

“Titus: Blameless”

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Titus 1:5-16

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I'm grateful to Pastor Ben for putting together and kicking off this series in the Letter to Titus last week. You'll remember, if you were with us, his opening on this letter, a personal letter, often called along with the 1 & 2 Letters to Timothy as the Pastoral Letters, to his coworker in mission Titus.

We continue on through the letter into a powerful, challenging passage, speaking to the reason Titus was in mission on the island of Crete. Let's go to God's Word together. Titus 1:5-16.

I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain, but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, self-controlled, upright, devout, and restrained, holding tightly to the trustworthy word of the teaching, so that he may be able both to exhort with sound instruction and to refute those who contradict it.

There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach. It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said, “Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.”

That testimony is true. For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth. To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work. The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy God, by your Spirit you have lifted up those within your church in every corner and time who have felt your call to live out your faith in the specific calling of leading humbly within your body the church. Lord, we pray you would stir us to encouragement by their example, whoever they may be, and that we now would feel your leading us into deeper faith, stronger conviction, and witness with integrity within the world, according to your Word. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Those last words we heard, “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions,” they are in reference to those who, it appears, were deceiving those within the church with a false message. Some of the language indicates that at issue was the application expectation of Jewish tradition in some way, similar to the whole thing we saw at issue in the last series and the Council of Jerusalem. But here, it's focused on this group of churches on the island of Crete.

Either way, it was bad. It was undermining the integrity of the church, the integrity of its witness. So bad, in fact, that Paul invokes the words of a Cretan writer named Epimenides, who had written, disparaging his own homeland, it appears, that “Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.”

And if you were wondering what the reason was that Titus was on the island of Crete, Paul doesn't leave us in suspense for very long. In v. 5, "I left you behind in Crete for this reason: so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you."

Have to take a sidetrack here, and there's not really an elegant way to do it. At some point we have to bring up a connected topic, the authorship of Titus. If you were to do a bit of further reading about Titus, even just a quick Wikipedia search, you would quickly find this out, and we don't want folks surprised or shaken by it, nor do we want to shy away from scholarship here.

The issue is this: obviously, in the opening verse of the letter, it purports to be from Paul to Titus, but a large number, if not a majority, of biblical scholars do not believe Paul wrote this.

You can point to a whole bunch of things: differences in vocabulary, in style, in phrasing, even in subject matter. And you could point out, perhaps, a different cultural approach to writing under someone else's name, something akin to a "living tradition" as a tribute almost, not something intended or understood to be deceptive. Nevertheless, it raises questions of the trustworthiness of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, made especially ironic when as Ben shared with us last week, the trustworthiness of God is put front and center in this letter: how is God described just in v. 2? "God, who never lies."

This all enters into that first verse we read from today: "I left you behind in Crete for this reason," that is, "Paul left Titus behind in Crete," indicating of course that Paul himself was in Crete. The catch is, nowhere in the Book of Acts is there a reference to Paul travelling to Crete, except as a prisoner on a ship, so how could he have been there to leave Titus behind in the first place? One theory—and this is the one behind the timeline in the early-mid 60s AD that Ben shared last week—is that after Paul is placed under house arrest at the end of the Book of Acts, he is subsequently released, and then goes on another missionary journey, one that wasn't recorded in Acts, including to the island of Crete. It's only later that he is imprisoned again and later martyred. Another explanation is that, well, Paul didn't write it.

There's so much more that could be said about authorship, but I wanted to give y'all those bullet points since it entered into the mention of Crete. Regardless of how you understand things like ancient authorship, we don't hold this letter as being less a part of Scripture. So if you hear a preacher ever say something like, "The writer of Titus," or of 1 & 2 Timothy which are often considered in the same boat, that's where it's coming from, and it's not without good reason. But if you want to know more about that topic, let's talk some more.

Okay, thanks for hanging in there. This is what Titus was left behind to deal with on the island of Crete: to appoint elders in every town. It was as crucial then, as it is now, for leaders to be faithful and especially conscious not just of what they proclaim but of how they act, how they speak, how they are perceived and known within the community. The health of the church is at stake, and the credibility of the church's message is too.

Think about it. I'm up here preaching most weeks, but what if it were well known that every weekend I would get into drunken fistfights at Union Avenue? Would that benefit the health of the church and the credibility of the message I preach from the pulpit? No, of course not. Wouldn't matter how eloquent or profound the message was, it would be undermined by my actions. "They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions." Now I don't claim to be an angel in public or private, but there is a point at which one's actions and public demeanor actively detract from the credibility of the gospel in a community. And perception matters. That's why it was so important for Titus to seek out and appoint elders in each town, those who would lead the church faithfully, those who would represent the church well. And Paul gives him a list of qualities to look for.

Now this list is a fascinating cross section of how we interpret prescriptions made in Scripture: are they for all times and settings, or are they more targeted for a particular context, and by what grounds do we determine the difference? As we go through them, I'll talk about a few of them.

But the very first one should put things right out there: in v. 6, "someone who is blameless." Now I've got some encouraging news for all of you. Every single one of your elders, when approached about serving on Session, emphatically raised their hands and declared, "I'm not at fault for anything. Completely blameless here." No, of course none of them would say that or think that. We hear those other words of Paul, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," but right out of the gates, this verse isn't messing around that leaders within the church are called to a place of humble righteousness, something they/we/I constantly fall short of, and yet the call remains to be blameless, for the sake of the church and the credibility of the gospel.

The next one is tricky, "married only once," the text says. Literally the Greek phrasing is "husband of one wife" or "a one woman man," but what exactly that meant at the time is tricky. Is it a statement against polygamy? Is it against remarriage after divorce? Or is it a statement against general promiscuity, that is, not keeping fidelity within marriage and not being a "one woman man"?

Of course, implied within the phrasing of a "husband of one wife" or "a one woman man" is that an elder should be male. And there has been a lot of conflict in the church over the years about notions of male leadership and female leadership. Is this verse something that should hold authority directly and literally today, or is it more a call to order and faithfulness within one's household? Why would this have been important to Titus on Crete? We'll talk more about Greco-Roman households next week, because that's a big part of it, but obviously, as a church, we proudly and without reservation nominate, elect, and are led by female elders every single year, so as far as church positions go, we interpret this a certain way.

The next one also is really tricky, and potentially painful for some. "Whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious." Wait, so say you're an elder. Say you've got kids in high school, college, or on into young adulthood. And your child says, "I don't believe in Jesus anymore," do you have to resign from Session? Or, say, should our Nominating Committee do some deep background not just into the faith of possible future elders but also of the faith of any children they have, and if someone has children who aren't actively practicing Christians, should they be eliminated from consideration as an elder?

This is potentially painful stuff, and it's not theoretical. There was a well-known pastor/writer/theologian named John Piper. He's semi-retired now, but he's known for being faithful, thoughtful, intelligent, and somewhat more literalist in his approach to Scripture. One of his sons, however, is outspoken against the so-called evangelical church culture and Christianity in general.

As a result, others had made the connection against this pastor that, if he took this verse seriously, he should resign from leadership in ministry as an elder and pastor, since clearly he had not led his household faithfully. Is that what this means? Or is it a caution against recent converts, that is, adults who may have recently come to faith, but their households have not, indicating that there could be discord on the home front in this new mission arena?

After that, the list gets easier. In v. 7, a bishop or overseer (which we read as a synonym for elder), just needs to be blameless (again), not arrogant or quick tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. Oh, and you should have a firm grasp of Scripture so you can preach too. Alright, so everyone, raise your hands if you feel you qualify. You'll

note that any number of past and present elders are not raising their hands right now, and that's probably a good thing.

This is a challenging passage, and I would invite any of you if you had further questions about any of this or how we interpret and practice this as a church, please reach out. But let me leave you with three points.

First, at some point, let the setting of the letter speak, especially when it comes to those phrases like "husband of one wife" or "whose children are believers." The church was and is called to look different in a compelling way, and there and then, Christians who were temperate, not given over to lust or disorder at home, stood in stark contrast to the culture in a powerful, attractive way, and so the church's leaders especially should reflect that. Same call applies today, but it may not look exactly the same. (And by the way, if your instinct is, "No, we have to go with what it says, full stop," that's okay, but just wait till next week.)

Second, let the framework of grace and repentance inform how we understand these qualifications, because who in the history of the church ever could raise their hand and say, "Oh yeah, I fit the bill" for always being hospitable, prudent, devout, not arrogant or quick-tempered, and to top it all, "blameless"? Nobody.

Now, there are limits. If someone is constantly flying off the handle, yelling at everyone every time there is the slightest bit of disagreement with what they think, then no, that person should not be an elder. But the person who recognizes their struggles with, say, arrogance, a quick temper, being inhospitable, a lack of self-control, and has actively sought to grow in faith, in peace, in maturity and sanctification, absolutely.

Finally, let these qualifications challenge all of us in how we live. If we think, whew, well I'm not an elder, so I don't have to worry about these, we're missing the point. The point of these qualities is for the church's leaders to model a depth of faithfulness in behavior to the entire church, not in a legalistic way, but again, in the sense that Christ is calling the church to reflect the power of grace and new life that is at work among them, and that life doesn't lead to chaos. Perception matters, and that life should be authentically compelling to the culture around it precisely because it shows a different way, a way of peace, a way of fullness, a way of love, a way of grace, and that calling is upon all of us.

In fact, you'll remember that we are in the process of gathering nominations for officers, for elders and deacons right now. You can fill out the nomination form online or in the pews. Keep these qualities in mind as you consider who God may be lifting up in leadership in the church. And it may happen that someone else may recognize these qualities in you.

In fact, let's say later in the year when we're nominating officers, someone on the Nominating Committee reaches out to you, asking if you would be nominated to serve, you should feel the weight of that responsibility. In fact, the worst response I can think of to a nomination isn't, "No." "No" can be a faithful, prayerful response. Could be timing, could be circumstances, could be anything, but it's faithful. The worst response I can think of is, "Absolutely. What took you so long?"

Instead, and church family you are served by a Session full of elders like this, a response like, "I can think of any number of ways I fall short of the responsibility, but I recognize how I do and will strive to represent Christ faithfully, to reflect his righteousness in my own life, to seek his grace eagerly and readily when I don't, and to prayerfully seek the Spirit's leading in all aspects of our church's ministry and witness." May all of us, elder or not, feel that same calling.

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