

HOLD FIRMLY TO THE TRUSTWORTHY MESSAGE

Titus 1:1-16

Key Verse: 1:9

“He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”

A major theme of Titus is that gospel faith produces eagerness to do good (2:14). When we think about living by faith, we sometimes have a negative connotation of “doing good.” It is because the Bible so clearly tells us that we are saved by faith in Christ alone, and not by anything we have done. We understand that our good works do not add any merit before God in terms of salvation. In fact, they make us self-righteous, proud and useless. But in Titus, Paul emphasizes the importance of “doing good” as the fruit of believing in Jesus. This “doing good” is only possible as the gospel transforms us. So we have no basis on which to be proud; rather, we are humble and thank God and give glory to God. In this respect, we should understand “doing good” as an essential part of our Christian lives. This challenges the ungodly culture around us; it is a vital means of evangelism.

The culture of our nation is descending into ungodliness. Random shootings with multiple homicides have become so common that now we hardly stop to grieve over them. Deception and lies are rampant, even among leaders in our nation. Rebellion seems to be normal, even admirable as an expression of courage. It is not easy to find men and women of integrity. In this social milieu Christians should be the salt of the earth. But instead we are influenced by the world and lose our saltiness. Why does this happen? It is because our gospel faith and practical lives are different. This is why we need to study Titus.

In today’s passage Paul mainly gives instructions to Titus for raising spiritual leaders in the area of Crete. He mentions that leaders should be blameless. This might scare us. Who can be blameless? But we need to understand Paul’s intention. It was to set a standard for leaders to grow into. We can see Paul’s uncompromising spirit. Though false teachers corrupted the society, Paul wanted to raise godly leaders to transform Crete with the gospel. So he teaches, beginning with his greetings, how the gospel transforms our lives. He urges us to hold firmly to the message of the gospel. Let’s learn how our gospel faith can transform our practical lives.

First, the gospel leads to godliness and gives eternal life (1-4). In verses 1-4 Paul introduces himself and greets Titus. In this part Paul uses unique expressions

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that are not found in his other letters. First of all, he refers to himself as both “a servant of God” and “an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1a). In terms of relationship, he belonged to God like a slave to his master. At the same time, he was an apostle of Jesus Christ, sent as his representative, with authority to proclaim the gospel message to the world. Like Paul, we should have a clear identity in relationship to God and to the world.

Secondly, he states the purpose of his apostleship: “...to further the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness...” (1b). This means to nourish people and help them grow, both in faith and in the knowledge of God. Paul mentions faith and knowledge together. Faith has to do with our hearts and knowledge with our minds, or our reason. We should always remember that faith comes first. Faith is not static; it is something that grows; it is dynamic. Each person who has a seed of faith in their hearts has the potential to grow into a giant of faith who can influence the whole world. In order to grow in our faith, we need the knowledge of God. This knowledge is not just information; it transforms us into godly people. Informational knowledge that does not transform our lives will only puff us up, and makes us like the Pharisees. However, knowledge of the truth has power to change us into the image of God. Here “the truth” as used by Paul, is a designation of the gospel and refers to the cognitive side of faith (1 Ti 2:4; 4:3). The gospel has power to change our lives. The more deeply we embrace and understand the gospel, the more godly we will become. To be godly means to grow in the image of God—in his humility, in his kindness, in his love, in his generosity, in his faithfulness, in his mercy and compassion, justice and righteousness. When we are proud, selfish, lazy, unfaithful and immoral, we become like a spiritual virus that makes other people sick. Only corrupted people want to be around us. But when we become humble, kind, loving, pure, faithful, hardworking, joyful and thankful, people like it. We become a blessing in our homes, campus, workplace, community and society. We can grow as influential people.

However, spiritual growth does not happen automatically. I have observed two kinds of attitudes toward spiritual growth. One is to struggle hard to grow in the knowledge of the truth by applying the word of God to one’s life personally. For those who do that, hearing the Sunday message is just the beginning. After hearing, they digest it for themselves and prayerfully apply it to their lives. They are growing in godliness. They are joyful, thankful and fruitful. The other kind hears the word but does not really take it to heart and try to apply it. They live according to their own ideas and remain under the influence of the world. They are always learning, but never come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Ti 3:7). They are

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full of bitterness, complaints and criticism. No one really likes to be around such people. Let's remember that knowledge of the truth leads to godliness.

Thirdly, he tells us our ultimate hope—eternal life. Verse 2 says, "...in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time...." When we believe in Jesus we can have true hope, that is, eternal life. We need hope. Dr. Billy Graham said, "People can live without sex, but they cannot live without hope." So we try to find hope in many ways. But human hopes are mostly like a mirage. They look like something great in the distance, but when we get close to them, we find nothing there. In the late 1960's America spent a huge amount of money to send a man to the moon, expecting some amazing new mysterious discoveries. But upon analysis, the rocks that came from the Moon were virtually the same as earth rocks. They were worth about \$23.50. Human hopes always disappoint us. But the hope of eternal life never disappoints us. Why? It is because God does not lie. Hebrews 6:18-19a says, **"God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."** Though our lives may be full of trouble and trial, like the surface waves of the sea, our souls are anchored to the hope of God which keeps us firm and secure. This hope becomes more and more tangible as time passes by. It began in the hidden counsels of God before the beginning of time and was brought to light through the preaching of the gospel entrusted to Paul by the command of God our Savior (3). With human hopes, the closer we get to them, the closer we are to disappointment. But with the hope of eternal life, the more we realize it, the more wonderful it is. We can have this hope because of God our Savior. It is God who initiated his salvation plan out of his mercy. God never gave up his plan despite man's unfaithfulness and sins. Finally God fulfilled his plan by sending his one and only Son Jesus. Our hope of eternal life is in God our Savior. That's why it does not disappoint us.

In verse 4, Paul addresses this letter to Titus, calling him, **"my true son in our common faith."** Though Paul was a Jew and Titus a Gentile, Paul had great affection and respect for Titus. He trusted Titus as a leader and referred to him as **"my brother"** and **"my partner and coworker among you"** (2 Cor 2:13; 8:23). Paul greeted Titus: **"Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior."**

Second, how to challenge the ungodly culture with the gospel (5-16). Paul and Titus had ministered together on the island of Crete. We don't know much about

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Paul's ministry there. Considering the date of writing, perhaps Paul visited Crete along with Titus after his first imprisonment in Rome. For some reason, Paul had to leave. So he wrote this letter to Titus instructing him to **“put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town”** (1:5). This tells us that the gospel had already spread throughout Crete and there were believers in many towns. But they were easily influenced by false teachers, and did not know how to live out their gospel faith practically. They needed spiritual leaders who could guide them in the truth and shepherd them. So Paul gave Titus direction to put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town.

Here we need to understand the meaning of “elders” and “appoint.” “Elders” in verse 5 is used interchangeably with “overseer” in verse 7. In Acts 20, Paul referred to “elders” also as “shepherds” (Ac 20:17,28). Peter told “elders” to “be shepherds of God’s flock” (1 Pe 5:1-2). So here, the main work of an elder or overseer is to be a shepherd and Bible teacher for God’s people. To “appoint” is not just holding a ceremony. It implies the whole process of raising leaders, beginning with evangelism, and including Bible teaching, discipleship and leadership development until one becomes a responsible and reliable leader. This is what Jesus had done with the Twelve. Paul followed Jesus’ example and raised many leaders, including Titus and Timothy. Now he instructed Titus to do the same. Paul had also told Timothy to entrust the gospel and its ministry to reliable men who would be qualified to teach others (2 Ti 2:2). This is what we should do also.

In verses 7 and 11 we find the words **“God’s household,”** and **“households.”** There was no large, organized church structure at that time. Believers met in households. Each household needed spiritual leaders. Paul felt that raising leaders was urgent and necessary. Even so, it had to be done properly, based on Biblical standards, not cultural ones. So he presented Biblical standards in three areas: marriage and family life (6), character and deeds (7-8), doctrine and message (9), and said leaders must be “blameless.” Here “blameless” does not mean “faultless” or “flawless.” It means “unaccused,” “being unimpeachable,” offering no loophole for criticism.¹

First of all, a leader must be blameless in marriage and family life (6). Verse 6 says, **“An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.”** A leader must be faithful to his wife. That is, he must have an

¹ Stott, John R.W., 1966. *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, p. 175

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unsullied reputation in the whole area of sex and marriage. He must also raise his children in Christian faith. Of course, parents cannot make their children Christians. Only God can do that (Jn 1:12-13). Yet as long as parents have charge of their children, they must raise them in a good spiritual environment so they may grow as trustworthy people. It is legitimate to ask how long parents remain responsible for the faith and conduct of their children. In verse 6, Paul uses the Greek word “tekna” for children, which usually refers to youngsters. Any Christian who becomes a leader should demonstrate that they practice their faith in their own home. This is where leadership begins. The British New Testament scholar, Donald Guthrie writes, “The home is regarded as the training ground for Christian leaders.”²

Secondly, a leader must be blameless in character and deeds (7-8). There are vices to be avoided. He must not be overbearing, quick-tempered, given to drunkenness, violent, or pursuing dishonest gain (7). There are also virtues to cultivate. He must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined (8). In brief, leaders must overcome the nasty elements of their sinful nature and demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in their behavior. They must be trustworthy.

Most significantly, a leader must be blameless in doctrine and message (9). Let’s read verse 9. **“He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”** What is the trustworthy message? The word “trustworthy” is repeated in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, and is mostly used to describe the contents of the gospel message, including saving grace—justification, growth to be godly—sanctification, hope of the kingdom of God and sharing glory with Jesus—glorification. 1 Timothy 1:15 says, **“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”** 1 Timothy 4:8-9a say, **“For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.”** 2 Timothy 2:11-12a says, **“Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him...if we endure, we will also reign with him.”**

Throughout history, many have claimed to have a trustworthy message. The 18th century Enlightenment sought to reform society using reason, to challenge ideas grounded in tradition and faith, and to advance knowledge through the

² Guthrie, Donald, 1956. *The Pastoral Epistles and the Mind of Paul*. Tyndale, p. 196

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scientific method. Democracy and technology advanced. People thought that as technology developed paradise would come. 20th century Communism promised utopia through sharing everything together equally. Many were fascinated by this message and gave their lives to realize its fulfillment. But history proves that these ideas were deceptive. Now postmodernism has arisen to overthrow the modernism of the Enlightenment. But it produces relativism that denies absolute truth. Where can we find a trustworthy saying? From philosophers? Politicians? Lawyers? College professors? Talk show hosts? Actually we cannot find any trustworthy message except the gospel message. Only the gospel message can give us forgiveness of sins, joy and peace, eternal life, and living hope in the kingdom of God. Only the gospel message transforms us to be godly people who can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Only the gospel message can redeem our corrupted homes, society and nation and restore the beauty and order of God's creation. The gospel is the only trustworthy message. We must hold firmly to this trustworthy message.

When we hold firmly to the trustworthy message, we can be qualified to be leaders in God's household. Leaders should do two things. First is to encourage others by sound doctrine. This means teaching the word of God and putting it into practice by showing a good example. In this way others may grow in godliness as good disciples of Jesus. Second is to refute those who oppose the gospel message. This means to guard and defend the gospel (2 Ti 1:14). When we look at the environment of Crete, it was not easy to defend the gospel. There were many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception (10). They were disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach for the sake of dishonest gain (11). Paul quoted a Cretan prophet, who said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons" (12). Then he said, "This saying is true" (13a). They followed Jewish myths and the merely human commands of those who rejected the truth (14). Their minds and consciences were corrupted (15). They claimed to know God, but by their actions they denied him (16). So Paul urged Titus to fight the enemies of the gospel by rebuking them sharply (13b). In fact, it was a battle against Satan who was working behind the scenes. Satan is the father of lies, a murderer, and the chief rebel against God.

When we look at the world we live in, it seems more and more ungodly. Deception and lies, rebellion, disobedience, violence, addictions and immorality are increasing rapidly. What can be a message of hope in these times? The gospel message is desperately and urgently needed. Without the gospel message there is no hope. So let's hold firmly to the trustworthy message of the gospel and encourage others with it and refute those who oppose it. Let's have a vision to

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transform our homes, campuses, work places, society, nation, and even the whole world with the gospel.