

Titus #2

Reading

For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain. One of Crete’s own prophets has said it: ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’ This saying is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the merely human commands of those who reject the truth.

Titus 1:10-14

Last time we began our study of the letter to Titus.

We learned that it was written by the Apostle Paul to one of his companions, Titus, who was working with newly formed Christian communities on the island of Crete.

The main ‘takeaways’ were...

- The importance of understanding that our Christian faith is a gift from God, not something we can achieve by ‘good works.’
- How knowing that life continues and gets better after our physical death helps to put our daily problems and trials into perspective.
- The importance of good leadership structures and correct doctrine in our Christian communities.
- And, linked to this, how living lives that are consistent with what we believe makes the gospel message more credible to those who do not share our Christian faith.

And today we get to the main reason for Paul writing this letter.

As we read last time...

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

Titus 1:5a

Paul, along with Titus and Timothy, had preached the gospel to the people of Crete, and many had believed the message and become followers of Jesus.

But, as each of us knows from personal experience, when people become Christians they are not instantly transformed into perfect creatures.

As we heard in today's reading,

For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

Titus 1:10-11

This is not an isolated incident. There are 'many rebellious people' who are deceiving not just individuals, but disrupting whole families (the word 'family' could be referring to Christian congregations) with their empty teachings.

The main troublemakers are the 'circumcision group.'

Who were they?

When we studied the letter to the Philippians we learned that the 'circumcision group' were people who believed that all Christians needed to obey the Jewish ceremonial law, including such things as circumcision.

So, why was that a problem?

It is easy to forget that the first Christians were predominantly Jewish.

Jesus was a Jew, as were his disciples. The Apostle Paul was Jewish. And in the years following the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, his

Jewish followers continued to observe their religious customs, including circumcising their male children and keeping to a kosher diet.

And there is no problem with this. Some modern messianic Jews continue to maintain these observances.

The problem was that some Jewish converts to Christianity decided that observing Jewish religious practices was non-negotiable, both for Jews and non-Jews.

And this was something that Paul would not stand for. The gospel that had been revealed to him was all gift, received by faith through the saving work of Jesus.

The 'circumcision group' was doing what so many Christians have done through the centuries, adding unnecessary rules and regulations to the gospel message.

As a former Pharisee, Paul knew what it was to put your trust in your own efforts and righteousness. And he could see that it was poison to the Christian faith.

And the Cretan circumcision group was not just deceiving people, they were doing it 'for the sake of dishonest gain.' Paul does not explain how they are being dishonest, but it means that he knows, and wants Titus to know that their motivations were not pure.

Paul tells Titus to make sure that these people are 'silenced.' This would almost certainly have meant them being expelled from the church community unless they ceased their unhelpful and dishonest activities.

If this seems harsh to you, it is following the instructions of the most loving man who ever lived. Jesus' teaching on conflict resolution is clear, and so good that it continues to be used by counsellors, of all faiths and none, to this day.

'If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they

will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.’

Matthew 18:15-17

Being loving does not mean being a push-over. Salvation is pure gift, but maintaining a loving Christian community requires all of its members to behave lovingly, and ‘Christianly.’

Paul continues...

One of Crete’s own prophets has said it: ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’ This saying is true.

Titus 1:12-13a

Whoa! Don’t hold back Paul!

Early Christian sources attribute this saying to a 6th century B.C. Cretan teacher called Epimenides of Knossos. Epimenides was held in high regard by Cretans as a prophet and miracle-worker.

Paul is using the quote to point out that it is not just outsiders who have a low regard for the people of Crete’s moral standards. Even one of their favourite teachers has said they are lying, brutish, lazy gluttons.

Paul’s use of the word ‘brutish’ could be referring to another quote from Epimenides...

The absence of wild beasts on Crete is more than made up for by its human inhabitants.

And Epimenides was not alone in his views. The second century B.C. historian Polybius wrote,

Greed and avarice are so native to the soil in Crete that they are the only people in the world among whom no stigma attaches to any sort of gain whatever.

Crete's infamy was so widespread that one of the Greek words for lying or cheating is 'kretizo.' When someone lied or cheated, they were behaving like someone from Crete!

Now, for some of us, Paul using a quote like this may seem 'un-Christian.' However, Paul did not live in a politically correct era, and anyway, there is good reason to think that he writes this with a 'twinkle in his eye.'

After all, if the Cretans agree with their beloved teacher's words, they condemn themselves. But if they disagree, they are accusing Epimenides of being a liar, the very thing he was accusing Cretans of being.

And Paul is not addressing all Cretans. He knows there are good people there. It is the circumcision group he has in his sights, and he really, really hates the way they are twisting the gospel message.

This is not the only record we have of Paul using rough humour about the circumcision group. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul says, possibly lacking a twinkle in his eye, that he wishes that they would 'go the whole way and castrate themselves.' (Galatians 5:12)

So, we have many people in the Cretan congregations who are rebellious, full of meaningless talk, deceptive and greedy for money.

And that's not all...

Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the merely human commands of those who reject the truth.

Titus 13b-14

These people are also holding on to false Jewish teachings and human traditions that are contrary to Christian truth.

Despite all this, Paul's aim is that these rebels will be persuaded to return to a lifestyle that is in keeping with true Christian teachings. Like

telling a child to go to their room until they choose to behave, Paul's ultimate aim is restoration, not punishment or exclusion.

And so Paul continues...

To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

Titus 15-16

'To the pure, all things are pure' is Paul re-emphasising that true goodness cannot be attained through external rituals.

Jesus was challenged by the religious leaders about his disciples not keeping to the ceremonial washing procedures that the Pharisees insisted were essential (Mark 7).

His reply included...

- The prophet Isaiah wrote about you when he said that 'these people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...'
 - You observe traditions you created, but ignore the ones God gave you.
- and then he goes further and says...
- it's not dirt on the *outside* that makes you spiritually unclean, it's the bad thoughts and words that come from *inside* you that demonstrates that you are not right with God.

The disciples later realised that this was Jesus' way of saying that Jesus was declaring an end to the necessity of observing the Jewish kosher food laws (Mark 7:19b).

The tendency of religious people is to create rituals and rules, and to insist that it is only by keeping to them that you can be pleasing to God.

The circumcision group is a good example of this.

But as Paul points out, they are making three fundamental errors...

- They are obsessing over Jewish myths that have nothing to do with the Christian message and following the teachings of people who reject the truth.
- And they have a false understanding of purity. Ironically, as a result ‘both their minds and consciences are corrupted.’ False beliefs are poisonous because they can allow us to feel good about doing things that are either not important, or just plain wrong.

And...

- They claim to know God and what he wants them to do, but their dishonest motives and actions prove that they really don’t. They are ‘detestable, disobedient and unfit for anything good.’

In these verses, Paul gives us three ways of discerning whether an idea or teaching is right or wrong.

- Is its origin divine or human? Does it square with what the Bible teaches on the things it is addressing?
- Is its essence based on faith in God or does it rely on human-made rules that are not found in the Bible?
- Does it result in a morally better life? Does a particular teaching help people become more loving, honest and generous?

Now, these are just general guidelines, and they need to be applied with wisdom and discernment.

Like all guidelines, if used wrongly they can become twisted into the kind of rigid rules that we are trying to avoid.

One of the biggest enemies of an authentic, living faith is our tendency to make our godliness a box-ticking exercise.

For instance, there are those who decide that if you...

- attend church,
- give a percentage of your income to good causes,
- read the Bible...
- ‘fill in the blank’... (is something jumping into your head?)

then you are OK with God.

The problem is that any rule-based system is both too much and not enough.

It is too much, because few of us manage to keep to even our own standards.

And it is not enough, because it regularly omits important stuff.

For instance, we might make time for a regular Bible study, but ignore giving time and attention to our friends and neighbours.

Talking about godliness and neighbours, Jesus was once tested by an expert in the Old Testament law...

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

‘What is written in the Law?’ he replied. ‘How do you read it?’

He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live.’

Luke 10:25-28

As he often did, Jesus responds to a question with another question.

The expert then gives a standard, orthodox response that we are to love God with every part of our being, and to love the people around us.

And Jesus approves of the answer.

But the expert is not satisfied.

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’

Luke 10:29

The expert assumes that not everyone counts as his ‘neighbour’. The expert wants to know the minimum requirements that will allow him to gain eternal life.

He wants to turn a living command into a restricting rule.

Jesus’ answer is to tell one of the most famous stories ever told. Let’s remind ourselves of Jesus’s genius as we revisit it...

Slide - Luke 10:30-35

‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. “Look after him,” he said, “and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.”

Luke 10:30-35

Rather than narrowing the command to love God and your neighbour, Jesus expands its scope.

Jews and Samaritans had a long history of mutual distrust and hatred. When the Pharisees accused Jesus of being ‘a Samaritan and possessed’ (John 8:48), they were not being kind.

The expert in the Law would not have thought of including Samaritans in his 'neighbour' category.

But when Jesus asks him...

'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'

The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'

Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Luke 10:36-37

The expert on the law has had his eyes opened.

Loving God and our neighbour does not have any limits. As a follower of Jesus it is something you pursue with 'all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.'

Our whole being, our every breath should be devoted to it. Not because it's easy, as G.K. Chesterton wrote...

The Bible tells us to love our neighbours, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are often the same people.

but because every human has value, because every human has been created in the image of God.

Just like the expert in the law who spoke with Jesus, and the circumcision group that Titus had to deal with on Crete, we can get bogged down with what we shouldn't do, rather than what we can do.

In the coming week, why not ask God to point out areas of your life where you have created unnecessary rules to live up to, rather than pursuing an active, living relationship with him.

Are there attitudes we hold that conflict with the things we believe?

Are there things we do that contradict the faith we profess?

If there are, don't waste time creating more rules to try and sort things.

Rather pray that Jesus will help you love him, and those around you with 'all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.'

And, along with this, pray that he will give you practical opportunities to demonstrate that love in the weeks to come. Jesus loves answering those kinds of prayers.

Amen!