

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 15: Titus**

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Titus: Characteristics of a Gospel-centered church

**PRAY. Introduction:**

If you’re going to solve problems today, what do you need? Many say the answer is innovation. What does our economy need? Innovation! Our educational system? Innovation! Politics and government? Innovation! Stuck in the quagmire of decades-old disagreements, we need new ways of thinking; a new perspective, a new way of doing things. So when we approach the topic of the church, innovation should seem to be important as well. Right?

Well, not exactly. In some ways, innovation in the church is fine. Email newsletters, photographs in the membership directory, a women’s tea—these are all great “innovations.” But when it comes to theology and the church, “innovation” is generally *not* something we want to shoot for. In fact, more often than not, “innovations” in the church have turned out to be heresy. Why’s that? Because innovation is good if things need to be improved. But if Jesus gave us a perfect message, then any change to that gospel is absolutely horrific. That kind of innovation is to be shunned.

Now, how do we do that? How do we protect this perfect good news that we’ve received? That’s what the book of Titus is all about. And I think Paul’s answer might surprise you. Paul says that our pastors must *preach* the gospel. But he *also* says that the way we structure our churches, the way we relate to one another, and the way we live in the world matter. All these help to preserve this precious message.

Let’s begin with some background to the book. Last week we considered Paul’s first letter to Timothy, which was also the first of what are called the Pastoral Epistles. Today, we will consider the second of these Pastoral Epistles, Paul’s letter to Titus. There are many similarities between I Timothy and Titus. Both books are written by Paul to men with pastoral leadership responsibilities, so it is natural that Paul would include similar instructions to both men. In Titus, as in I Timothy, we see instruction about establishing elders, we see the need to oppose false teachers, and we see instruction about what it means to live as a Christian in the church and in the world. So, with all these similarities, what’s distinctive about Titus? Titus served in a different context than Timothy, so there are some different nuances in instruction.

**Structure of Titus:**

Turn with me to 1:4-5. Paul says, “To Titus, my true child in our common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior. 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.” Paul had previously spent time on the island of Crete establishing the church, and now he has sent Titus to continue that work. That’s the purpose of the letter: to bring spiritual health to the churches in Crete. So, how does Paul go about equipping Titus to do that? *Flip your handout over to the back page and you’ll see a brief outline of the book of Titus.* First, Paul explains the need for *proper* leadership in 1:5-9. In this section he explains the qualifications for elders.

Why does he begin with a description of biblical leadership? Well, as you move down the outline you see in verses 10-16 of chapter 1, the problem: false teachers. As is so often the case, the absence of good leadership didn’t leave a leadership vacuum; it left bad leadership. These teachers were wreaking havoc and needed to be opposed.

Then, with this fundamental element of church order in place, Paul tells Titus what to teach in chapters 2 and 3 so that relational order may be achieved. He says in 2:1, “But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.” This right teaching was to fuel Gospel-driven living among various groups of people who would be in the church: older men, older women, younger women, younger men, slaves, citizens.

But there is a key thing we need to notice! After each strand of practical teaching, Paul returns to the gospel - the good news of Jesus. He does this in chapter 3 – Paul Summarizes the message of forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and then Paul says in verse 8: “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.” (3:8). The Gospel would transform the lives of the Christians in Crete, and it would transform the churches in Crete as well. That’s why we can sum up the book well with a phrase from 1:1: “knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness.”

So, with this goal of a Gospel-centered church in place, we’ll walk through this book theme by theme. First we’ll take a look at good leadership, (2) then at bad leadership. (3) We’ll examine the gospel message that motivates Paul’s instructions on orderly relationships in chapters 2 and 3. And (4) finally the practical instructions themselves. Let’s dive in.

**Theme 1, Gospel Shaped Leaders** (1:5-9)

We see first, as we saw clearly in I Timothy, that good leadership is essential to a healthy church. While churches can go on functioning for some time without the the kind of men Titus describes, a church’s gospel witness will eventually become muddied without them. So, what do these Gospel shaped leaders look like? Look at the qualification in 1:6-9. First and foremost, Paul describes the elder as someone who is blameless. No Christian is perfect; but the elder is one whose life does not bring the Gospel into reproach.

Toward that end, we see that these Gospel-shaped leaders won’t just be leaders at church, they will first be leaders in their own homes. An elder should be the husband of one wife. That doesn’t mean an elder *must* be married; that would have excluded Paul, not to mention Jesus himself. Paul is referring to faithfulness in marriage. An elder must be a man who faithfully keeps to one woman and does not wander in any way.

And the elder’s relationship with his children matters as well. As a side note, it does not seem that Paul is arguing that an elder’s children must be Christians, as that is outside of the control of the parents. Rather, a better translation for the term “believers” in verse 6 is “trustworthy” or “faithful”.[[1]](#footnote-1) The passage appears to be contrasting a reputation for wild and disobedient behavior with a reputation for being faithful and trustworthy.

But more than just manage his own family well, the elder’s relationship with other people should be exemplary too. He should not be “overbearing,” determining to get his way whatever the cost to others. He's not be “quick-tempered”. Elders will be put in patience-trying situations so a man who makes a habit of losing his cool is not fit to lead the church. The elder “must not be . . . a drunkard,” but instead demonstrates moderation and self-control. The elder is to be “not violent”, showing us that *Biblical* masculinity is not tied to any sort of macho aggression, power, domination. Instead, the Bible’s teaching on masculinity focuses on protecting and providing—using strength for the benefit of others. The elder should not be “greedy for gain.” It is not wrong for an elder to have wealth, but he should never make his living through less than reputable means.

Now, with these more negative restrictions in place, Paul goes on to provide positive descriptions of how the elder should relate to other people. So the elder is called to be “hospitable”—literally, a “lover of strangers”—he reaches out to those who are different from him. The elder also “loves what is good.” This idea of “loving what is good,” “teaching what is good” and “doing what is good” comes up again and again in the book of Titus. How do you know if a church is healthy? According to Paul, it’s committed to what is good. And that commitment begins with its leaders. Therefore, the elder is also someone who is “self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.” An elder is not one who is carelessly walking through life, giving little thought to his own growth in Godliness. No, if the elder is going to lead others to follow Christ, well, he must first be able to control and discipline himself. He must be pursuing holiness himself if he is going to call others to repent of their sins and put their trust in Christ.

Now, as we’ve gone through this list so far, you’ve probably noticed something. All of these qualities are things that the Bible commends for *all* Christian men, and most of them are applicable to Christian women as well. In other words, whether you desire to be an elder or not, you should pursue the qualities on this list. We can take this list of qualities even this week, and, as appropriate, pray that God would grow these sorts of fruit in our lives.

But the last quality Paul gives to Titus is the most unique for elders and also one of the most important, in 1:9: “He must hold firmly to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” The elder must be able to teach. He can’t be squishy on doctrine – especially on the Gospel. It doesn’t matter if he is above reproach, if a man denies the Gospel or, if he fails to speak up when others begin to deny the Gospel, he is unfit to lead. He is not only unfit to lead the church, he is helping the wolves who would come into the church. So when we are evaluating an elder candidate, we can ask ourselves: does this person seem to be used by God to bring clarity to the Scriptures? Is he the type of person who can talk with a confused and wandering Christian and call them to the truth? And is he willing to firmly disagree with those who would teach what is contrary to the gospel?

Since the Gospel is central to the church’s life, then the elders who lead must be faithful in knowing and holding the truth of the gospel. They must also have the kind of lives which back up that truth. Paul is saying that if you get these sorts of men in place leading your church, you are on the path to a faithful witness in the world. So we should pray that God would make our church rich in these sorts of elders. Pray that he would keep our elders faithful. And pray that as it says in verse 9, we would be encouraged by the sound doctrine they teach. ***QUESTIONS?***

**Theme 2, Resistance of Gospel Deniers** (1:10-16, 3:9-11)

So . . . those are the good leaders. But what about the bad? Before getting onto the teaching of sound doctrine, we see that there is first a need to refute false teachers. Let’s look at 1:10-14. Paul tells Titus. “For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons,’ The testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.” (1:10-14). What is going on in Crete doesn’t seem to be the mere presence of false teachers in the surrounding community, “somewhere *out there*.” No, it appears that these false teachers had actually gained a strong hearing in the church – it says they’re “upsetting whole families!”

So, who are these false teachers? *In 1:10*, Paul refers to the “circumcision party.” From elsewhere in Paul’s letters, we can assume they are people who accept Jesus as the Messiah yet require the Jewish laws to be observed, including the law of circumcision. Paul knows that any addition to the gospel is a false gospel. And so he tells Titus that it is his duty to oppose such teachers and their teachings. And don’t just tell them they are wrong; explain to them how they are wrong. He says in verse 13, “rebuke them sharply, *that* they may be sound in the faith.” His goal here is not to stifle freedom of expression but to halt the spread of spiritual disease and to heal sick souls—even the souls of these false teachers.

Paul picks up this theme again in 3:9-11: “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” In thinking about this, you know, one of the most important things any pastor or elder will do for us is something we may never notice. It is not visiting hospitals, successfully leading a church to expand its budget, or ensuring that his sermons have clear outlines—all of which are good things. It is this: working hard to know Scripture in order to protect us from false teaching. False teaching is a bit like asbestos: if it gets in the air of a church, everyone is at risk of being harmed though they don’t know it. We need our leaders to be watching out for us.

And, all of us should seek the Spirit’s help in our discernment of good teaching from bad. We should be like the Bereans in Acts, searching the scriptures to verify what we hear.

But, of course, it is not enough to simply *oppose* false teaching. It’s great, for example, if you have a church that opposes universalism – the idea that all religions lead to God. That’s untrue, and unhealthy for the church. But you’ve got to go further. A church must have elders that also teach *sound* doctrine. Solid, consistent teaching of the *truth* is the best way to prevent falsehood from taking hold in the church. And what is that truth? That leads us to our third theme,

**Gospel Saturated Doctrine** (2:1,11-15 and 3:3-8)

In 2:1, Paul says to Titus, in contrast to the false teachers, “Teach what accords with sound doctrine.” (2:1). And at the core of this sound doctrine that Titus and every other Christian pastor has been called to preach is the gospel. Chapter 2, verse 11-14: “For 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, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” This is the heart of everything Paul is trying to get across in this letter to Titus. It produces the results he’s seeking.

We should cherish what is at the heart of this message, there in verse 14: Jesus Christ gave himself for us, to redeem us. This message is not about anything we have done, it is about what God has done for us already through Christ. A hallmark of sound doctrine is grace. Because of our sinful nature, we can never achieve our own salvation. In our sin, we are the enemies of a holy God. Our only hope is that God would rescue us from his own good justice. But God in love, sent his son Jesus to live a perfect life and die the death we deserved to die on the cross, and to rise again on the 3rd day. Now, whoever would turn from his sin and believe in Jesus will receive life instead of death, glory instead of judgment, forgiveness instead of wrath. That’s the redemption through grace that Paul is talking about.

Paul again reveals the riches of this grace in 3:3-8. Titus was to stress theGospel we find here. And so we too must hear it, and believe it, and value it, and thank God for it, because only then will we be able to devote ourselves to what is good.

And an important part of valuing the Gospel is remembering what we have been saved from. Look at verse 3. All of us, including Paul himself, have been foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by passions and pleasures. Now, interestingly, these adjectives sound similar to what Paul said about the false teachers that are in Crete. We’re just like them! This is central to the message of Titus. Yes, Paul’s given instruction about elders and resisting false teaching and holy living. But all that instruction must be grounded in the truth that *we* were no better off than the false teachers on Crete. We are broken. We are sinful. We are unworthy of God’s love. A Gospel-centered church is not a church where people come because they were the most respectable and upstanding. No, the heart of sound doctrine is that we were all once foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved. We have all been at one point more like these slimy false teachers than like Christ, and that is precisely why we need this Gospel message.

Now, let’s say we get that. We mentally understand the Gospel. Our brain assents to this sound doctrine that should be taught in the church. Is that all? Is the Christian life just signing your name on a list of truths?

Not at all. [And personally, this has probably the most encouraging thing about Titus for me this past week, as I’ve been studying it:] God radically changes our lives through the gospel. Moralism, rules, effort and determination ultimately are not what bring about a changed life; -- the gospel produces godlinesss in us. Look again at 2:11-12: “For 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.” Did you hear that? If you struggle with ungodliness and worldly passions like I do, hear and believe that it is God’s grace that teaches us to say no to sin and follow him. Notice – God’s grace doesn’t say “no” for us – we don’t just sit on the couch; we’re called to pursue holiness. But we can do so only as the gospel of God’s mercy teaches us about God’s love and about who we are as beloved children of God. We are saved because of his kindness! We’ve been washed! We’ve been reborn! We’ve had the Holy Spirit poured out on us! We’ve been justified by his grace! We’re heirs of eternal life! (cf. 3:5-7.) As we meditate on the cross and savor these gospel realities, our gratitude soars. And then, not out of moral determination but out of immense gratefulness, we learn to obey God – for his glory and our good. His grace exposes our worldly desires as trivial, so that God would satisfy us supremely. We can only live supernaturally because we have been forgiven supernaturally.

And that leads us into our final point, where Paul will teach about what lives that have been transformed by the Gospel look like practically in the church. Before we cover that, ***Any QUESTIONS?***

**Theme 4, Gospel Centered Living** (2:2-10 and 3:1-2)

For those who know the Gospel, how does God now call and equip them to live? Look at 2:2-6: Paul gives instructions to Titus that are specific to age and gender.

These lists are extremely practical. Depending where we fall in these categories, we can use them to examine our own hearts, and then use the other lists as a guide for what to pray for others. The point of it all is that those who have been transformed by the Gospel will live changed lives and they will encourage others to walk in paths of godliness.

We should notice that Paul assumes that there are folks of all ages in the churches on Crete. We live in a culture where youth and creativity are valued more than age and wisdom. It shouldn’t be so in the church. If you are older, then you have a particular responsibility in Christ’s church to be providing a godly example to those younger than you. Your physical health may not be what it used to be, but this is the time of life for your spiritual health to shine as an example. Those of us who are younger would do well to pray for our older brothers and sisters in the faith. Do we treasure the legacy and esteem the example of older Christians like Paul teaches us to here?Do we have the interaction between age-groups that Paul talks about here? That’s why we talk so much about a culture of discipling. We should seek to pour into one other’s lives in deliberately edifying relationships with the goal being that the Gospel would be made visible among us.

In 2:9-10, Paul continues on to give instruction for slaves. Now, we should recognize *that* when the New Testament talks about slaves, it is not talking about the racial, discriminating slavery America practiced for nearly three centuries. It is talking about a kind of slavery that *was* a type of servitude, but which is probably closer to our idea of employment than to our idea of slavery*. W*e’ll go into more detail on the slavery issue later when we cover the book of Philemon. For us today, Paul’s application for slavery should shape the way we view our employment.

What this means for us is that our work is important. It is one of the key ways the Gospel is adorned by our lives before non-Christians. So, if we are to live lives with the Gospel at the center, what will this mean for our lives at work, particularly in relation to our boss? Well, negatively, we shouldn’t talk back to our employers, or steal from them in any way. Positively, we should be subject to our bosses in everything unless it would cause us to sin. We should try to please them, to show them we can be fully trusted…Have you ever thought about God caring for your employer? Have you ever considered God’s desire for the good news to be attractive to them? And have you ever thought about God wanting to use *you t*o reach them? The way we work may be one of the most powerful witnesses God uses – our goal, as it says in 2:10, is to “show all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.” If you are known as a Christian *and* as an exceptional employee, that will commend the gospel.

A Gospel-centered church is going to be filled with people seeking to understand what it means to live holy lives. They are going to understand this more as they are taught “what accords with sound doctrine.” As they do this, they will be able to stand against false teachers and make the Gospel known to non-Christians. That’s what Paul wants to see in the churches in Crete, and that’s what we should pray for our congregation here. ***QUESTIONS?***

**Conclusion:**

Well, let me conclude with a series of questions for us, to help us think about applying this book of Titus to our lives.

First, do we take Gospel-driven elders for granted? Or do we pray that God would continue to raise up Titus 1–type men to lead his church here on Capitol Hill and for that matter that God would raise such men up in churches across the world?

Second, Do we assume that just because we haven’t denied the gospel in today’s class that false teaching could never occur in this place? Are we on guard against those who would teach any other Gospel than Christ crucified?

Third, Do we ever take the Gospel itself for granted? Do we forget that it was the kindness and love of God our savior that appeared to give us new life?

And finally, do we ever try to cultivate a godly life on our own strength, apart from the grace of God? Thank God that we don’t have to do that: his grace is what teaches us how to honor him. We will never live out these truths from Titus fully in this age. But by God’s grace, the salvation that we have in Christ assures us – as it says in 2:13, “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” So let’s pray that God would bless us with godly elders, that he would protect us from false teaching, that he would make the Gospel real to us every day, and that as a result, we would in the words of Titus 3:14 “devote [ourselves] to good works” – to the glory of God.

1. In fact the ESV has a footnote that reads: “or are faithful”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)