

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Titus: On the Home Front”

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**Titus 2:1-15**

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We're in the third week of this short summer series, going through the Letter of Titus, this powerful, challenging epistle to one of Paul's proteges, in mission on the island of Crete, shoring up a church called, on one hand, to look decidedly different from culture around it and yet, on the other, to bear witness to it in a compelling, beautiful way. This week, the focus goes into the home, and it is challenging. Let's go to God's Word together.

*But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound instruction. Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance. Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or enslaved to much wine; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled in all things, offering yourself as a model of good works and in your teaching offering integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us. Urge slaves to be submissive to their masters in everything, to be pleasing, not talking back, not stealing, but showing complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the teaching of God our Savior. For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.* The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Spirit of God, we pray for your wisdom, your light as we come to your Word for us. We pray that through it we might be convicted to conduct even the ordinary aspects of our lives in a manner glorifying to you, that your gospel would be declared in every word and ordinary act. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

There was a flag football league back in seminary. Just an ordinary, intramural sort of thing. But because it was a *seminary* flag football league, what do you imagine it'd look like? Maybe a lot of energy and good effort, good sportsmanship and encouragement, and certainly not doing stuff like trash talking, manipulating the refs, or holding grudges, certainly not. Is that what you think? Wrong. The running joke each Fall was that if you wanted to see the future pastors of America not acting like the future pastors of America, go hang out on the sidelines of these flag football games. Not that spectators were really a thing. But it did make me wonder, should a

passerby just happen upon this ordinary game, just what conclusions might be made? There's something about the witness of ordinary life that can speak volumes.

Here in the second chapter of Titus, this is about as ordinary as it gets in Greco-Roman life. It's talking about the household, the social and economic building block of all of Roman society, even more so than today. At its center was the *paterfamilias*, the "father of the family" or "head of the household." Everyone in that household, wives, children, slaves were under his authority, and that authority was near total. This structure was ordinary. And it's into those ordinary structures that Titus is called to offer guidance. How should disciples of Jesus conduct themselves in this entirely ordinary staple of common life?

Some of the guidance still checks out. I dare say, no one flinched at the calling for older men to be "temperate, serious, prudent," or for older women to be "reverent," "not slanderers or slaves to drink," or for younger women to "love their husbands, to love their children," or for younger men to "be self-controlled" and "a model of good works." Qualities that are universally hailed. But others, not so much. Now a word of caution here. This passage and others like it in Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Peter, and 1 Timothy, passages known as "household codes," have been used to do great harm, invoking the will of God along with it.

I suspect that the first thing that raised an eyebrow, is the description of the young women. "Good managers of the household," one phrase says. "And where are the guys in all this?" one might think. "Last I checked, the fellas are just as capable." But then to follow that, "being submissive to their husbands." How many folks are feeling a little squirmy right now? Let me just tell you, that ain't how it works in the Howell house.

And finally, what I would guess the most concern and shock centers around is in v. 9: "Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity." This could be a much longer topic to unpack, so let this be an invitation to further conversation. But among the reactions to this, both to the wives-and-husbands description and to the slavery description, could be a) to abuse it, b) to dismiss it, just say it's immoral and outdated, and dismiss everything else along with it, c) to try to whitewash it, that is, something like "Well it says 'slavery' but really it's not slavery," or d) to try to see it in the world it came from. Obviously my hope is that we'll seek after that last one. Whenever the word "slave" comes up in Scripture—and it does, a lot—we tend to imagine it through the lens of slavery in the American South. In some ways, it was different. But in a lot of ways, it was tragically and cruelly similar. Among the differences, the social standing of slaves had a much wider range, some highly educated. It wasn't necessarily race-based. It was much more common for slaves to be freed, though hardly a requirement. There were even in fact some limited elements of legal protection for slaves.

Still, when it comes down to it, slaves were considered to be the property of their masters. Most slaves became slaves through the Romans' conquest of their homeland, through piracy and trafficking, or simply through birth. Their labor was forced, not voluntary, their enslavement often lifelong, and their treatment potentially brutal. Slaves were ubiquitous. It's estimated that 1/3 of the population in Italy and Greece were slaves, and it was common even for all but the poorest of households to have a slave. And it's in that harsh light that it becomes very difficult to square what appears to be Scripture's condoning of an evil institution.

There have been attempts to paint over it, make it out into something it wasn't. One that I've seen that's gotten some traction is that what Paul means here isn't slavery, per se, but some form of benign indentured servitude. Someone voluntarily binds themselves for a prescribed period of time to pay off a debt. And because it was voluntary and temporary, it's not so despicable. That happened, but it was such a narrow sliver of Roman society that it's a stretch to claim that that's what Paul means when he uses the word "slave" here, the same word used across the empire to mean someone bound as property to their master. And because this institution was so ubiquitous, calling for the abolition of slaves, or even for equality of wives within marriage and society, harsh as it may seem to ears today, would have been nonsensical at the time, akin to, as one scholar put it, "invent[ing] space travel." So, what we're faced with in this letter is calling upon those bound in a cruel and unjust institution to continue submitting to their masters.

The treatment of slavery in the New Testament is not 100% abolitionist. And the fact that it isn't can be troubling. How can we look to a text that claims to be God-breathed, an authoritative guide toward a godly, righteous life, and yet has seems to have such an ambivalent stance upon an issue as clearly wrong as slavery? But is the treatment of slavery in the New Testament completely indifferent, saying, "Welp, nothing can be done"? No. It's not that either. Because clearly along the way, we have Paul saying in Christ there is neither slave nor free, we have slaves and freed people holding equal standing within the church. We have Christ himself teaching that whoever would be greatest among his followers would be a what? A slave of all.

If you want to see perhaps the best example of this, just flip the page in your Bible to the short letter to Philemon, a slave holder and leader in the church. Paul, writing to Philemon, doesn't quite say directly that Philemon should an escaped slave, but the gist is, "I could just tell you to the right thing, but I won't, because I know you'll do it anyway, because of the faith that we share." He says "I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love," (Phm 9). The undercurrent within the church, whether it was with wives and husbands, children and parents, masters and slaves, with the entire Roman household and by extension the very fabric of Roman society, was to be subversive to those institutions, yes, intensely subversive, but subversive on the basis of love, letting love, letting grace infuse the hearts of individuals, then of households, then of cities, then of empires. And in that respect, in these ubiquitous, ordinary things, perception mattered. How does the letter put it? In v. 5, "so that the word of God may not be discredited." How effective would the church have been in bearing witness to the gospel if in its conduct it was perceived to be tearing down the very fabric of society? At best, they'd be dismissed. At worst, well, the Romans were very, very good at stamping out insurrection.

Because what ultimately was the goal here. The letter tells us, starting in v. 11. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all," [grace is the starting point] "training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly" [that same grace is what *trains* us to live in a godly way, a way that is at once different from culture yet attractive and compelling within it] "while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" [the work of grace lived out is ultimately in hope, waiting for the full glory of our Lord, recognizing that the world now is not as it should be, and yet we wait, and we serve]. And the manner in which we serve reaches even into the most ordinary corners of our lives.

I don't believe it's incidental that we are hearing this passage on this Sunday, on Father's Day. Well done, Ben. There is a powerful testimony and challenge to considering how even the most ordinary, daily things can testify to the grace of Christ at work within the world, within a family, within a household. There are some of us who have been blessed with fathers, grandfathers, and father figures who embody some of the qualities listed here: "temperate," "sound in faith, in love," "self controlled," "a model of good works." Notice that none of that is flashy. It's the opposite of flashy. It's the daily witness of faithfulness and grace lived out. I know there are a lot of examples of that in this room right now. Others of us have not been so blessed, and the notion of our fathers, past or present, can range from complicated to downright painful. And it's because that bag has sadly, tragically been so mixed, even and especially within the church, that along with this testimony, this potential for grace to be lived out in something as ordinary as a household, comes a challenge for us too.

Now this challenge is for everyone, but given the day, I'm talking in particular to the dads to the granddads, to the father figures. And this is a challenge I put as much before myself as a father as I put it before you. I know there are some faithful men here, men who have steadfastly sought to nurture and guide that faith among disciples of all ages within our church family. I know you're there. I see you. I'm grateful for you. But I also know that we've got any number of guys that are disengaged, disengaged from faith, disengaged from any active part of it.

Now understand who I'm talking to, now. If in your heart, you're honestly not sure about this whole church thing, faith thing, Jesus thing, then what I'm about to say does not apply to you. We have a whole other set of things I'd love to talk about, and that invitation is open, and I'm glad you're here. But if you are in the camp who would say "Faith or Jesus or God is the most important thing," but in practice it is little more than an afterthought and you've more or less farmed out the faith stuff to other relatives, to a spouse, to folks at church, whoever, to you I say this: Guys, we need you off the bench. I say that as one who doesn't really go in for gender roles in the household or in the church, not what I'm about, but as a church we will simply not be as faithful a witness to Christ in raising up and making disciples if half our roster is phoning it in. Fellas, we need you. And we don't need you for flashy stuff. That's not really what this is all about. We need you for the unflashy stuff. We need you for the steady presence among our youth and children on Sunday mornings and evenings. We need you for the faithful mentorship of others in the church. Perhaps most of all, especially for those who are fathers among us, we need you engaged, not just in being around, but in showing the power of grace and life in Christ in the most ordinary, ubiquitous things: at the kitchen table, at the bedside, at the ball field.

It's not an easy ask. I admit that. I know there's already a lot weighing on you. But the stakes are too high not to put this challenge before you. For the credibility and the impact of the faith we've been entrusted to continue and spread hinges upon the faithful showing what a different way can look like. "He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

"Declare these things." Friends, fellas, declare them with your life, in the most ordinary ways.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.