

Silencing False Teachers on the Island of Crete

Titus 1:10-16

Titus 1:10-16 – *“For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, ¹¹ whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain. ¹² One of them, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” ¹³ This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, ¹⁴ not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth. ¹⁵ To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. ¹⁶ They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.”*

Background Notes

When the apostle Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment, he resumed his missionary travels (sometimes called his “Fourth Missionary Journey”). We don’t know his exact itinerary, but we do know that he stopped on the island of Crete and ministered the Word there. Some of the Cretans became Christians, and those who were already Christians were strengthened and built up in their faith. Paul then left Titus at Crete while he continued his travels.

Some time later the apostle wrote this letter to Titus to remind him of his responsibilities to help build up the churches on Crete. *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you” (v5).*

Besides appointing leaders in the churches on Crete, Titus was to refute and silence false teachers who were seeking to influence the Christians there. They were upsetting and subverting entire households of believers (v11).

Who were these false teachers? *“For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision” (v10).* Notice that there were many false teachers, of different varieties, but verse 10 indicates that the most troublesome false teachers were “those of the circumcision,” or Judaizers.

The Judaizers were the Jewish legalists of the day, who taught that a person was not truly saved unless he was circumcised, and also kept a lot of other Jewish rules and rituals. They put a great emphasis on “Jewish fables” and “commandments of men.”

- “Jewish myths or fables” were apocryphal (non-biblical) writings about certain Old Testament characters.
- “commandments of men” were rules and regulations that had been added to the Old Testament Law, that eventually became known as the Jewish Talmud. Orthodox Jews still follow the regulations of the Talmud today.

Were the Judaizers Christians? Verse 16 seems to indicate that they only professed to be true believers: *“They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.”* However, verse 13 seems to indicate that they were true believers - but they were believers who were in error: *“This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.”* A true believer would be one who has slipped into doctrinal error, who needs to be rebuked for the error and encouraged to be “sound” in the faith.

Perhaps the truth is that among the false teachers on Crete, there were both Christian Judaizers and non-Christian Judaizers. We do know that both kinds of Judaizers existed in the 1st century – and both kinds were dangerous to the young believers!

The Christian Judaizers had wandered so far from the truth that Paul said they were just like typical Cretans. To drive his point home, Paul quoted Epimenides, a native Cretan who lived around 600 BC, who described his fellow-Cretans as: *“Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.”* Paul was not affirming everything that Epimenides wrote, but he said that this particular quote was true, and it characterized many of the Cretan people.

Doctrinal Points

1. The church is not a democracy.

Some people think that the church is a democracy – that if you attend a church, you should get equal time to voice your views. No! The church is **not** a democracy! Paul said that the false teachers who were attending the churches on Crete were to be **silenced!** Verse 11: *“Whose mouths must be stopped.”* They were not to be given equal time to share their views. Entire families were upset by their teaching (v11).

What was Titus to do about these false teachers? He was to **silence** them (v11) and **rebuke** them sharply (v13). This instruction is still true for church leaders today. Believers who stray from the truth must be silenced and rebuked. The elders, the spiritual leaders and overseers of a church, have that responsibility (v9).

How do elders do this? The seriousness of the situation determines the actions of the elders. Sometimes only further instruction is needed. Sometimes a strong warning is needed. But sometimes excommunication is required. Putting a person out of fellowship or excommunication from the church is the highest form of church discipline. This responsibility is a very unpleasant job for spiritual leaders, but it must be done for the continued health of the church. It’s “tough” love. It’s like a dentist pulling out an infected tooth. If that tooth is bad, tough love demands that that tooth be pulled so the infection doesn’t spread and harm the entire body.

As a boy, I recall an incident when a guest speaker at our church started to share some false teaching about the Person and work of Christ. The elders publicly rebuked him and asked him to be silent, and to come down from the pulpit. While

a rebuke is not always that dramatic, elders do have a responsibility to “guard the flock” and make sure that the teaching in the church is sound. Remember - the church is not a democracy!

2. “To the pure, all things are pure.”

Verse 15: *“To the pure, all things are pure.”* What does this verse mean? This is an instance where knowing the context greatly helps us to interpret this phrase. First let’s talk about what it does **not** mean.

Does it mean that Christians can read whatever literature they want or watch any movie they want – and be completely unscathed and uncontaminated, because “to the pure, all things are pure”? No! Trashy paperbacks and pornography are not miraculously upgraded to become “art” - even for a mature Christian. Titus 1:15 is not a “proof text” that says it’s OK for Christians to read, view or participate in impure material.

Does it mean that pure people will always have pure thoughts, and impure people will always have impure thoughts? No! Does it mean that a pure mind will always handle the subject of sex in a pure way, whereas an impure mind will always think impure thoughts about sex? No! While that may be true, it is not the correct interpretation of this phrase.

The proper interpretation has to do with the false teaching of the Judaizers. The Judaizers claimed that for a person to be pure, he or she had to keep certain religious rules and regulations. The apostle Paul said, “No! That’s false teaching!”

The following paragraphs are excerpted from an essay I wrote, entitled: “All Things Are Pure”:

*“The false teachers included certain ascetic rules about eating and drinking in their commandments, those ‘commandments of men’ (v14). They advocated the Old Testament dietary laws as well as the additions and traditions of the Judaizers as a means of becoming spiritual and holy. Their sole emphasis was on **external** rule-keeping to achieve purity, with no recognition of the absolute need for an **internal** change of heart.*

“The Lord Jesus told the Pharisees that when there was evidence of an internal change of heart, “then all things are clean for you” (Luke 11:41). The “pure,” then, are all who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, who have had an internal change of heart through the work of God at conversion.

“Because of our new life in Christ, the Old Testament dietary laws about certain unclean foods do not apply to us today. These ceremonial regulations were all set aside with the coming of Christ. Obviously, any manmade rules about foods or rules about ritualistic washing connected with eating have nothing to do with the Christian life. Christians are free to eat beef or pork or fish or any nourishing food on any day of the week with washed or unwashed hands - because all things are pure.

*“The second half of Titus 1:15 and verse 16 deal with the unbeliever. To these unbelievers, **nothing** is pure. Observing rules and rituals and ceremonies won't help a bit to purify an unbeliever. **Their problem is not external – it's internal.** Until the internal change takes place at conversion, the unbeliever cannot please God. Rule-keeping and ritualistic ceremonies do not make points with God. In fact, verse 16 indicates that the deeds of unbelievers prove that they do not know God. If they really knew the Lord they would stop slandering God by teaching that following rules and rituals can make you holy and acceptable with God. Taking that position, then and now, is detestable and disobedient - and worthless for any good deed (v16).”* [This entire essay is available on the GCM website under “Devotions for Growing Christians.”]

So, there you have it. The interpretation is clear when you understand the context! To the pure, all things are pure.

Practical Applications

1. Are you a “Cretan Christian”?

Verse 13 indicates that at least some of these Cretan false teachers were Christians. But even though they were Christians, they were so far from the truth and so far from the Christian lifestyle that the apostle Paul could associate them with the quotation: *“Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons”* (v12).

Are you a Cretan Christian? Do you lie? Think about it. What about calling into work sick when you're not really sick? What about lying on application forms? What about cutting corners on income tax returns?

Hopefully no one here would be labeled an “evil beast,” but what about a “lazy glutton”? Do you put in a good day's work, or are you a lazy freeloader? Do you share with others, or do you just indulge yourself? Are you a Cretan Christian?

2. Make sure it says so in the Bible!

The false teachers on Crete were teaching the commandments of men. They were distorting the teaching of God's Word (v14). Is it possible that you're following the commandments of men? Are you zealously keeping rules that are not found in the Bible?

Every religious cult has rules and commandments that are not found in the Bible. In fact, that's one of the clear marks of a cult. Be careful! Search the Scriptures to be sure the teaching you're following is biblical, and not mixed with the “commandments of men”!

Don't be deceived by false teaching. Don't be drawn into a cult. Check it out, and make sure it says so in the Bible!