

Applying The Exegeted Word to an Exegeted People

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Bible Text: Titus 1:12-14

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We're in verses 12 through 14 of Titus chapter 1. Let me begin in verse 10 as I read. Hear the Word of the Lord. "For there are many unruly men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced, who subvert whole houses by teaching for dishonest gain things they ought not teach. One of them, a prophet of their own, said, 'The Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, and idle gluttons!' This witness is true. So rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who reject the truth." The grass withers and the flower fades but the Word of our God stands forever.

Brothers and sisters, I want to encourage you today in the Word of our God that an elder must know and love the Word and the people of God. An elder must know and love the Word and the people of God, leading them in the truth of the Word. In presbytery exams, if I stand to ask a question (because presbytery is too smart to put me on the committee) if I stand on the floor of presbytery, I try to nail down in that candidate "do you love people?" Do you love people? It's so important as you looked at candidates a couple years ago, as other congregations look for candidates, a leading question is always "do they love the Word of God, will they preach us the Word of God? And perhaps it's humility. We all know we have plenty of that. Perhaps it's not understanding that this question should be asked. But a second question is like unto the first: will he love US WITH the Word of God?

Brothers and sisters, as we come to verses 12 through 14 of Titus 1, we see, firstly, that an elder must exegete his people. This is something that's talked about in homiletics courses (there's one of those 50 cent words for you), classes about preaching. To exegete the people. But what does that mean? Well, we see a glimpse of it here as Paul is talking to Titus about the context in which he is ministering. "One of them, a prophet of their own, said, 'The Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, and idle gluttons!'" Now in some denominations, not only do churches examine resumes and CVs of potential ministers, but the church also puts together a little description about themselves that they put out through the denominational means so that ministers looking for a charge can look and say, "what is this congregation about?" So you can imagine Titus clicking through the website and coming upon the description. Oh, the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Crete, I wonder what they're about. And- and there below the church name is the church motto: we seek to always be liars, evil beasts, and idle gluttons. Well that just sounds like an ideal place to minister, doesn't it? That's what you call job security. And that's why I never try to finish a morning and afternoon sermon series at the-- on the same week. I want some overlap so I'm leaving you hanging in some way so that I know you'll want me back the week to at least wrap that up. But an elder has to exegete his people, he has to KNOW his people. I remember sitting in a meeting in a church one time and one of the elders described the church to me as a meat grinder (and he was being gracious at that point). And- and there had been this massive

scuttlebutt and this question came through one of the elders: "what can we do to make the people think that we love them?" And I was the young staff member at the time and I raised my hand. I said, "here's a crazy idea. Why don't we love them? Why don't we get to know them? Why don't we spend time with them?" You've heard me talk before about the great level-- the apostolic leveling that whenever the apostles are writing to the people of God, they always are talking about US, us together. And brothers and sisters, that is what you should look for in your elders, as well. That we are part of you. That we don't operate under a different Gospel. We don't have a different, definitely not a superior, faith. It is the same Gospel that has saved all of us. And you should look for your elders, that they love you, they know you, they spend time with you. Part of this is a cultural knowledge, a cultural understanding. Paul here is using cultural arts to inform the reality in which Titus is living and serving and ministering.

Titus isn't bringing up Epimenides, as some assume this to be who Paul is quoting. And Paul doesn't say, "I don't know anything about that. I can't get his book at Reformation Heritage Books or at Banner of Truth so it's completely irrelevant to the Gospel and anything going on here." No, Paul was aware of the culture of the Cretan church, the culture in which they lived and resided. Now- now he didn't exalt it, he didn't celebrate it, but he knew what was going on and what was being said. Brothers and sisters, WE must be aware of what is going on and being said. You must look for your elders to be aware of the culture in which you live. And you need to expect that because we live in that same culture and we are called to serve and to minister in that culture. Now some question because Paul calls Epimenides a prophet. He's just using the old language where poets and the like are called prophets. He's speaking culturally. He's speaking in a way that when this letter is read to the church at Crete they would say, "okay, I remember reading that article in the paper. I remember that letter to the editor." And they-- he was connecting with their own view of these poets that were around. An elder must exegete his people. And what do I mean by exegesis? He must KNOW them, he must draw out from them who they are, what their desires, are what they enjoy, what they hate. He must know his people, he must understand his people. Now when we talk about preaching in the text, you might have heard of eisegesis. That's not a- a political party over in the Middle East, that's reading into the text what you want to find there. And there are many elders, there are many ministers and ruling elders, who do that to their people as well. They're not happy until all of their people are exactly like THEM. Do you know what a hellacious place Trinity would be if you all were just like me? I mean, I've got my 6 family members AND my parents here today who would testify this would be a church that no one would ever want to touch if everybody was just like Joel. No, we're to know one another and to love one another as God has made us to be.

Secondly, an elder must exegete the Word. He must exegete the Word. We see here that the goal is soundness in the faith. What is the standard of soundness when it comes to the Christian religion? The Word. What does the Bible say? Now some are suspect of presbyterians and reformed churches because we are confessional and we're seeing as exalting the Westminster Confession of Faith or the Three Forms of Unity for the continental reformed churches or there are actually a few Congregationalists out there who still hold to the Savoy, which is the congregational form, or Baptists who hold to the London Confession or even the New Hampshire Confession. People say, "you- you've taken these documents of men and you have exalted them up to the same standard of Scripture." No. No, we see in them a faithful summary of what Scripture teaches. They help us consistently answer the question: what does the Bible teach? And when what we believe about what the Bible says and teaches is written down, we're able to interact with it, we're able to see more clearly the errors that perhaps are there, or our misunderstanding of what Scripture teaches. And we need to remember, brothers and sisters, and remind those who perhaps are reticent to participate in a full confessionalism, that EVERYBODY has a confession. EVERYBODY operates, in some summary fashion, in what the Bible teaches. But some have seen fit to write it down. And for all in that group to be on the same page and to interact and

interrelate upon that. See, even the confession "Jesus is Lord." 'cause some- some would say, you know, "I just-- I believe what the Bible teaches." And- and if you say-- you ask them, "what does the Bible teach?" whatever comes out of their mouth af-- to answer that question IS a confession of faith. It is a summary of what the Bible teaches. Very few people would say, "well, I believe that the Bible teaches: in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," and then hours later, you know, "the Spirit and the bride say come.." you know. No, nobody just says all of Scripture in summarizing what does Scripture teach. Even that simple confession "Jesus is Lord" is loaded like the mother of all bombs as it drops in the heart of a newly converted sinner saved by grace. It's a confession of the historicity, of the divinity, of the humanity and of the regal sovereignty of Jesus Christ. That three simple word confession provides a lifelong endeavor of understanding what those words mean. An elder must exegete the Word, he must understand what is the soundness of the faith. He must draw it out of the Scriptures and he must make it edible to the sheep of God's house. One of the lines that stuck out to me yesterday from Adam Kuehner's message at the ordination of Ryan Bever down at Harrisonburg at Grace and Truth Mission Church was when he said, "some pastors have more syllables in four words than they have converts in four decades of ministry." That is a challenge to your pastor's heart. Some of you might say, "Joel, we don't worry about you using a lot of syllables in one word." Probably true. But are we seeing converts as the Word is brought to you week by week? Let us pray for that to happen.

Thirdly, an elder must apply that exegeted Word to that exegeted people. An elder must apply that exegeted Word to that exegeted people. Some of you will say to me on occasion, "boy, you really preached to US. You preached to Trinity." Well, I figure that's what I'm supposed to be doing. I don't know who else I would preach to. You know, I- I- I suppose I could preach to Gibsonia from this pulpit but I doubt they'd hear it, I doubt they'd care. I am called to preach to you guys. I'm called to apply the exegeted Word to YOU, the exegeted people. Your ruling elders are called to participate in that as we meet in session, as they teach in Sabbath school, as they counsel, as they converse with you. Paul tells Titus, "so rebuke them sharply..." "... rebuke them sharply..." And I think some clarification on that word sharply is that the rebuke should fit the crime. If there's a casual misunderstanding, a statement made in ignorance, that can be gently dealt with and nurtured and shepherded and brought along. When someone is teaching something that is false, that is destructive, that is leading entire households astray, it must be dealt with sharply. It must be dealt with in a way that breaks it off and brings an end to it. And the word used here, rebuke, in our- in our book of discipline, we use the word "rebuke" and- and it's contrasted, I would say, with the word "admonition." And perhaps you've heard these two words and a lot of times in church meetings I'm reminding people admonition and rebuke are not interchangeable. They're two different concepts. In our book of discipline we defined them this way: "Admonition- this is the lightest degree of censure and is commonly used by the court in cases of neglect of duty. It consists of reproving the offender, warning him of the danger of his course, and charging him to be more faithful in his Christian life. The court may also make the people under its oversight aware publicly of the fact of and reason for the admonition." And then rebuke is defined this way: "This is a censure for a more aggravated sin and is commonly used by the court in cases of active transgression or of continued neglected of duty in spite of counsel. It consists of authoritative reproof in the name of Christ, and a call for repentance and reformation of life. And the court can make those under its oversight aware publicly of it." So what is the difference? Well think of it this way: AD-monition. Admonition, you must add to what you are doing. There's something that you're not doing that you need to add to your regimen. And in RE-buke, re-buke, you must remove something that you are doing. So one is used in times of people not performing in ways that they should and the other is used in ways of people performing in ways that they shouldn't, that they need to stop. And it's up to the elders, brothers and sisters, it's up to the elders.

And this is why I'm thankful for presbyterianism because I'm not alone, and in our session we're not alone as we have the brothers of the presbytery to help us when we perhaps go astray. And we as the presbytery have the Synod to help us to know how to walk. And if that's not enough we have the RP Global Alliance tracking all of our moves and posting them online. They're amazing, I don't know how they do it but they turn them into lovely articles to keep us informed of what's going on in the churches. Brothers and sisters, you should not expect to come and sit in the pew week by week or sit in Sabbath school or come to the session with a question, you shouldn't expect to come and not have the Word applied to YOU. To your situation, to your life, to your problem. As elders, we are called to take the exegeted Word and apply it to God's people. That's what we are called to do. We're not called to speak in vague ways about some kind of truth that might be helpful if you so choose to participate. We're Calvinists, after all. God has chosen so we must participate, we must obey, we must do as the Word says.

Fourthly, an elder must lead in truth from the Word. "... not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who reject the truth." Beloved, an elder must understand the difference between the core truth and application of the Gospel in the Scriptures in all of life and everything else. An elder must understand the difference between Christ's standard and my standard, between Christ's way of doing things and the way that I might prefer that they be done, between Scripture and traditions of men, between the Gospel and activities that just simply are not necessary for the Gospel to work. An elder must lead in truth from the Word.

Fifthly. And this comes from one word in the text that might not seem so important but it gives us great Gospel hope. It's found in verse 13 and it is this word in the English: that. That. Fifthly, brothers and sisters, an elder must hold out Gospel hope for change in the people of God. "So rebuke them sharply THAT they may be sound in the faith..." Go-- Paul is pointing here to WHY we do gospel ministry, to WHY we exegete our people, and WHY we take the exegeted Word and apply it to those people. It's THAT they may be sound in the faith. It is because change can and does happen in the people of God when the Word of God is applied to them. It's because we might begin as liars and evil beasts and idle gluttons; what's- what's true of the Cretans might be true of us, BUT the possibility remains that we may be sound in the faith when the Word of God is applied in specific ways to our hearts and minds. Change happens. It is the Gospel hope in the church that we are not what we once were and by God's grace tomorrow we will not be what we are today. Brothers and sisters, I would encourage you to look for, encourage, pray for, and expect change in one another. Expect sanctification because we're doing it by works of the law? No, because if- if we are a Gospel community, if we are a community of faith, if we're a community where the grace of Jesus Christ has come upon us we WILL be changed. We WILL be sanctified. God did not love us from eternity and predestine us and make all of the preparations necessary and all of the accomplishments necessary and all the applications necessary so that we might be justified but then have it stopped there. If we're predestined we will be justified, if we just-- are justified we will be sanctified, and, praise God, if we are sanctified some day we will be glorified. And like a bald man reading in Leviticus all God's people said, "amen." It's okay, let's try it together. Amen. See, you're not alone, you can-- we can do it as a group. Brothers and sisters, we can expect Gospel change in ourselves and in one another WHEN the Word of God is being rightly applied to the people of God.

If I say the name Issachar what text pops into your head? Remember the sons of Issachar? What were they known for? They were known for having understanding of the times and what Israel should do. They were part of those "... men of war, arranged in ranks, who came to Hebron with a sincere heart," First Chronicles 12 tells us, "to make David king over all Israel, along with all the rest of Israel who with one heart came to make David king." These guys ended up with a fantastic reputation for

understanding what should be done in their time and place. But First Chronicles 12 is not the first time we hear of Issachar and his family. The first time we hear of Issachar is in Genesis 49 verses 14 and 15 which say, "Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between two burdens; he saw that a resting place was good, and that the land was pleasant; so he bowed his shoulder to bear the burden and became a slave to forced labor." That's the first word we hear about Issachar and yet what is the reputation that stands in time? That his sons knew, they understood the times. They had wisdom. That's- that's the idea that's being presented there, they had wisdom in what should be done in Israel to the point that they participated fully and joyfully in the coronation of the true king of Israel.

The Cretans were known as liars, evil beasts, and idle gluttons. But then the Word of God showed up, handled by men of God who loved the Word and loved the Cretans. Calvin says in his commentary that Paul wouldn't have said this without proof. It must've been a well known fact that Cretan society was a mess. But brothers and sisters, by God's grace it doesn't stay that way. Calvin said, "How wonderful it is that God's plan is to call such a wicked people, who are infamous for their vices, to be among the first to share in the Gospel. It is just as marvelous that the kindness of God's heavenly grace is given to people who are not worthy to live on this earth. So, in that corrupt country, as though at the heart of hell, Christ's church held on and kept expanding, even though it was infected by the evil habits that prevailed there. For Paul is not just reproving outsiders but specifically singles out those who had professed Christ's name as these evil vices had already taken root and were spreading everywhere. Paul does not spare the reputation of all the people so that he may cure those from among them who had any hope of being healed" It's well known also that, after Paul's work in the Ephesian church where he pled with them day and night through tears, that that Ephesian church did not always stay faithful, they wandered from the truth BUT by God's grace they came back. Brothers and sisters, when the Word of God is being applied to the people of God let us hold out great hope for Gospel change in ourselves, in one another, even in those little pew climbers that crawl all over us during the worship service. Even in that spouse that we think is so hardened that I'll never get through to them. Even in that child that seems like they are on the precipice and they are ready to walk away from the faith. Even in perhaps that child that we can see wandering in the desert from here and we pray longingly for them to come home. Let us hope for gospel change. Pray for your elders, that we would know and love the Word of God and YOU, the people of God and that we would lead you in the truth of the Word so that we might see Gospel change among all of us.

Stand with me as we pray.