

I Tertius

Mark Heath, 31 Aug 2004

Rom 16:22 "I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord."

Have you ever wondered why verses like this are in the Bible? Here we have the great apostle Paul dictating a letter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and Tertius is writing it down. Paul sends some greetings from people he knows and suddenly Tertius interrupts him. He asks if he can say hello too, and with Paul's permission, inserts his own sentence of greeting. It's a bit like when we see someone on television, perhaps in a crowd, holding up a "Hi mum" sign when they realize the camera is on them. Tertius spots his moment of fame, and grabs it.

Now on one level, we might argue that this verse does not "say" very much. It does not contain a command to be obeyed or a truth to be believed. It's hardly important as an example to follow, as most of us are unlikely to operate as scribes, and we've already had loads of greetings in this very chapter. But I think that this verse gives us a small window into Tertius' attitude and suggests three ways in which we can be like him.

Of course you may think I am reading too much into the text, so I intend to show with each point that these attitudes are encouraged elsewhere in Scripture also.

1. Excited to be a small part of something big

On the face of things, Tertius' task was quite a small one. Paul was the author of the letter, someone else would deliver it, another would read it publicly, and yet more people would preach sermons on its content. It's almost certain that he didn't realise this letter was destined to be a key book in the New Testament. Yet his desire to add a sentence suggests to me that he was very excited to be used in this way.

God's kingdom is full of apparently insignificant tasks. In church life people are needed for toilet cleaning, car park attending, tea and coffee serving and so on. And in our daily lives we often come across people who have needs that we can meet. Most of the time we will get no public recognition for this work. We simply do it because God has stirred our hearts to serve in this way.

There is a temptation to get discouraged when doing "small things" for God. Sometimes we even can be too proud to take on the task in the first place, like the noblemen in Nehemiah 3:5, who were too self-important to help rebuild the wall. "And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord."

Of course we know that we are not supposed to be working for the praise of men. It is God who will reward us for what we do for him. Even a small act of kindness such as giving someone a cup of cold water will store up treasure in heaven for us. Matt 10:42 "And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."

In fact, Jesus had a lot to say on our willingness to serve others in humble ways. Matt 20:26-27 "If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others. And if you want to be first, you must be the slave of the rest." And as we know he practised what he preached. Nowhere are we more patently following the Master's example than when we give ourselves in service to the weakest and least in our world.

Col 3:23-24 tells us “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.” We need to be like Tertius, excited that what he was doing was part of God’s big plan to bring salvation to the world. So whoever you are helping, and however humble the task, remember that God looks on with pleasure so do not be disheartened. And if you can offer your services to help others, even in a small way, then do so, because then you can be, like Tertius, part of something really big.

2. Proud to be associated with the work of God

Now we could think that Tertius was perhaps a bit vain. Perhaps he wanted his name to be read out lots of times by everyone who read the letter. But I do not think that this is likely. The apostle Paul always had persecution following shortly behind wherever he went. To publish your name as being his associate would not be a good idea unless you were prepared to risk opposition yourself. So we can conclude that Tertius was proud to be associated with Paul, and also with the church in Rome who he greets knowing that they are his family “in the Lord”.

There is often a temptation for us to be ashamed of our links with one another in the church. Sometimes they are subject to public criticism or ridicule (whether deservedly or unfairly), and we are tempted to disown them. Perhaps you overhear someone sayings: “I was walking down the street yesterday and came across a bunch of Christians trying to convert people. They had a guitar with a rainbow strap and were making a dreadful noise. They were even wearing ‘Smile, Jesus loves you’ badges”. Suddenly, we feel rather embarrassed to admit that these people are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Worse still is the temptation to be ashamed of the gospel. Paul was acutely aware of this possibility and wrote about it in this very letter. Rom 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” He had made a decision that he would preach the gospel unashamedly and take whatever consequences that doing so might bring him.

Paul knew that for different reasons, the Jews and Greeks were not naturally inclined to accept the gospel. He explains in 1 Cor 1:22-23 that “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles”.

The Jews could not believe in a Messiah who was crucified. Crucifixion to their mind was a “sign” that God was against you. Gal 3:13 says “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’”. In fact, the signs were there for the Jews to see, but they misinterpreted them. They would need a working of the Spirit for their eyes to be opened.

The Greeks on the other hand were quite sophisticated, and had a number of outstanding philosophers. But the message of Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead seemed like a stupid idea to them. Paul could have been tempted to leave that bit out and focus on the more intellectually presentable doctrines of Christianity, but he knew that in doing so he would strip the gospel of its power.

So are we willing, like Tertius and Paul, to publicly confess our faith in Jesus? And though we know that there are sadly many churches who have abandoned the gospel and brought dishonour to the name of Jesus, we must also be willing to acknowledge that we are in fact part of a huge global family of the people of God – the church universal. Jesus loves the church, and despite its many failings still plans to use it to proclaim his glory to the nations.

3. Confident in the inspired word of God

Now we have already acknowledged that Tertius did not know that he was writing part of the Bible, but he will have known that it was the apostle Paul, a Spirit-filled anointed leader who was dictating the letter to him. Romans contains some of the most systematic and clear teaching on salvation anywhere in Scripture. As Tertius wrote it down, he knew he was writing truth. If he didn't agree with some of Paul's teaching in the letter, he would not likely have wanted to put his name to it.

It is not an easy time in history for us to publicly acknowledge our belief in the Bible. Perhaps you've heard someone say something like this: "Oh my aunt Doris is one of those Bible bashers. I was explaining to her about evolution and she said that she didn't believe it because it wasn't what the Bible said. She even believes in the Noah's ark myth! She's clearly been brain-washed to believe it and won't listen to reason".

People who believe the Bible are considered fools by our proud intellectual society. They don't only reject its historicity and theology, but also its moral principles are now considered to be dangerously outdated and even bigoted. But we are people whose lives have been turned upside down by the living God. We have encountered the risen Christ and have had our eyes opened to the truth. Though many around us believe that they are the "enlightened" ones, the fact is that they are in darkness and in bondage to sin. If we are too embarrassed to offer them the gospel, then how will they be saved? As Paul asks, again in Romans, "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (10:14)

But simply announcing that we believe the Bible is not enough. It's not just about believing that it is a historically reliable document. If we truly believe it to be God's word, then we will pay careful attention to what it is saying to us. We will allow it to shape our thinking and our actions. We will trust that God's wisdom is wiser than man's. I want to highlight three important implications of believing that the Bible is indeed the word of God.

i) Believe the promises

God's word is full of promises, that we should take hold of in faith. By believing the promises, we have peace in times of uncertainty and confidence to step out into new situations. God will always be true to his word, and this will give us boldness in prayer and witness. The more we step out in faith in God's promises, the more opportunity we give him to use us in ways we would never have thought possible.

God is always looking for faith. He delights in it, and rewards it. We, on the other hand, naturally prefer to take the "safe option", often giving in to fear. But this not only saddens God, it insults him, for every time we fail to trust him, we act as though we think his promises are false.

ii) Obey the commands

God's word is full of very practical commands, telling us what we should be doing, and what we should not be doing. This is not about legalism, as though we are trying to earn favour with God, but because we have come to love his ways. We want to live lives that are pleasing to God and enjoy the close fellowship with the Holy Spirit that is possible when we let him guide us into war against our own sin.

Some of God's commands are not easy for us to obey because we think we know better. Take for example the instructions for how disputes are to be resolved in Matthew 18:15. We're supposed to go to the person who has sinned or offended us and try to put it right privately. But we prefer to do things our way. We gossip and get bitter, never dealing with the situation according to God's word. If we really believe that the Bible is the word of God, then obedience is not optional, it is imperative.

iii) *Take heed of the warnings*

God's word is full of warnings, because it is very realistic about our human nature. We are all weak and subject to temptation, and if we are not careful there will be serious consequences. Hebrews 2:1 warns us that "we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." Don't be so proud that you think you can never fall into sin, or drift away from God. The warnings are there to make us alert to the devil's tactics, and to remind us of our dependence on God.

Knowing the dangers we face enables us to be prepared. We need to pray regularly to be filled with the Spirit. The promises, commands and warnings of Scripture should be the content of many of our prayers. We should ask God to fulfil his promises in our circumstances, ask for his help to obey his commands and his grace to avoid the stumbling blocks, pitfalls and distractions that life will inevitably bring.

Conclusion

So though we know very little about Tertius, his attitude has much to teach us. Will we, like him, joyfully accept all opportunities to serve with humility, knowing that God is working in and through us to accomplish his great purposes and plans? Will we refuse the temptation to hide our faith for fear of ridicule or scorn? And will we take God at his word, living in faith that obedience to his word is not just the best way to live but the only safe course of action in life. If we can follow Tertius' example in these ways, then perhaps like him, we will be used by God to bring blessing to many thousands of people, though we may not realise the full significance of our actions until eternity.