervened (v. 3), they become harsh, proud, and sectarian. Wherever they lose the doctrinal anchor of vv. 4–7, their good works drift into moralism or collapse altogether. The chapter holds these two together as one integrated claim.

Subject Sentence: The grace that saved us from our former life now commissions and empowers our present one.

Primary Claim: God is calling the church to a public life of goodness, gentleness, and civic faithfulness — not as the ground of salvation but as its necessary fruit — and He grounds

that call entirely in the mercy He showed us when we were no better than those we are now called to serve. Believers who have been washed, renewed, justified, and made heirs by sheer grace have every reason, and no excuse, to live otherwise.

Interpretive Evaluation

The relationship between vv. 1–2 and vv. 4–7: imperatives grounded in indicatives

The most significant interpretive question in this chapter is structural and theological: what is the relationship between the behavioral commands of vv. 1–2 and the doctrinal statement of vv. 4–7? The Reformed reading, grounded in the text's own grammar, is that the indicative of salvation (vv. 4–7) is the explicit ground of the imperatives — the connective tissue is visible in v. 3 (“For we ourselves were once...”) and the resumption of ethical instruction in v. 8 (“so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works”). This is not two separate sections loosely joined — it is one argument: *because grace has done this, therefore live like this*. Commands without the gospel ground produce moralism; the gospel ground without commands produces antinomianism. The text holds both.

The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition rightly emphasizes the human responsibility dimension of vv. 1–2 and 8 and the genuine call to observable transformation. This is a valid emphasis and need not be quarreled with at the level of application. Where Wesleyan exposition sometimes overreaches is in reading “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (v. 5) as referring primarily to water baptism and a progressive sanctification that is partially synergistic. The text's emphasis is on divine initiative from beginning to end — the washing and renewing are what God does, not what we cooperate in producing. The Wesleyan application instinct is sound; the synergistic reading of the mechanism is not supported by the passage.

“Washing of regeneration” (v. 5): baptismal or spiritual regeneration?

Lutheran and Roman Catholic readings tend to find sacramental regeneration here — water baptism as the instrumental cause of regeneration. The Greek *loutron* (washing, bath) does carry water imagery, and the passage does connect it to the Spirit's work. However, the Reformed reading — shared with most evangelical scholarship — understands “washing of regeneration” as a metaphorical description of the regenerating work of the Spirit, not a reference to the water of baptism as the channel of grace. The parallel with Ezekiel 36:25–27 (where God promises to sprinkle clean water on His people as an image of the Spirit's internal cleansing and renewal) supports the spiritual reading. Furthermore, the passage's entire emphasis is on *God's* initiative and *God's* mercy — introducing baptism as the instrumental cause would shift the weight toward a human-administered rite in a way the context resists. The Reformed reading: the “washing” is the Spirit's regenerating work, described in water imagery consistent with Old Testament prophecy.

“Heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (v. 7): conditional or unconditional?

Arminian readings frequently understand “heirs” as a conditional status — believers are heirs so long as they persevere in faith, and that perseverance is not guaranteed. The Reformed reading understands the heirship as grounded entirely in justification by grace (v. 7a) and is therefore as secure as the justification itself. The passage gives no ground for conditionality — the chain from mercy (v. 5) to justification (v. 7a) to heirship (v. 7b) is entirely divine in agency. The warning passage of vv. 9–11 (avoid divisive people) functions as a pastoral and ecclesial instruction, not as a threat to the security of the justified — it addresses the community’s health, not the individual’s standing.

The “divisive person” (v. 10): church discipline or mere avoidance?

Some Baptist readings emphasize formal church discipline procedures here. The text does describe a two-warning structure before “rejection” (*paraiteomai*), which has disciplinary resonance. The Reformed reading embraces this as a legitimate church discipline text, though noting that the focus is specifically on doctrinal divisiveness (the preceding context of “foolish controversies and genealogies and dissensions and quarrels about the law”), not generic interpersonal conflict. The discipline is in service of the community’s doctrinal health and gospel witness — consistent with the chapter’s governing concern.

The Reformed reading preferred throughout: The chapter is a unified argument in which the gospel indicative (vv. 3–7) is the explicit and irreplaceable ground of the behavioral imperatives (vv. 1–2, 8). Regeneration is the Spirit’s sovereign work, justification is by grace alone, heirship is secure, and good works are the necessary fruit of grace rather than its ground or condition.

Key Canonical Support

- **Ezekiel 36:25–27** — God’s promise to sprinkle His people clean, give them a new heart, and put His Spirit within them: the Old Testament ground of the “washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” in v. 5, showing this is covenant promise fulfilled, not a new or isolated idea.
- **Romans 3:21–26** — Justification by grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, apart from works of the law: the closest Pauline parallel to Titus 3:5–7, grounding the same claim in its fullest doctrinal form.
- **Ephesians 2:1–10** — “We were by nature children of wrath” (parallel to Titus 3:3’s “we ourselves were once...”), saved by grace not works, “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (parallel to Titus 3:8’s emphasis on good works as fruit): the most structurally parallel passage in the Pauline corpus to this chapter’s entire argument.
- **Romans 13:1–7** — Submission to governing authorities as a theological obligation, not merely pragmatic counsel: corroborates and expands the public civic

instruction of Titus 3:1–2, showing this is a consistent Pauline concern, not incidental to the gospel.

- **John 3:5–8** — The Spirit’s regenerating work described in water and wind imagery by Jesus Himself: supports the Reformed reading of “washing of regeneration” as Spirit-work rather than water-rite, and grounds the doctrine in dominical teaching.

Aim: To demonstrate that the church’s public life of goodness and gentleness is neither self-generated virtue nor a work performed to earn favor, but the overflow of a salvation accomplished entirely by divine mercy — and to call believers to inhabit that life with gospel clarity and renewed urgency.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:1	Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work	“Remind” (<i>hupomimnēskō</i>) — this is review, not new instruction; submission framed as a standing posture, not occasional compliance
3:2	To speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people	“All people” (<i>pantas anthrōpous</i>) — the scope is universal, not limited to fellow believers; extends the call to the whole social environment
3:3	For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another	The hinge verse — the grace-grounded “for we ourselves” that makes the commands of vv. 1–2 non-moralistic; the catalog matches the Cretan social environment Titus is navigating
3:4	But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared	“Appeared” (<i>epephanē</i>) — the Incarnation in its soteriological dimension; “loving kindness” is <i>philanthrōpia</i> , God’s genuine love for humanity

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:5a	He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy	Explicit denial of works-righteousness as the ground of salvation; “his own mercy” — the exclusivity is emphatic in the Greek
3:5b	By the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit	The instrument of salvation: Spirit-wrought regeneration described in cleansing imagery; two aspects of one work or two sequential acts (debated; see Interpretive Evaluation)
3:6	Whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior	“Poured out richly” — abundance, not scarcity; the Spirit’s giving is extravagant; mediated through Christ
3:7	So that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life	Justification → heirship → hope: the chain is entirely divine; “hope of eternal life” frames the present as an inheritance-in-waiting
3:8	The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works	The “faithful saying” formula signals this is creedal summary material; good works are the output of believing, not the input to justification
3:9	But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless	The contrast: what Titus is to promote (v. 8) versus what he is to avoid (v. 9); the quarrels are specifically over the law — likely Judaizing tendencies
3:10	As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him	A three-stage process embedded in one verse: first warning, second warning, then rejection (<i>paraiteomai</i>); divisiveness is treated as a serious ecclesial threat
3:11	Knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is	The divisive person’s condition: <i>exestraphtai</i>

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	self-condemned	(warped, turned inside out); “self-condemned” — their continued divisiveness after warning constitutes their own verdict
3:12–13	Personal instructions about Artemas, Tychicus, Zenas, and Apollos; travel plans	Pastoral logistics; Zenas and Apollos are to be helped on their way — possibly they carried this letter
3:14	And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful	The good works of v. 8 now made concrete: meeting urgent material needs; “unfruitful” (<i>akarpoi</i>) frames gospel-detached life as barren
3:15	All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.	Closing greetings; “in the faith” (<i>en pistei</i>) — shared faith as the bond of community

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	3:1–2	Public Life Commanded: Submit, Obey, Show Goodness to All
2	3:3–7	Gospel Ground Declared: Grace Transformed What We Were
3	3:8	Doctrinal Summary Applied: Good Works as the Fruit of Believing
4	3:9–11	Community Health Protected: Avoid Controversy, Discipline Division
5	3:12–15	Pastoral Postscript: Logistics, Urgent Needs, Final Grace

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The grace that saved us from our former life now commissions and empowers our present one.

Primary Claim: God is calling the church to a public life of goodness, gentleness, and civic faithfulness — not as the ground of salvation but as its necessary fruit — and He grounds that call entirely in the mercy He showed us when we were no better than those we are now called to serve. Believers who have been washed, renewed, justified, and made heirs by sheer grace have every reason, and no excuse, to live otherwise.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe how you see the difficult, ungodly, or hostile person in your public life. (*Mind/Belief*)

Paul's command to show "perfect courtesy toward all people" (v. 2) is not rooted in sentimentality about human potential — it is rooted in memory: "we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray..." (v. 3). The person in your workplace, your neighborhood, or your family who is hostile, foolish, or enslaved to their appetites is not your enemy — they are a portrait of what grace rescued you from. When you look at them with contempt, you have forgotten the mercy that found you. The corrective is not trying harder to be nice — it is remembering more clearly what you were before God's goodness appeared.

2. Examine whether your "good works" are rooted in grace or in the desire to establish your own standing. (*Affections/Worship*)

The chapter insists with precision that salvation is "not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy" (v. 5), and then immediately insists that believers "devote themselves to good works" (v. 8). These two are not in tension — they define the only non-toxic form of good works. Good works done to earn, to impress, or to secure God's favor are not the fruit of grace — they are a quiet replacement of grace. Ask yourself: if your good works were invisible to everyone, including God judging your standing, would you still do them? The grace-transformed heart does good because it has been made new, not because it is trying to make itself acceptable.

3. Be the kind of presence in your civic and social environment that makes the gospel visible without making it a slogan. (*Will/Behavior*)

Verses 1–2 are strikingly specific: submit to governing authorities, be ready for every good work, speak evil of no one, avoid quarreling, be gentle. This is not a call to political quietism or cultural withdrawal — it is a call to a particular *quality* of public presence. The Cretan churches existed in a culture Paul himself had just quoted as characterized by lying, evil, and laziness (1:12). Into that environment, the instruction is not to separate but to show up differently — submitting where submission is due, working where work is needed, speaking

well where others slander, gentling conversations that others inflame. Identify one public relationship or civic context where you are currently failing to show the quality of presence this passage describes, and change it this week.

4. Let the extravagance of the Spirit's giving produce gratitude that overflows into generosity toward urgent needs. (*Affections/Worship*)

The Spirit was “poured out on us richly” (v. 6) — abundantly, without measure. The same Spirit who regenerated and renewed us was given extravagantly, not sparingly. The closing verse of the chapter (v. 14) applies good works to “cases of urgent need” — material, tangible, present-tense need in the community. The connection is not accidental: those who have received without measure are called to give without calculation. Where are the urgent needs in your church community, your neighborhood, your city? The richness of what you have received in the Spirit is the measure of what you are freed to give.

5. Name and resist the temptation to make doctrinal precision a weapon for division rather than a protection for community. (*Will/Behavior*)

Paul tells Titus to avoid “foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law” (v. 9) — not because doctrine doesn’t matter, but because the chapter has just delivered some of the densest doctrine in the New Testament (vv. 4–7) and immediately applied it to a life of public goodness and ecclesial health. The divisive person of v. 10 is not divisive because they care about doctrine — they are divisive because their doctrinal energy is aimed at controversy rather than community. Examine your own engagement: are your strong views about theology producing the fruit of vv. 1–2, or the conflict of v. 9? The test of genuine doctrinal health is not how sharply you disagree with others but how clearly the life of vv. 1–2 is visible in you.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Titus 3:4–7 constitutes one of the most compressed and complete soteriological statements in Scripture, touching the full arc of salvation in four verses: the divine initiative (God’s goodness and mercy appearing), the exclusion of works-righteousness, the Spirit’s regenerating and renewing work, the justification by grace, and the resulting heirship of eternal life. It establishes with unmistakable clarity that every element of salvation is a divine act — not a human achievement — and that the basis of salvation is God’s own mercy rather than anything in the recipient. The passage also teaches that the Incarnation (“when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared”) is not merely a historical event but the moment of divine soteriological intervention — God’s character becoming visible and operative in the world. The Spirit’s work is described as both regeneration (new birth) and renewal (ongoing transformation), grounding the Christian life in a continuous divine action rather than a one-time transaction.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage is a linchpin text for the Reformed doctrine of grace operating at every level simultaneously. It is anti-Pelagian in its explicit denial of works as the ground of salvation (v. 5a); it is anti-synergistic in its attribution of both regeneration and renewal entirely to the Spirit's initiative (v. 5b); it is forensic in its insistence on justification by grace as the basis of heirship (v. 7); and it is anti-antinomian in its immediate framing of good works as the necessary fruit of the justified life (v. 8). The chapter thus embodies the Reformed *ordo salutis* not as an abstract doctrinal scheme but as a living argument: because this is who God is and what He has done, therefore this is who we are and how we live. The "for we ourselves were once..." of v. 3 is particularly significant for Reformed piety — it grounds both humility and compassion in the doctrine of total depravity, not as a theoretical category but as autobiography. The community shaped by this passage will be simultaneously doctrinally serious and publicly gentle, theologically precise and humanly compassionate — because it knows that both come from the same source.

Main Takeaway

You were exactly who you are now looking at before God intervened — foolish, disobedient, driven by passions you couldn't control, hating and being hated. He didn't wait for you to improve. He showed up in mercy, washed you clean by His Spirit, declared you righteous by His grace, and named you heir of eternal life. That is the whole story — and the only honest response to it is a life of gentleness, goodness, and public faithfulness toward people who are still where you used to be. Stop living like you earned your way out of v. 3. You didn't. Go live like someone who knows it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching vv. 1–2 as a free-standing civic ethics passage.** The commands to submit, obey, and show courtesy to all people are regularly taught in isolation from vv. 3–7 as a kind of Christian citizenship manual — practical advice for how to live in society. This severs the nerve of the text. Paul does not ground civic goodness in the dignity of government, the social contract, or even general revelation. He grounds it in the gospel: "we ourselves were once..." without the gospel ground, the commands of vv. 1–2 become moralism. The preacher must trace the argument from imperative (vv. 1–2) through historical self-indictment (v. 3) to doctrinal foundation (vv. 4–7) before returning to imperative (v. 8) — or the text has not been preached.

- **Treating vv. 4–7 as a parenthetical doctrinal insert rather than the structural load-bearer.** Some expositions move quickly through the soteriological dense vv. 4–7 as if they are background material supporting the “real” pastoral point of the chapter. In fact, the reverse is true: vv. 4–7 are the argument, and vv. 1–2 and 8 are its application. Titus 3:5–7 is among the most carefully constructed soteriological summaries in the Pauline letters — it deserves extended exposition, not summary treatment.
- **Using “washing of regeneration” to argue for or against baptismal regeneration without exegeting the text.** This phrase (v. 5) frequently becomes a proof-text war between those who read it sacramentally and those who dismiss the water imagery entirely. The preacher should do the hard work of exegesis — tracking the Ezekiel 36 background, the context’s emphasis on divine initiative, the parallel with Spirit-wind imagery in John 3 — rather than either importing a sacramental system the text does not require or flattening water imagery the text deliberately employs.
- **Reducing “good works” (vv. 8, 14) to generic ethical behavior without connecting them to the specific shape of vv. 1–2.** Paul is specific about what good works look like in public: submission, readiness for service, refusing to slander, avoiding quarrels, showing gentleness to all. The good works of v. 14 — meeting urgent needs — are likewise specific. Preaching “devote yourselves to good works” without filling in that specificity leaves the congregation with an aspiration rather than a direction.
- **Preaching the “divisive person” warning (vv. 10–11) as a general instruction to avoid difficult people.** The context is specific: divisiveness arising from “foolish controversies and genealogies and dissensions and quarrels about the law” (v. 9) — that is, doctrinal contentiousness undermining the community’s gospel identity. This is not a text about interpersonal conflict avoidance. It is a text about protecting the church’s doctrinal health from those who weaponize theological argument. The two-warning structure is also significant — it is not a first-strike policy; it assumes effort at restoration before rejection.
- **Ending the sermon on grace without landing the call to public life.** Titus 3 can produce a rich, emotionally satisfying exposition of the grace of vv. 4–7 that fails to return to the concrete public responsibilities of vv. 1–2 and 14. The chapter does not end on the doctrine — it ends on “let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful” (v. 14). Grace that produces no fruit is explicitly called barren. The sermon should land where the text lands: in the observable life of a community that has been changed by what it has received.