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A Message to a Pastor on a Greek Island - Titus 3:1-11

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As I write this article, my wife Barbara and I, along with my two sons, my daughter-in-law and two grand-daughters, are preparing for a trip of a lifetime. We will be touring Rome, the Mediterranean Greek islands, and stopping in Ephesus. My greatest excitement is to see first hand some of the places visited and written about in the New Testament. One the Islands off the coast of Greece is Crete. The Apostle Paul stopped there on his way to Rome to face trial before the Emperor. Prior to my trip I did some research on Paul's missions in Greece and his letter to the pastor he appointed to Crete named Titus.

Paul was the greatest church planter of the New Testament era. For three decades after his dramatic conversion (A.D. 35) on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-30), he traveled throughout the Roman Empire preaching the gospel and establishing Christian congregations. Luke, in the book of Acts, recorded the missionary journeys of Paul and his associates beginning about A.D. 46 until they were taken as prisoners to Rome itself about A.D. 62.

As Paul traversed the regions of the Mediterranean world, he would stay for a while with the fledgling churches and train leaders to take over when he left. One such young leader was Titus whom he assigned to the island of Crete to oversee a small assembly that was started there. While he was residing at Nicopolis, on the west coast of Greece, Paul wrote to Titus one of his three letters in the New Testament known as the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy are the other two).

Some critical scholars have questioned if Paul actually wrote those three letters. However, the clear consensus of evangelical scholarship finds no reason to doubt Paul was their author. He wrote in the early 60s to give important instructions to Timothy and Titus on how to manage their ministries, and to deal with occasional problems. Paul enjoyed especially close relations with both of his proteges. He called Timothy "my true son in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2) and Titus "my true son in our common faith" (Titus 1:4).

Two problems that seemed to reoccur in all the churches of that time were false teachers and conflicts among the members. Paul focused his letter to Titus on effective church organization, maintaining apostolic doctrine, and refuting false teaching. These are the same kinds of issues that plague the church today.

Most people want to believe they are doing the right things in life. Paul wanted Christians in churches he founded to do good and minister in Jesus' name. This was especially crucial in a hostile pagan environment. In chapter three of his letter to Titus, Paul wrote the young church leader on Crete to instruct his people of their responsibility to uphold Jesus' standards. In this article we examine this section of his epistle, and will see how it applies to our current situation.

1 Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, 2 to slander no one, not to be contentious, to be gentle, showing every consideration for all people. 3 For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. 4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love

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for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we did in righteousness, but in accordance with His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He richly poured out upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 This statement is trustworthy. Titus 3:1-8a NASB

Paul begins by having them take a reality check of the origin, meaning, and purpose of the Christian life.

First, in verse one, Paul tells Titus to remind his people to *"be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed"* (see also Rom. 13:1-7). Notice he says to *"remind them"* – which implies they already knew these principles. He also says in verse two, *"to slander no one, not to be contentious, to be gentle, showing every consideration for all people."* Why? Because as Christ's disciples, they should make a favorable impression in the non-Christian society by abstaining from making offensive curses, not quarreling, and showing respect to everyone.

Paul reinforces his admonitions, in verse three, by reviewing their own former degenerate condition. He says, *"For we too were once"* "For" (*gar*) makes the connection between his statements in verses 1-2 to what will follow in verses 3-8. Note the characteristics that once described them. "Foolish" (*anoetos*) means they were unintelligent, senseless, and did not understand God's truths. "Disobedient" (*apeithes*) indicates they were doing what they instinctively knew was wrong. "Deceived" (*planao*) asserts they were morally misled – perhaps

blinded by Satan himself (see 2 Cor. 4:4).

He also says they were *"enslaved to various lusts and pleasures."* It is obvious that when people indulge in sin, they become bound to it like a slave to an owner (Rom. 6:16-23). Anyone who has worked with drug addicts or alcoholics knows the terrible power those substances have in their lives. Next, he says they were *"spending our life in malice and envy."* This is general wickedness that manifests itself in wanting what others have because they are always dissatisfied with their own position, possessions, and power.

"Envy" (*phthonos*) is listed often in New Testament vices (Mark 7:22). It is characteristic of humanity in rebellion (Rom. 1:29). It is a deed of the flesh (Gal. 5:21). It is also a mark of false teachers (1 Tim. 6:4). This form of envy is always negative and never positive as with God's jealousy (*zealots*).

Finally he says, they were *"hateful, hating one another."* Literally it reads, "being hated and hating one another" (NIV). "Being hated" (*stygetos*) is being odious or repulsive to another. "Hating (*miseo*) one another" is the expression of mutual antagonism both on a personal level and in society. Hate is that strong negative reaction toward someone considered an enemy. Jesus, of course, stressed the need to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us.

Paul's recounting of his reader's former depraved condition leads to a great theological principle in the following verses (3:4-8b). He had said, *"For we too were once foolish,"* etc. He now says, in contrast, in verse four, *"But when..."* This phrase establishes their salvation as a historical fact. In the Greek, verses 4-7 form one sentence or statement. He says, *"the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared,"* "Kindness" (*chresto-*

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tes) is used by Paul only in the New Testament in reference to the goodness of God. "*Love for mankind*" (*philanthropia*) is used concerning of love towards people in great distress, and ransoming them from captivity

The term "*appeared*" is *epiphaino* and literally means to enlighten, to display, to be manifested or revealed (see also Titus 2:11). It is the word from which we get the Christian celebration of "Epiphany" (January 6th). That day commemorates the revealing of Christ and the coming of the Magi to visit the child Jesus (Matt. 2:1-12). In this case Paul denotes the light of the gospel shining into the darkness of the sinful world.

It was by that gospel that God (verse five), "*saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we did in righteousness, but in accordance with His mercy.*" "*He saved us*" (*soza hemeis*) is the primary verb in this long unitary statement (vss. 4-7). God has made salvation available to all people. Paul makes it clear that salvation is emphatically *not* (*ouk*) based on any works of righteousness or good deeds. "*But*" (*alla*) (and this is the main thing) because of His *mercy*. The point here is that people cannot save themselves. Salvation depends entirely on God's grace.

This is further emphasized in the next clause (vs. 5b), "*by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.*" "*The washing*" (*loutron*) means the metaphorical cleansing of the defilement of sin from the heart (see Psalm 51:7-10). (Note: Paul does not indicate the necessity of water baptism when he uses this analogy. The Bible does not support the assertion that baptism is the means or channel for regeneration.) The washing is accomplished through "*regeneration*" (*palingenesia* - rebirth, see John 3:4-8). It is a spiritual renewal of life by grace that begins through faith in Christ and the

power of the Holy Spirit whom God "poured out" on them "*generously*" (verse six) as He did at Pentecost (Acts 2:17,33). Note also the implicit Trinitarian aspect of verses 5-6: "Holy Spirit"; "He" (the Father); and "Jesus Christ" (the Son).

This is, of course, the heart of the gospel. When sinners put their faith in the finished work of Jesus, by His atoning sacrificial death on the cross and His victorious resurrection, their sins are forgiven and they begin a new life in Him. And what does this salvation provide? In verse seven, Paul tells them that because they are "*justified by His grace*" (*dikaioo ho ekeinos charis*) they will "*be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*" "*Justified*" or "justification" is one of Paul's favorite terms for describing the fact of salvation (see Rom. 3:24; 5:1:9; 1 Cor. 6:11; Gal. 2:16-17; 3:24). It is defined as "to make or render right or just, to hold as guiltless, to accept as righteous, to be held acquitted, to be cleared, to be approved, to stand approved, to stand accepted."

To be an heir means to be adopted as a part of God's eternal family. It describes those who still await the final consummation of the age when Jesus will come again, and they will receive the fullness of salvation in eternal life in heaven.

Paul closes this section in verse eight by reaffirming the doctrinal axiom he has just asserted: "*This statement is trustworthy.*" Indeed his words are as applicable today as in Titus' time. We must understand what Paul was emphasizing to his representative in Crete. The Christian life, and all Christian ministry, has as their foundation the basic gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ: "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift- not from works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

... and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and beneficial for people. Titus 3:8b NASB

"That's a good idea." "I feel good today." "Good dog." "The good, the bad, and the ugly." We probably use the word "good" hundreds of times a day without even thinking about it. As we said, most of us like to think we are doing "good." The problem is, we rarely think about what that really means. The dictionary defines "good" more than a dozen ways: of a favorable character or tendency; fertile; attractive; suitable; free from injury or disease; not depreciated; commercially sound; can be relied on; advantageous; pleasant; wholesome; right, commendable; et.al.

Paul may have had all those concepts in mind when he told Titus to instruct his people to do good in verse eight. He puts special emphasis on this saying, "*and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently (diabebaioomai - to strongly assert or stress), so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds.*" His words imply a sense of urgency. It may be that Titus was a bit timid in demanding his congregation do what was necessary, so Paul is encouraging him to speak up confidently. "*These things*" points back to all that he had said in verses 1-8a, but especially to the gospel message he reiterated in verses 4-7. It also looks ahead to what he is about to command (vss. 8b-11).

He tells Titus to direct his instructions to those who have "*believed God*" (*pisteuo theos*). They are those who have made the decision to put their faith in Jesus as their Savior and Lord, i.e., those who have heard and responded positively to the gospel message (vs. 4-7). It does not apply, however, only to that initial acceptance, but to their present state of living in right relationship with God. The prime motivator for Christian service is the salvation they received by God's love and grace.

Paul says the reason for all he has said is so that the saved members of the church in Crete "*will be careful to engage in good deeds.*" "*Engage*" or "*Devote*" (*proistemi*) literally means "to be forward in." It can be translated as "to undertake resolutely," "to practice diligently," or "to maintain the practice of." They are to make it a habit in their lives and the life of the church.

And what is it they are to be so careful to devote themselves to do continually? "*Good deeds*" (*kalos ergon - from which we get "ergonomics"*). Good deeds are those positive works people intend to accomplish. The works of Christians testify loudly to their faith in God, or lack of it. We know, of course, that good works are not the cause of salvation, that is entirely the work of God's grace through Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul makes that clear in all his correspondences (see Rom. 3:27-28; 4:2-6). Nonetheless, the best evidence of saving faith is the performance of good works in believers' lives. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do" (Eph. 2:10). (See also Matt. 5:16; Acts 9:36; Col. 1:10; 2 Thess. 2:17; 1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10,25; Titus 2: 7, 14; Heb. 10:24; 1 Pet. 2:12.)

The Letter of James particularly underscores the place of works in verifying the authenticity of one's faith (James 2: 14-26). This has led some interpreters to the conclusion that James advocates the need for works to attain or maintain salvation. We need not make that assumption. James, as does Paul, is simply accentuating that true faith shows itself in good works.

In any case, the Cretian Christians are to pay close attention to their behavior so the local authorities and pagan people around them will never question the validity of their testimonies for Christ. As Paul summarizes, "*These things are good and beneficial for people.*" Christians likewise today are to minister, both among ourselves and in the society in general, for the glory of Jesus Christ. We certainly cannot add anything to the salvation we have been granted. Nevertheless, when we contemplate the cost to God for our redemption, how can we not do everything we can to bring Him glory.

9 But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are useless and worthless. 10 Reject a divisive person after a first and second warning, 11 knowing that such a person has deviated from what is right and is sinning, being self-condemned. Titus 3:9-11 NASB

We all know of churches which at one time were vibrant and growing fellowships. But, due to internal conflicts or unwillingness to change, declined in membership and relevance. As a seminary student, I remember often passing an abandoned building on a main thoroughfare of the city. A large faded sign out front had a man's name emblazoned in large letters. I assumed it was at one time a flourishing business location. I asked a long-time resident what she knew about it. Surprisingly, she said it had once been the city's largest church. In fact, she had been baptized there herself. She said, however, when the popular long-time pastor (the name on the sign) died, he left no plan for a successor, which led to a major conflict and the congregation's eventual demise.

That being said, don't let anyone tell you that the New Testament churches were perfect. They also had their problems. In fact, except for two or three exceptions, nearly all the books of the New Testament were written in response to issues in the churches. They included lack of respect for apostolic authority, false teaching, doctrinal differences, financial difficulties, racial and ethnic prejudice, social class conflicts, immorality, persecution, etc.

Does it sound familiar? Yes, the problems we face today have been present throughout church history, even from the beginning. Paul addresses some of those issues in this section of his letter to Titus.

Paul begins the paragraph in verse nine with "*But*" (*de*), an adversative conjunction. Whenever it appears in Scripture, we know it is to make a strong contrast between what was just said and what will follow. In this case, it is to distinguish the previous positive concepts (vss. 4-8) with their "good and beneficial" consequences, to the negative qualities Paul is about to discuss.

He tells Titus to warn the people, "*avoid*" (*periistemi*) certain attitudes. It literally means to shun, stay aloof from, or turn oneself in an about face and go in the opposite direction. Stay away, he says, from practices that have no positive spiritual benefits and inevitably lead to destructive results. He describes them all as "*foolish*" (*moros* - from which we get "moron").

So, in this context, we could probably translate it as, "But avoid what is moronic or stupid...." So what problems does he mean? First he mentions "*foolish controversies*" (*zetesis*). These are contentious discussions that create division in the fellowship. It may have been in Crete that certain individuals were stirring up conflicts about unessential matters. Maybe you have been in churches where some persons had reputations for their contentious personalities. Later Paul advises Titus how to deal with them (v.10).

The second issue Paul warns about is "*genealogies*" (*genealogia*). Those are records of family histories and lineage that trace a person's descent. Recently, genealogical tracking has become something of a fad in America. Several online companies now do the research for a fee. Paul condemned distorted use of genealogies, both here in Titus and in his first letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:4). Just how they were using the genealogies, in this case, is not exactly clear. They may have caused arguments over authority in some churches. Some may have erroneously thought a certain pedigree was needed to qualify for leadership. Even in some evangelical churches today, certain families rely on their legacies to exert undue influence on making business policies in the church.

Next, he advises Titus against tolerating "*strife* (*eris*) and *disputes about the Law*" (*mache nomikos*). Again, it is not spelled-out what exactly he is referring to here, but it may have involved senseless disagreements over minute details of the Mosaic law. So, they and the other foolish things, were "*useless and worthless*." As shepherd of the church, Titus was to preclude unhelpful arguments among the people. They hindered the work of the gospel and marred the reputation of the believers in the eyes of their unsaved neighbors.

Paul did not stop there, however. In verse ten, he goes on to order Titus to admonish a "*divisive person*" (*hairetikos* - from which we derive the term "heresy" and "heretic."). The New Testament concept had to do more with disruption of fellowship than with theological issues as we think of it today. In this case, Paul means someone who constantly tries to garner factions or parties in the church to get his personal opinions accepted (see 1 Cor. 11:17-22). This is a sign of an unhealthy church. Such factionalism weakens the church's ministry

within itself and to the lost world outside. Furthermore, it fosters confusion and dismay in the minds of young believers.

Paul implies that such a person should be confronted lovingly and patiently by the elders of the church, and should get two opportunities to repent. After that, however, if the offender does not heed the two warnings, the church should "*Reject*" (*paraiteomai* - i.e. have nothing to do with or avoid) him. Any further efforts to correct such a person only continues to stifle the effective ministry of the body.

Paul says someone who has those attitudes and maintains a stubborn refusal to change "*has deviated from what is right*" (*ekstrepho*). The term is better said as "warped" (NIV). He is stuck in a state of perversion and has lost touch with the truth. He is "*sinning*" (*hamartano* - "missing the mark") and his thinking is so distorted that reasoning is futile. As a result, he is "*self-condemned*" (*autokatakritos*). Perverted and sinful behavior automatically condemns the offender.

Stubborn insistence on personal preferences and self-centered actions do great damage to a church's testimony and ministry. A church must establish its priorities and goals and never let discordant people distract it. A welcoming church is focused and grounded on the gospel message of Jesus Christ, performs positive good acts of ministry that reflect that priority, and does not let internal divisions divert it from its mission.

On my journey to Rome and the Greek Islands, I will keep in mind the journeys and letters of Paul to the early churches in that part of the world. I am sure I will be inspired, as was Titus, to serve the Lord faithfully for the remainder of my life, as I pray you will do also.

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