

Titus #4

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle towards everyone. At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and 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 Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.

Titus 3:1-8

In our previous studies we explored the importance of understanding what we believe, and of putting that belief into practice in our church communities and in our homes.

This has the twin benefits of being an inspiration to other believers, and of demonstrating to non-believers the power of the gospel message to transform people's lives for the better.

And so Paul, having looked at what it means to live as a Christian in our churches and in our homes, concludes his letter with how followers of Jesus are to live as members of the societies they live in.

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities...

Titus 3:1a

It is notable that Paul writes, 'Remind the people.'

Part of the Christian life is being open to being reminded of things.

It doesn't take long to understand the basics of what it means to be a Christian. We all know we shouldn't lie. Or envy. Or worry. It is putting these beliefs into practice that we struggle with.

This is why regularly studying the Bible is such a helpful thing. This is why meeting with and encouraging other believers is so important. This is why you're sat there enduring me explain Scripture to you.

And Paul starts this section by telling Titus to remind the Cretan Christians to be law abiding citizens. And it is almost certainly something they needed to be reminded of.

Crete had been conquered by Rome in 67 BC, and, like the Jews in Israel, the majority of its population begrudged, no, despised, being under Roman rule.

And yet Paul is telling them that they should submit to Rome's authority.

Paul's teaching on how followers of Jesus should behave towards human government is based on the Bible's teaching that God is ultimately in control of everything that happens. From creation to the new creation, God has got things covered, even when it doesn't look or feel like he has.

In Matthew's gospel we read...

...the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words...

'Teacher... we know that you are a man of integrity... Is it right to pay the poll-tax to Caesar or not?'

Jesus said, 'You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?'

'Caesar's,' they replied.

Then he said to them, 'So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'

Matthew 22:15-21 (selected texts)

The Pharisees think they have Jesus trapped. The poll-tax was something only non-Roman citizens had to pay, and the Jewish people resented it bitterly. If he answers that it's OK to pay the tax, he could be seen to be supporting Israel's Roman oppressors.

But if he opposes the tax, he will be encouraging people to break the law, and give the Pharisees reason to turn him in to the Romans as a traitor.

Jesus knows what is going on, and asks to see the coin that is being used to pay the tax. He then asks whose image is on the coin, and what is written on it.

The image on the coin is a Roman emperor, probably Augustus, and the inscription reads 'Augustus, son of the divine.'

Jesus is a genius. He uses the coin as a memorable visual aid. Jews were forbidden to make idolatrous images, and yet on the coins that they are using is the image of a man claiming to be the son of a god.

There are so many layers to this story, but we are studying Titus, not Matthew, so suffice it to say that Jesus is pointing out that worldly stuff like money and taxes have their place, but that we should never confuse them with the one who made us in *his* image, the one to whom we owe our existence.

The narrative of the Bible demonstrates that God has chosen to work his purposes out in history through imperfect humans, including you and me, government officials and even tyrannical pagan kings.

Of course, Christians do not worship anyone but God. And our ultimate allegiance is to God. When the early church is told to stop preaching the good news of Jesus, their response is that they have to obey God, not people (Acts 5:29).

So, being subject to rulers and authorities does not mean giving them our *unconditional* obedience, Christians have a long history of protesting against injustice. But our freedom in Christ is not an excuse for anarchy.

As Paul wrote in the Book of Romans...

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.

Romans 13:6-7

So, back to Titus.

Being a Christian involves being a wise and responsible citizen, *Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle towards everyone.*

Titus 3:1-2

As we saw last time, there was a tendency for Christians to turn their new found freedom in Christ into a freedom to do whatever they pleased, rather than freedom to be the kind of people God wanted them to be.

And Paul insists that it is not just about being law-abiding. It's not just about not doing anything wrong. We should be actively working at making our society a *better* place. As Jesus said, we need to be the salt in our communities, people who help to make life taste better while keeping things from going bad.

And 2000 years later we live in a society which has been massively influenced by billions of 'ordinary' Christians who were ready to do good, slandered no one, peaceable, considerate and gentle.

People who went the extra mile, who adopted abandoned babies, helped the poor, cared for the sick and told others about the good news of Jesus.

Paul then does some more reminding, reminding his hearers what they – and he – were like before becoming Christians.

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

Titus 3:3

See how Paul writes, 'At one time *we too* were foolish, disobedient,' etc... It is very possible that he is here referring to the authorities that he is urging the Cretan Christians to obey. But he is also referring to himself.

Before his conversion, Paul was an authority figure. A deeply religious man, proud of his devotion to God's laws, and his enthusiasm to make sure that others kept to them. And yet he now realises that he was foolish and deceived.

Then something changed...

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4-7

There are many different ways that people become Christians.

Some people can't remember a time when they didn't believe in Jesus.

Others spend years wrestling with doubts and questions before becoming Christians.

For Paul it involved the resurrected Jesus appearing to him in a vision as he was travelling to Damascus to persecute Christians.

But however people become followers of Jesus, the instigator is God, the empowerer is God and the finisher is God. Salvation, from beginning to end, is pure gift. Pure grace.

God is our saviour, not because of any good things we have done, but because he is a merciful God, renewing our lives by the Holy Spirit, poured out on us through the work of Jesus Christ. What a beautiful, trinitarian summary of salvation.

And so Paul continues...

This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.

Titus 3:8

Paul uses the phrase 'a trustworthy saying' five times in the New Testament, four of them in his first letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:15, 2:11, 3:1, 4:9) to emphasise that the preceding words were especially important.

And as we've learned in the previous talks, Paul wants Titus to *remind* the Cretan Christians that their faith is an undeserved gift. They are to devote themselves to doing what is good out of gratitude for God's undeserved, unearned salvation, not to make themselves worthy of it.

Paul has told Titus to encourage the Cretan congregations to be good citizens and to live lives that are peaceful, polite and gentle. And he has given the reason and motivation for this, the fact that we have been given the greatest gifts of all, forgiveness for our sins, a life empowered by the Holy Spirit and the promise of eternal life.

And yet, there will always be the temptation to go back to our old ways. Our sins are forgiven, but we are not perfect. And as we have seen, some of the Cretan Christians were very far from being perfect.

And so Paul continues...

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.

Titus 3:9-11

One of the devil's most regular and successful schemes is tempting Christian leaders to take their eye off their primary purpose of teaching the good news of Jesus Christ. And one of the ways he does this is by distracting them with stuff that seems more urgent and important.

Titus was working with some very difficult, dishonest people. As any pastor, teacher or manager will tell you, people like this are brilliant at wasting your time.

And Paul knows that time is precious. When you read Paul's letters, you get a sense of the urgency he feels to make sure the gospel is communicated to as many people as possible.

And he has learned from experience that Titus will have to make difficult choices about scheduling his days.

Paul's words may come across as harsh, but he is performing pastoral triage, helping Titus to make sure that he doesn't get bogged down in foolish arguments when he should be preaching the gospel.

Divisive people are a threat to any organisation. They are a particular threat to Christian communities, because of our commitment to loving and forgiving people. I admire kind people, probably because I'm not one, but there are times when you need to be cruel to be kind.

Paul understands forgiveness. He also understands that some people don't want to be helped. Some because they are convinced they are right, and some because they enjoy causing trouble.

Christians should always be willing to forgive people, but Christian communities need wisdom to discern between people who are in trouble, and people who are trouble makers.

As I said in an earlier talk, the ultimate aim of any Christian discipline is that the people who are being disciplined are reconciled with Christ and with the Christian community. Paul's hope was that people would see the error of their ways and return to the community they had excluded themselves from.

This should always be our goal, not condemnation but reconciliation.

And so we approach the conclusion of the letter...

As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there. Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need.

Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives.

Titus 3:12-14

Paul plans to give Titus a break from his ministry on Crete, by joining Paul at Nicopolis in Greece.

We don't know anything about Artemas, this is the only mention of him in the New Testament.

We know more about Tychicus, he was from the Roman province of Asia, probably Ephesus (Acts 20:4).

In Ephesians 6:21, Paul calls Tychicus a 'dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord,' and in Colossians 4:7, 'a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord'.

And in 2 Timothy, written not long before Paul's execution Paul writes, 'Tychicus I sent to Ephesus' (2 Timothy 4:12). Timothy was in charge of the church in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3), and Tychicus was being sent there so that Timothy could rejoin Paul in Rome (2 Timothy 4:9, 4:21).

So, we know Tychicus was an experienced, hard-working, trustworthy leader, perfectly suited to working with the Cretan congregations.

Zenas and Apollos were probably the people who brought the letter to Titus, and Paul wants to make sure that they are properly equipped for the next stage of their journey.

My first thought when reading this was, ‘surely it’s obvious that Zenas and Apollos will need to be properly equipped,’ but the next sentence indicates that two of the things the Cretan Christians needed to be *reminded* about the importance of hospitality and self-discipline.

As we reach the end of this series, what is God reminding us of as a congregation? What is God reminding you of as an individual?

For the Cretan Christians it was a wide range of things including...

- Faith being a gift, not something we can earn.
- The importance of good leadership structures.
- That salvation does not depend on observing rituals.
- How what we believe should positively affect the way we live.

Let’s remind ourselves again. As Christians, we are followers of Jesus, not followers of doctrine or good works.

Our faith is in a person, Jesus Christ. He is the one that right beliefs help us to focus on. Although we can’t see him, if we have given our lives to Jesus, he lives in us and with us. He never leaves us, and he loves us more than we will ever understand.

Doctrine is important. But it must never be a replacement for Jesus.

Like the lights on a runway, good doctrine helps guide us in the right direction. Correct understanding of what we believe keeps our eyes on where we want to land.

Doctrine is not the target. It would be a disaster if the pilot aimed for the runway lights. Jesus is the target, he is where we want to land, that is where we will be safe.

And in the security of God's love we can ask Jesus to help us live lives that are focussed on what he wants us to be doing. And as we fill our lives with good things, it becomes easier to let go of the things that distract and distress us, and other people.

As we learned in our series on Philippians, Paul probably dictated this letter to a scribe. However it was customary for the author to conclude the letter in his own handwriting.

And so Paul takes the pen from the scribe and scribbles...

Everyone with me sends you greetings. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.

Titus 3:12-15

Grace, indeed, be with us all.

Amen!