

Empty Talkers

Titus 1:10-16

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Titus, chapter one. Today we return to our study of Paul's pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus. You will have already noticed that we're not studying them in canonical order—we're not studying them in the order that they're found in the Bible: I and II Timothy and Titus are the order that they're found in the Bible. We're studying them in the chronological order, the order in which they were written. I Timothy was written first and then Titus, and then finally, II Timothy, which is Paul's last letter before he was martyred for his service and love and discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Well, we've been studying these pastoral letters and we've noticed several common themes in them. Paul in this letter is writing to his trusted associate, Titus. And Titus has been left in Crete to minister to and build up a series of congregations that have grown up because of the gospel preaching that has gone on, on the island of Crete. But Paul has some special concerns for these Cretan Christians. The Cretans were not renowned for their morality. In fact, they were rather renowned for their immorality! And so these new, young disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, these Christians in these congregations spread in little towns throughout Crete, were surrounded by a very immoral culture. And Paul was concerned that the immorality of that culture not reflect itself in the lives of the members of these local congregations. He wanted them to be distinct from the world. He wanted them to be in the world, but not of it. He wanted them to be salt and light. He wanted them to live as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, and be an influence and a positive effect on the culture, rather than being influenced and affected by the immorality of the culture. And much of what Paul writes in the Book of Titus is about that concern. He wants to see the gospel of God's grace lived out in such a way that the lives of God's people in these congregations on Crete adorn that gospel of grace. And that concern comes up over and over again in this book.

Now, the last time we were in this book together we were looking at verses 5 to 9. And you may want to sneak a peek right now, because in that passage Paul describes the qualifications and something of the responsibilities of elders that are to be appointed and ordained by Titus in every church.

Isn't it interesting that he's concerned about discipleship in this local congregation? He's concerned about this congregation being distinctive, and being a unique witness to Christ in its living and in its believing in the community that it found itself in—this immoral culture in Crete. And so, the first thing that he says is, 'Ordain elders. Find men who meet these spiritual qualifications, and cause them to be used for teaching and for discipling, and for combating false teaching in this local congregation.' Paul knew that men who bore these distinctive qualities that are described here in Titus 1:5-9, would be the kind of example to these Cretan Christians of how they ought to live in this immoral culture.

In verse 5 he reminds us that elders are needed for the display of God's glory in the church. They're there for the discipleship of the church. In verses 6-8, where the character qualifications are given of these elders, we're reminded that these elders are to be an example for the Christians in these churches; and in verses 8 and 9 we're reminded that these elders, by their own character, are to foster godliness in the church, and they're to convey the truth, and they're to confront error.

So Paul has spoken about this in verses 5-9, all because he is concerned to promote sanctification. He's concerned to promote godliness. He's concerned to promote holiness and discipleship in this congregation—or, these various congregations—on Crete. The appointment of elders should be seen in light, in this instance, of that pressing need to resist the influence of this immoral culture. And we've observed, as we've studied I Timothy and Titus so far, that the situation is so similar to our own day and age.

Paul was living and preaching in a pluralistic society. We are living in a pluralistic society. Paul was living and preaching in an immoral society. We are living in an immoral society. And so there are very helpful parallels: not only is this the word of God, which is useful for every believer's edification, but even the circumstances of His giving this word to those congregations in Crete speak to unique circumstances that we face as a Christian congregation today. Paul desires these Cretan Christians to, in their thinking and in their living, reflect the gospel of God's grace; to adorn the gospel of God's grace, and not to be negatively influenced by the world around them.

And so there are two or three or four things that I'd like you to see in this passage today. And let me just show you where they are before we read God's word.

In verses 10 and 11, Paul calls on Titus to silence the false teachers. That's the first thing.

In verses 12-14, he calls on Titus and the elders to encourage sound doctrine that leads to godliness.

In verses 15 and 16, he encourages them to do two things: First of all, he wants Titus and the elders to understand the process of sanctification—how it happens. How do people really become holy? How do they grow in grace? How do they become better and better disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ? That's the first thing: Understand sanctification.

But secondly, he gives us that little apophthegm, that little phrase or maxim that our actions reveal our hearts. And I want to look at those four things in those three parts of this passage. But before we read God's word and hear it proclaimed, let's look to Him in prayer and ask for His blessing.

Our Lord and our God, we acknowledge that this is Your word, and we pray that as we hear it read and expounded that we will hear it for what it is: not the ideas of man about God and spiritual things; not the inspired insights of spiritual men about religious things; but, God's word to God's people, revealing God's character and plan and will. We acknowledge, O Lord, that all Scripture is given by inspiration and is profitable, and we pray that as we hear it that we would hear it believing that truth about it. And that believing this, that Your Holy Spirit would use the truth in our hearts to transform us by Your grace. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear God's word in Titus, chapter one:

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain. One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. For this cause reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truths upon our hearts.

Now, Paul, as we have said, is concerned throughout this letter for the congregation of Christians, or the congregations of Christians, in Crete to adorn the gospel of grace with their living: through their living to show, to demonstrate, to evidence the power of God at work in them by the gospel. And he's called on elders to be appointed in these churches precisely so that they can aid in that process.

But here, in verses 10 to 16, the last part of Titus, chapter one, he is specifically telling us three or four reasons why elders are needed in this church.

I. Paul has a zero-tolerance policy regarding teaching that deviates from the apostolic norm.

And the first reason you'll see there in verses 10 and 11: elders are needed in order to silence false teachers. The elders are there to make sure that the teaching that goes on in those local congregations is sound, that it's according to God's word; that it is in accordance with the preaching of Paul and the other apostles. Paul has a "zero-tolerance policy" regarding teaching that deviates from the Scripture. He has a zero-tolerance policy regarding teaching that deviates from the teaching and preaching of the apostles, and he's telling Titus here that the eldership must silence false teaching in the church. And he even gives us some of the qualities of these false teachers in verse 10. There are three qualities there that you can recognize in this Jewish Christian threat to congregational sanctification.

First of all, notice that Paul calls them "rebellious men." Now, he does this because they do not submit to the authority of the word. You notice elsewhere later in the passage, he will say that they are teaching Jewish myths and the commandments of men. In other words, it is extra-biblical teaching that they are appealing to and fostering in the life of this local congregation as the key to these Christians becoming what God intended for them to be. If they're really going to grow in grace, they need to obey these commandments of men, and they need to believe these particular myths. And Paul is saying, 'Aha! These men are rebellious. They are rebelling against the authority of God's word, because God says His word is sufficient in order to grow us in grace, in order to equip us for every good deed. But these men are coming along and saying, no, if you really want to be a Christian, if you really want to be holy, if you really want to be what God intends you to be, then you need to believe these myths, and you need to obey these commands, even though God didn't command them in the Scripture.

And so, Paul from the very beginning identifies them as people who do not submit to the authority of the word or to the apostles' preaching of the word. And you know, even to this day that is a standing characteristic of a false prophet. A false prophet will always come up with some extra-biblical thing to tell you that is necessary to live the Christian life, and encourage that as key to the Christian life.

Secondly, notice that he calls them "empty talkers and deceivers." That's a beautifully rich word—empty talkers. It's just one word in the Greek. We get it as two words in English, but it means "those who peddle big words with vaporous content." Big words, big talk; very, very little substance. And so they are deceivers. They are peddlers of false doctrine. So, they reject the authority of the

word, they peddle big, empty talk, but are deceivers in the end.

And he calls them “of the circumcision.” He very likely means that they were Jewish Christians. They were Christians from a Jewish background who are continuing to insist on certain Jewish popular myths and man-made traditions as necessary for Christian experience. Now, Paul says “especially the circumcision” to indicate that perhaps not all of the false teachers were Jewish Christians, but perhaps the main ones in these local congregations were from a Jewish Christian background.

Notice that Paul does not believe in “freedom of speech” in the local church: only truth must be spoken there. And the reason is, of course, the consequence of this false teaching. Paul is concerned that Christians in these congregations live counter-culturally; that they not cave in to the peer pressure of Cretan culture around them. But if they do not believe what the Bible says is the way to grow in grace, they will be crippled in living the Christian life. And so, the false teaching leads to false living. And so his first word to Titus is, ‘Titus, you and the elders need to silence false teachers. You need to fight this false teaching.’

Now Paul's attack on false teaching, his approach towards doctrinal deviation is alien to the spirit of our own pluralistic age. We think that everybody's opinion matters, and what would it hurt if we had varying opinions taught in the church. But remember, Paul's age was pluralistic, too; and precisely so, he was zealous for sound doctrine because it is crucial, it is necessary for Christian growth. His concern was for these Christians to grow in grace, and they couldn't do that on bad teaching. They needed sound teaching. And so the very first thing he says is, ‘Titus, you and the elders fight false teaching. Silence the false teachers. Promote sound teaching in the church.’

II. Paul wants the congregations in Crete to be strongly exhorted to be counter-cultural in their living, and Pauline in their thinking — He is telling Titus that the eldership must rebuke these Christians under cultural assault.

But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to say in verses 12 to 14 that he wants them to encourage sound doctrine unto godliness. Now, if you're looking at verses 12-14 right now, you may be saying, “Well, Ligon, you certainly did put a positive spin on that!” because these are fairly blunt words. These words strike me as having all the tact of a Marine master gunnery sergeant speaking to a buck private. They are “in your face” kinds of words, and of course, Paul means them to be. He actually exhorts...in verse 13, he exhorts Titus and the elders to “reprove... severely” these people in the congregation, so that they would be sound in the faith.

Now, what's Paul saying there? Well, Paul wants this congregation in Crete, or

these congregations in Crete, to be strongly exhorted to be counter-cultural in the way that they think and live. He wants them to be biblical in their thinking and biblical in their living, and he is telling Titus that the eldership must be involved in confronting these Christians who are under cultural assault, warning them against this false teaching that will lead them down rabbit trails and into immorality, and exhorting them to resist the influence of the world. He wants the elders to be involved in encouraging sound doctrine that leads to godliness. Listen to what he says: "For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith...." And so, he is concerned that their thinking be right, in order that their living will be right.

But of course he's told them, he's told Titus, that the people are to receive this message from elders who are already described in verses 6,7, and 8. And listen to the description of these men who are going to deliver this rebuke: They are husbands of one wife; they have children who are faithful, or who believer; they have not been accused of dissipation or rebellion; they are above reproach; they're not self-willed; they're not quick tempered; they're not addicted to wine; they're not pugnacious; they're not fond of sordid gain. They're hospitable; they love what is good; they are sensible, just, devout and self-controlled; and they hold fast to the faithful word. It's these men who are going to rebuke and reprove and exhort the members of this local congregation to faithfulness. In other words, they have walked the walk before they bring this talk of exhortation and rebuke. They have a life that backs up the words, the strong words, that they are going to deliver to this local congregation.

You may, like me, be also struck by the bluntness of Paul's letter to Titus, knowing that it was going to be read in congregations of Cretans. Can you imagine me standing up before you and reading a letter that went something like this?

"And Ligon, a prophet of their own, a Jacksonian, once said, 'Jacksonians are always liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons. And Ligon, let me tell you: it's true!'"

Now, how would you respond to that? You might be a little offended! Well, I think it's a compliment from Paul to these Cretan Christians that he's willing to say that in a letter that he knows is going to be read to them, because the best of them, those that are Christians are going to go, "Yes, Paul, you're right. That's what my culture is like, and I don't want to be like that. Because though I was born here, my citizenship is in heaven. 'My people' is the Christian church. And though I dearly love my Cretan friends and family, my first loyalty is to the Lord Jesus Christ, to my citizenship in heaven; and I don't want to live like these people live here."

It is a marvelous call to Christian discipleship. You see, Paul is concerned that these Cretans not fall into the ways of simply following in the practices and attitudes and outlooks and behaviors of the people around them in their own

home country. This cultural tendency to dishonest-ness and to maliciousness and laziness—Paul says, Titus, you've got to challenge that. You can't allow those tendencies to go unchecked.

And Paul's concern about false teaching is that it is not only not going to challenge that, but it's going to drive sin underground by not really dealing with it, while people “feel like” it's being dealt with; and, it is going to fail, in fact, to foster true godliness. And so he says to Titus through these elders, ‘Encourage Christian growth in holiness, because false teaching cannot produce true Christian holiness.’

That's the second thing that Paul says to Titus, and it's so relevant to us today. How many of us have been helped by some older, wiser, godly Christian along the way who has been willing to get in our face and warn us that we were going the wrong direction. I have benefited on more than one occasion. In fact, I've benefited more times than I am really desirous of telling you, of people confronting me about sin, and those becoming significant turning points in my own growth in grace. And that is exactly what Paul is talking about the elders doing. They know the people, they love the people, they want these people to live like Christians, and they are willing to confront them and call them to live as believers in this immoral culture.

III. Paul wants the elders to reckon with the dynamics of the inward grace in its outward expression — He is telling Titus that the eldership must understand the sanctification and recognize the heart conditions of the flock.

Thirdly, if you'll look at verses 15 and 16, there are two messages there, but this is the first of those two messages. Paul here makes it clear that he wants the elders of the church to reckon with the dynamics of inward grace. He wants them to reckon with how the Holy Spirit works to change believers. He wants them to understand sanctification. He wants them to understand the way the Spirit works to grow a Christian, and he begins in verse 15 with these words: “To the pure, all things are pure....”

Now, why does he say this? Because he tells you in this very passage that there are those in this congregation who are false teachers, who are saying to them, “If you really want to be a good Christian, you need to believe these popular myths; you need to follow these manmade commands. If you'll do these rituals, if you'll believe these things, if you'll abstain from partaking in these things, even though the Bible doesn't say you need to abstain from partaking in these things; and if you'll do these things, even if the Bible doesn't say that you need to do these things—if you'll do those things, you'll really be a great Christian. You'll be a super-Christian! You'll be far along the road to holiness.”

And the Apostle Paul says, "That's not how sanctification works. Sanctification doesn't work by ignoring the Bible. Sanctification doesn't work by adding to the Bible. Sanctification doesn't work by taking away from the Bible. Sanctification doesn't work by putting popular myths alongside of the Bible. That's not how the Holy Spirit works." And so he quotes this little maxim, "To the pure, all things are pure."

It's a statement that is not unlike his instruction in Romans 14, where he talks about how Christians are to consider things which are indifferent; that is, things which are neither forbidden nor commanded in God's word. How is the Christian to deal with these things? In Romans 14 and elsewhere in the New Testament, one of the struggles was how should a Christian view the use of meat which had been designated and stamped for the purpose of offering sacrifice to pagan deities? There were some Christians who felt we shouldn't go into a meat market and buy meat that had been so designated. And others felt that, 'Hey, it's cheap meat! We'll buy it, go home and eat it. We're not worshipping those pagan deities.' And Paul dealt with issues like that in the New Testament to deal with the cases of conscience of Christians.

But these false teachers were saying, "Look, Cretan Christians. If you want to grow in grace you need to abstain from this and this and this and this, even though God's word doesn't say that you need to abstain. And if you'll do those things, you will become more holy." And Paul says, "No, no, no, no! To the pure, all things are pure. If you are following God's word, if you are under God's grace, if you're a true believer, the way to holiness is not adding manmade commands to God's word. That's not how believers grow in grace."

The Spirit works on the heart through the word. The heart is the seat of our mind and will and desires, and depriving us of things that God has not commanded us to deprive ourselves of is not going to increase our holiness one whit. Externalism, formalism, ritualism, manmade commandments—none of these things is capable of producing real Christian holiness. "To the pure," Paul says, "all things are pure."

Now Paul doesn't, of course, mean that things that God has forbidden in His word are pure to those who are pure: he's speaking of those things which had been ritually declared clean by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, or which are morally indifferent. God hasn't told us about them one way or another. These things are pure to the pure. Why? Because the Spirit works on our heart by the word. We're not sanctified from the outside in by keeping manmade commandments: we're sanctified from the inside out by the Holy Spirit working in accordance with the word of God.

And so Paul wants Titus to make sure that these elders reckon with that reality. 'If we want a holy congregation in Crete, Titus', he's saying, 'then they need to understand how the Spirit works.' And how does He work? He works by the word

being spoken to consciences, impacting the desires, transforming the heart of a believer from the inside out so that our outward actions reflect that inward transformation.

But he's not done. He goes on to say:

“To those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed.”

IV. Our actions are a heart diagnostic.

This is the fourth thing that Paul is saying in this passage. Not only does he want these elders to silence false teachers and to encourage sound doctrine to the ends of godly living, and to understand sanctification; but he also wants them to know that our actions are a heart diagnostic.

Now, when you go to a doctor and something's wrong inside, doctors have all sorts of diagnostics that they use to try and figure out what is wrong inside of you. They have X-rays and CT scans, and MRI's and other even more unpleasant things to figure out what's going wrong in you. And Paul is saying to the elders, 'Elders, let me give you a diagnostic. You want to see what's going on in the heart of that Christian? Look at her, look at his life. Look at his actions. Look at what she loves. Look at how he spends his time. Look at what he cares about. Look at her priorities. Look at the behavior, the neighbor-love, the love of God, the love for Scripture. Look at the actions of this person, because our deeds reveal our hearts.'

Paul is simply repeating something that Jesus said on numerous occasions: “By their fruits you will know them.” Paul is reminding these elders that our actions reveal our hearts. Our life is a diagnostic of what we really believe, of what we really desire in our heart of hearts. And so elders are not only to understand how the Holy Spirit grows Christians, but that actions are the spiritual diagnostic of the heart. And just as external things cannot produce that growth in true Christian holiness, so also where the Spirit is working, there will always be an external manifestation of God's grace in the way we live, in the way we think, in the way we speak.

Paul's words are infinitely practical to these Cretan Christians, but they are imminently practical for us as well, for we live in an immoral culture, and our great temptation right here in Jackson is to try to keep one foot in the world and one foot in God's kingdom; to try and live a little bit like the culture around us, and a little bit like Christians. And Paul is saying to Titus and these elders, 'Nope, that's not what I want. I want you to live like blood-bought Christians. And the

only way you'll do that is by the word.'

Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, thank You for Your word. Grant that we would pursue holiness, relying upon Your grace so that with our lives we might adorn the gospel of grace. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen

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