

Titus 1:1-16 “Sound Doctrine and Good Works”
Jeremiah 23
Psalm 23

September 4, 2016

In the evening service, we are now just completing the Jeremiah series.

In the oracles against the nations,
Jeremiah warns that judgment is coming against all nations.
And in particular, he uses the image of Sodom and Gomorrah
to speak of what God will do to those nations that rebel against him.

But Jeremiah 23 reminds us that God is no respecter of persons.

When the prophets of *Jerusalem* walked in lies
and strengthened the hands of evildoers –
then Jerusalem itself became like Sodom and Gomorrah,
and God declares that he will wipe Jerusalem from the face of the earth.

But it’s important to see the relationship in Jeremiah 23
between the *shepherds* and the *prophets*.

The shepherds of Israel are the sons of David.

David was the shepherd-king –
and the kings in Jerusalem are the ones who set the tone.
When the king is faithful,
then he will not put up with false prophets and wicked priests.
But when the king is faithless –
when the shepherd does not care for the sheep –
then prophets and priests alike practice deceit,
with no one to restrain them.

It all starts with the shepherd.

It all starts with the King.
When God raises up for David a righteous Branch –
a faithful Shepherd who will lead, and feed, and protect his sheep –
“In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely.
And this is the name by which he will be called:
‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

And so of course we must sing Psalm 23 in response!

Because in Psalm 23 we hear Jesus singing,
“the LORD is my shepherd”!
The LORD brought his beloved Son through the valley of the shadow of death,
and he now dwells in the house of the LORD forever!

And therefore Jesus has also become for us “The LORD our righteousness” –
the one who is true God and true man – in one person!

Sing Psalm 23
Read Titus 1

Later this month the session will be examining our elder and deacon nominees,
so it is fitting that we take some time to reflect on one of the Pastoral Epistles –
and how Christian leadership should function in the church.

The book of Titus has a fairly simple structure:
after Paul's greeting, there is an opening discussion of leadership (ch 1),
followed by exhortations to each part of the congregation (ch 2),
concluded with an exhortation to the community as a whole (ch 3).

Next week we will zoom in and look in more detail at the qualifications for elders (v 5-9),
but today we will look at the big picture of what Paul is doing
in his epistle to Titus –
and in the whole of chapter 1.

What is the relationship between sound doctrine and good works?

Some people like to say that sound doctrine *produces* good works –
in other words, if you believe the right things,
that will result in you doing the right things.

There is a grain of truth there.
It's true that if you *really* believe the right things,
then you will act rightly.
But here's the problem:
our beliefs are not formed merely by thinking.
Our beliefs are shaped by our practices –
as much as our practice is shaped by our belief.

This is plainly a central theme in the book of Titus,
starting in the very first verse:
Paul writes to Titus
“for the sake of the faith of God elect
and their knowledge of the truth,
which accords with godliness.”

Yes, in one sense, faith and knowledge *produce* godliness –
there is a sense in which *godliness* is the test of doctrine –
but there is another way in which the *lack of godliness*
disproves the teaching in question –

which we see in the false teachers of the second half of chapter 1

who “profess to know God, but they deny him by their works.”

Likewise, the household instructions of chapter 2 open with a similar phrase:

“teach what accords with sound doctrine” –

and the subsequent direction focuses on how you live.

Good works thus “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (2:10),

and, Paul says in 2:11-12 that “the grace of God has appeared,

bringing salvation for all people,

training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions,

and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age...”

In 2:14 Paul will say that Jesus redeemed us from all lawlessness

and “to purify for himself a people for his own possession

who are zealous for good works.”

And then chapter 3 will describe how we were once foolish, disobedient, etc. –

but God saved us – not *because* of works done by us in righteousness,

but because of his own mercy – he justified us by his grace –

“so that those who have believed in God

may be careful to devote themselves to good works.” (3:8)

And, in case you haven’t got the point yet,

in his concluding instructions in 3:14 Paul says:

“Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works,

so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.”

In other words, from start to finish, the Epistle to Titus

focuses on how good works are essential to the Christian life.

Verses 1-4 is a very typical Pauline greeting.

The basic structure is this:

Paul, to Titus, grace and peace.

This is a standard Greek form of epistolary address –

which Paul has crafted into his own unique style.

Paul’s opening greeting will generally give you a window

into the central purpose of his letter.

And this is no exception:

1. Greeting: The Faith and Knowledge which Accords with Godliness (1:1-4)

a. Paul (v1-3)

I Paul, a servant^[a] of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ,

Who is Paul?

A servant (or a slave) of God.

This is the word “doulos” – which refers to a menial slave.
Usually Paul refers to himself as a servant of *Christ* –
but here he uses the phrase “servant of God” –
suggesting a connection to Moses, David, Job, and the prophets –
who were called “servants of God.”

Indeed, Paul’s work in this epistle is to do very much what the prophets did
in warning the people of God against apostasy and unbelief.

But Paul also identifies himself as an “apostle of Jesus Christ.”
He is an emissary – a messenger sent by Jesus himself.
Other people could call themselves apostles of the churches –
because they had been sent on various missions by the churches –
but only the Twelve, and Paul, and very few others,
could claim to be sent by Jesus himself.

Why has Paul been sent by Jesus?

*for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords
with godliness,*

The church needed the apostles in order to rightly teach the truth.
After the resurrection of Jesus,
there were many who claimed to have the right doctrine.
Indeed, you see some of this variety in Crete in Paul’s own day!

In all of the NT letters, there are lots of references to these various teachers and teachings.
Paul is a servant of God – like the prophets of old –
whose purpose is to instruct God’s elect in sound doctrine.
He is an apostle of Jesus Christ –
which means that he bears unique authority from Jesus himself.

And this is why it is especially important for us to listen to what Paul says.
Because Paul is writing this so that we might believe and know the truth –
that truth which accords with godliness.

Some people are “doctrine geeks” – they just want to know theology.
Other people are preoccupied with practice – just tell me what to do!

Paul says that you need *both*.
He refuses to prioritize one over the other.
As our shorter catechism teaches us,
“What do the scriptures principally teach?
The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God
and what duty God requires of man.”

But this faith – this knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness –
has an eschatological focus:

² *in hope of eternal life,*

Why do we believe this doctrine?
Why do we live the way we do?

As Paul said in 1 Cor 15 –
if it is only for this life that we have hope,
we are the most miserable of men!
Our *hope* – the thing that we are looking forward to –
is eternal life.

And Paul describes how this hope is rooted in eternity past –
and then made manifest in the proper time through the preaching of the gospel.

Because this is the hope of eternal life:

*which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began^[b] ³ and at the proper time
manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the
command of God our Savior;’*

Think about that:

God promised this salvation – this eternal life –
“before the ages began.”

This is the same thing that Paul says in Ephesians 1:4 –
“before the foundation of the world.”

Before the ages began, God promised this hope of eternal life.
Before God created the world, he had promised eternal life.

This is why we talk about predestination to life
as something that God had determined “before the ages began.”
The plan of salvation was something that God had decided
before he created anything!

And Paul says that this *promise* is what was manifested *in his word* at the proper time.
This is very much the same sort of thing that John says in his gospel.
“In the beginning was the Word”
“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

The Promise that God made before the beginning
has now been manifested “at the proper time” in his word –
through the apostolic preaching.

In other contexts, the focus is on how God sent his Son *at the proper time*. Here, Paul's emphasis is on the proper time for the *preaching* of the gospel.

This is useful for us to think about.

God's timing is never accidental.
His *promise* made before the ages began
will come to pass *at the proper time*.

I know that that can be hard to hear.
We want to be in control.
We don't want to be told, "just wait –
God will take care of it in his time!"
But God is God –
and you are not!

And that also means that God never lies.
He will do what he promises – *in the proper time*.

You need to learn to *trust* God –
to believe that he *will* be faithful to his promises.

How do we learn this?
We have to learn humility.
There is no substitute for humility!

I know!
We don't like it when people tell us what to do.
We don't like it when *God* tells us what to do!

But that's why Jesus said that we have to become like little children
to enter the kingdom of God.

And Paul says that Titus has done this:

b. To Titus (v4a)

⁴ *To Titus, my true child in a common faith:*

I like Theodoret's way of saying this:
"he who hears cannot be called the son of the preacher,
unless he takes to himself what he learns with faith." (284)

Paul calls Titus his "true child in a common faith"
because Titus has *believed* Paul's message.

The identity of the recipient helps us understand the nature of the letter.

Many have commented on how the theology of the book of Titus is more implied than stated.

The reason is very simple.

Titus was one of Paul's theological students.

Titus *knows* Paul's theology very well.

Paul doesn't need to explain things in detail.

And so Paul gives Titus his standard greeting:

c. Grace and Peace (v4b)

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

The standard Greek greeting was "chairein" – greetings.

Paul always says "charis" – grace.

The standard Hebrew greeting was "shalom" – peace.

By blending them together, Paul gives a theological foundation for Christian fellowship.

Our basic human need is for *peace* – shalom – "well-being."

But there is no way for us to obtain peace apart from grace!

We need both grace and peace –

and this is what God the Father has done –

through our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Why do I say this?

Because *even* in something as *ordinary* as the way that Paul addresses his letters he is calling our attention to what God has done in Jesus.

Our second point then turns to the task in Crete.

2. The Task in Crete: Putting Things in Order/Appointing Elders (1:5-9)

We'll spend more time next week on the details of verses 5-9.

For now the essential point is found in verse 5:

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

We catch a glimpse of Paul's church-planting strategy here.

Paul had apparently planted several churches in Crete –

but he left Titus behind in order to train and ordain elders.

Notice that Paul doesn't say to appoint "an elder" in every church –

but "elders" in every town.

Both points are important.

Paul does not think of these elders as isolated.

Every town should have multiple elders.

Not just every *congregation* – but every *town*.

It's the same principle you see in Acts 15 – the “elders of Jerusalem” –
or in Acts 20 – the “elders of Ephesus.”

There should be an “eldership” in every city – a “presbytery.”

⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife,^[c] and his children are believers^[d] and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer,^[e] as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound^[f] doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

We'll look more at the qualifications next week.

But these elders are needed in Crete

so that they can give instruction in sound doctrine –
and to rebuke those who contradict it. (v9)

And this is really the central problem that Paul addresses in his epistle to Titus.

3. The Problem in Crete: Teachers who Profess to Know God, but Deny Him by Their Works (1:10-16)

There are teachers in Crete who profess to know God –
but deny him by their works.

a. The Solution A: “Empty Talkers and Deceivers...Must Be Silenced” (v10-11)

¹⁰ For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party.^[g] ¹¹ They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

Notice that Paul provides a large category for the problem teachers:

“insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers” –

and then highlights the particular problem in Crete:

“*especially* those of the circumcision party.”

In other words, Paul's instructions have a broad range of application –
with a particular example in Titus's own ministry.

Notice the three characteristics that Paul highlights:

First, they are insubordinate – or rebellious.

They will not submit to godly authority.

If you rebuke them – they will not listen.
If you warn them – they will reject your admonition.

Paul has just talked about how *proper* authority functions in the church.
Godly leaders should call people to *obey* the gospel of Jesus.
But there are many who are insubordinate.
They will not obey the gospel of Jesus.

And you see why in the second term that Paul uses:
Second, they are empty talkers – they speak many words,
but their words are devoid of truth.
It may sound plausible and interesting –
but there is no gospel – there is no good news – in their speech.

And the reason for this is found in the third characteristic:
Because third, they are deceivers – those who mislead.
It is often the case that they are themselves deceived.
Most of the false teachers that I have met are very sincere people.
But being self-deceived they are equally as good at deceiving others!

And the result is that they upset whole families by teaching for shameful gain
what they ought not to teach.
In the early church there were whole groups that followed such teachers.
Simon Magus led one such group.
Marcion led another.
Various Gnostic groups proliferated –
many of which coalesced in the later Manichees.

These were groups that borrowed some Christian teaching –
but they were *not* Christian churches.

You see similar things today –
famous ones like Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Oneness Pentecostals,
and lesser known ones like the Hebrew Roots Movement.

Paul expects Titus to train the elders of Crete
to be able to silence the false teachers of his day.

Augustine said it well:
“May the Lord preserve me from such cowardice
that I should hold my peace through fear of their wrath,
when he commands me through his apostle,
saying that ‘they ought to be reprov’d’ by the bishop
for ‘teaching the things which they ought not.’ ...
For when God commands that we speak and preach the word
and that we refute and condemn ‘in season and out of season’

those who ‘teach the things which they ought not’...
let no man think that I can be enjoined to silence in these matters.” (290)

Rather, as Paul says, the deceivers must be silenced.

They may not be allowed to speak in the churches.

(Which will most likely require that they be expelled from the church).

Tonight the officer training class will be learning about the PCA’s “Rules of Discipline.”

These are the procedures that we use to “silence” false teachers –
and also to rebuke those who are straying
(hopefully before they become false teachers!).

We do this because this is what Paul tells us to do!

After all, verses 12-14 deal with the congregations in Crete more broadly:
the church in Crete needs to be addressed as a whole.

The problems in the churches are widespread.

“Whole families” have been disturbed by this false teaching,
and so verses 12-14 deal with this larger problem –
(notice the assumption that the “they in verses 12-14
are distinct from the “people who turn away from the truth”):

b. The Solution B: “Rebuke Them Sharply, That They May Be Sound in the Faith” (v12-14)

But right up front we hear a rather shocking stereotype of “Cretans” in general.

¹² *One of the Cretans,*^[h] *a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.”*^[i] ¹³ *This testimony is true.*

The quotation was attributed by some in the ancient world to Epimenides –
a Cretan poet of the 6th century B.C.

The poem was apparently well-known

(it is quoted by many early Christian commentators).

The reason for the claim that “Cretans are always liars...”

was that the Cretans claimed to have the tomb of Zeus on their island –
which would mean that Zeus was *dead*.

And so Epimenides was attacking his fellow-Cretans for their lack of faith in Zeus.

Paul, obviously, is not attacking Cretans for their lack of faith in Zeus!

Rather, he is dealing with a common problem in Crete by using a popular phrase.

Crete was notorious in the ancient world for its lack of moral character:

“The ancient historian Polybius wrote that it was:

‘almost impossible to find...personal conduct more treacherous
or public policy more unjust than in Crete (Histories 6.47).
Cicero also stated, ‘Moral principles are so divergent
that the Cretans consider highway robbery honorable.’ (Republic 3.9.15).”
(ESV)

So Paul is referring to a fairly widespread perception of the Cretans.

When you minister in a different context or culture,
you quickly discover that there are different problems here than elsewhere.

If I was sending a non-western pastor to a suburban American church,
I would say, “Americans are materialistic, self-absorbed,
and obsessed with technology.”
And just as the Cretans tended to be blind toward their blind-spots –
so also are Americans!

*Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, ¹⁴ not devoting
themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.*

I want you to think about this:
“rebuke them sharply.”

When you think of a sharp rebuke, what do you think of?
Probably you think of someone who said something harsh and unloving.
But the sharp rebuke is *not* designed to push someone away.
Notice the purpose of the sharp rebuke:
“that they may be sound in the faith...”

How do you respond to a rebuke?
Proverbs 9:8 says “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;
reprove a wise man, and he will love you.”
If you get angry at those who rebuke you – then you are a scoffer.
If you love those who rebuke you – then you are wise.

If you insist on going your own way – doing your own thing –
and if you refuse to listen to the counsel of those around you –
then you will turn away from the truth – and you will die in your sin.

The particular problem in Crete was “Jewish myths.”
And I should point out that “Jewish myths” continue to be a problem today.
You will find many teachers who talk about “secret codes”
to understanding the Bible – “locked away” in the Hebrew language.
MCPC once lost a family to such a heresy.
It’s called the “Hebrew Roots Movement” (which I referred to earlier).
They are modern-day Judaizers.

When I was attempting to silence the teacher –
he admitted that in his view Gentiles *should be* circumcised
and follow all the law of Moses.
Unfortunately, the family refused to heed my rebuke.
I warned them to stay away from this false teacher –
but they insisted that they could persuade him of the error of his ways.

But Paul is not limiting his warning to “Jewish myths.”

He wants the people of God to be “sound in the faith” –
which means that they should not devote themselves to
“the commands of people who turn away from the truth.”

In Acts 2:42, we are told that the people of God in Jerusalem
“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship,
to the breaking of bread,
and to the prayers.

These are the things that we should be devoted to.

Paul uses a different word here in Titus –
but the point is very similar:
if we are devoted to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship,
if we are committed to the breaking of bread, and the prayers,
then we will not follow the commands of those who turn away from the truth.

And in verses 15-16 Paul gives the reason for his exhortation:

c. The Reason for the Solution: True Purity (v15-16)

¹⁵ To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. ¹⁶ They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

What does Paul mean: “to the pure, all things are pure”?
In the context of the “Jewish myths” and the “circumcision party”
it is clear that Paul is talking about the OT purity laws.
God had told Israel that certain animals were “unclean” –
and that certain practices were “unclean” –
so that Israel had to maintain a distinctive purity code.

But in Christ, those purity laws have been fulfilled.
After all, God created all things *good*.
The point of the purity laws was to make a clear distinction
between God’s holy people and the “unclean” Gentiles.
But in Christ, God has declared all foods clean.
God has united Jew and Gentile in one new man.

“To the pure, all things are pure.”

It’s important to understand Paul’s distinction.

Paul is *not* talking about sin.

Paul is *not* saying that to the pure, things that were sinful are now okay!

Rather, he is talking about the old ceremonial laws of the OT.

And this should be applied to all sorts of human distinctions.

For instance, some societies frown upon interracial marriage.

Paul’s principle here is that “to the pure, all things are pure.”

The church should not adopt mere traditions of men as rules of faith.

Indeed, Paul warns that “to the defiled and unbelieving, *nothing is pure.*”

Those who have strayed from sound doctrine are corrupted by unbelief.

And therefore, that unbelief permeates and penetrates everything they do.

Both their minds and their consciences are defiled.

What they believe is contaminated by sin –

and what they do is contaminated by sin.

“They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works.”

This is serious stuff.

Don’t just listen to what he says.

Watch what he does!

If they are false teachers – it will show by their works.

They may be good at hiding it!

But it will come out.

“They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.”

Words and actions – in the end – go together.

Belief and practice cannot be separated.

“The faith of God elect and their knowledge of the truth

is always in accordance with godliness.”