

There was a Christian lady who lived next door to an atheist. Every day, when the lady prayed, the atheist guy could hear and he thought to himself, “She sure is crazy, praying all the time like that. Doesn’t she know there isn’t a God?”

Many times, while she was praying, he would go to her house and harass her, saying “Lady, why do you pray all the time? Don’t you know there is no God?”

But she kept on praying. One day, she ran out of groceries. As usual, she was praying to the Lord explaining her situation and thanking Him for what He was going to do. As usual, the atheist heard her praying and thought to himself. “I’ll fix her.”

He went to the grocery store, bought a whole bunch of groceries, took them to her house, dropped them off on the front porch, rang the doorbell, and then hid in the bushes to see what she would do. When she opened the door and saw the groceries, she began to praise the Lord with all her heart, jumping, and singing and shouting everywhere! The atheist then popped out of the bushes and told her, “You crazy ole’ lady, God didn’t buy you those groceries, I bought those groceries!”

Well, she broke out and started running down the street, shouting and praising the Lord even more. When he finally caught up with her, he asked what her problem was. She said, “I knew the Lord would provide me with some groceries, but I no idea that He was going to make the devil pay for them!”

We are making our way through a letter from the Apostle Paul to a young coworker named Titus. If you recall, both Paul and Titus went to the Island of Crete which is large island in the Mediterranean Sea just southeast of Greece. They were there to organize and to shepherd the churches, but later there came a time when Paul had to depart for other ministry, and so he left Titus on the island to finish what they started and to straighten out some things in the churches – things that were apparently not right, and a primary way for Titus to do that was to appoint mature Christian men as elders – as spiritual leaders in the churches.

Last week, we spent some time looking at the character qualities – the lifestyle qualities of an elder which I concluded were actually marks of maturity for every Christian man to aspire to. They applied to every single man who is growing in grace and godliness, and from these mature Christian men, Titus was to appoint some as elders in every city where there was a church with a clear and simple mission.

Their mission was to cling to the truth of God’s word which they had been taught – clamp onto it like a vice grip, so that they might first *encourage* others with sound healthy doctrine – encourage them to press on and to mature in the faith, and then secondly and unfortunately, these elders were to *confront* those who oppose sound doctrine, and if you spend any time in the New Testament, you will come to realize there will always be those who oppose the truth.

Wherever God sows the truth, Satan quickly comes to oppose it – and that sets the stage for the next part of this letter where the Apostle Paul describes to Titus the nature of this opposition that must be confronted by him and by the elders he appoints in Crete.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Titus 1** and we will begin with **verse 10** where Paul says,

¹⁰ For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, ¹¹ who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain. ¹² One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.”

In this passage, Paul begins by describing these people that oppose the truth, and we should not overlook the fact that right off the bat, Paul says there were **many** of them.

If you remember, at this time, the Island of Crete was a Roman province whose people were influenced by pagan philosophies, it was a place historically steeped in Greek mythology, and it was an island with several major harbors, open to anyone and everyone with their own form of religious baggage. The island was a hodgepodge of people with their own beliefs – these people were all over the place, they were in great numbers, and apparently some were in the church – which would seem to be a good thing, but they weren’t interested in the truth or being right with God.

These people were **rebellious, empty talkers, and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision**. That’s how Paul described their behavior, and quite frankly – there’s nothing good about it.

He called them **rebellious** meaning they did not want to be held accountable. God has established an order of authority for all of us in several different areas of life.

There is an order of authority in the home, in the church, in the workplace, and in the community. God wants us to recognize those areas where He has placed an order of authority in our lives, and He wants us to submit to that authority, but these people wouldn't do that. They didn't recognize the authority of God's Word – much less the authority of the spiritual leaders in the church. Yes, they claimed to be Christian, and they rubbed elbows with God's people, but they thought they could do whatever they wanted – in their own way – on their own terms. They were rebellious.

Paul also described these people who opposed the truth as **empty talkers** and **deceivers**. These people make themselves known by their fruitless speech and by their lies. They were smooth talkers – their words were impressive and persuasive, but when it came to content, their words lacked substance and they were not true.

Instead of leading people to the truth, they led people to accept things that were not true – and of course, it was at the expense of others – and when I say that, I mean their main motivation was financial **gain**.

In 2018, a televangelist asked his followers to fund his fourth private jet – a \$54 million dollar jet because he said Jesus “wouldn't be riding a donkey”. He said God told him to buy it. When asked why not fly in a commercial plane like the rest of us, he responded, joined by another extremely wealthy minister, that flying commercial is like being in a long tube with a bunch of demons.

These are prosperity gospel preachers, and quite frankly, they are the only ones who are prospering. These are preachers who seem more concerned about their *income* rather than the *outcome* of serving God. Unfortunately, it is what we see today – it's prevalent, and it was prevalent back then.

So, as described by Paul, these were some of the characteristics of the false teachers in Crete. They were **rebellious**, **empty talkers**, and **deceivers**, but there was another group who Paul was very familiar with whom he called the **circumcision**. If you recall, they were the professing Christians with Jewish backgrounds who thought the key to their acceptance by God was keeping the Law of Moses, and let me explain.

Historically, the “people of God” were focused on one ethnic group – the Jews, the people of Israel, and they were set apart by the practices commanded in the Mosaic Law such as the circumcision of males, the observance of special days, the ceremonial washings, and the eating of certain foods.

In Paul's day, there were many Jewish believers in Christ – at least they professed to be believers, and they felt that for the Gentile believers to truly be a part of the family of God, they needed to follow the requirements of the Mosaic Law. They insisted that the Gentile believers had to become Jews (in practice) before they could become true followers of God.

These Jewish believers were telling the Gentile believers, *“Yes, it's fine to believe in Jesus Christ, but we've got this extra stuff that you have to follow to be saved, which includes the circumcision of males, and we don't care what the church says – we reject that.”*

Anytime the message becomes *Jesus plus something else equals salvation*, then it is an outright lie. It's a distortion of the gospel truth and a destruction of grace. It's trouble. If you *add* legalistic requirements to God's gracious plan of salvation, then you *take away* the simple truth of the gospel and you suggest that God's plan of salvation through the finished work of Jesus Christ is not sufficient to save.

These people who opposed the truth, these legalists, were teaching things they should not teach – **upsetting whole families**, and that's what legalism does – it breeds conflict and divisiveness even in a family setting, and **why is that?**

Legalism happens when we substitute our *rules* for our *relationship* with Jesus – rules we think will somehow earn us points with God. It happens when we lose sight of what Jesus has done and instead focus on what we have done, and because the focus is on man – legalism creates self-righteous and judgmental people like the Pharisees, it robs people of freedom and joy, it reduces the Christian life to nothing but a set of *dos* and *don'ts*, and it jeopardizes loving relationships with both God and with others.

I heard a funny story about a Methodist pastor who was sitting in his study when he looked out the window behind his desk and saw Jesus standing outside watching him. He didn't know what to do so he called his bishop. The pastor said, “You won't believe this, but Jesus is standing outside my study looking at me.” The bishop gasped and asked, “What's He doing?” The pastor took another glance and whispered, “Nothing. He's just watching me. What should I do?” The bishop thought for a minute and suggested, “Look busy.”

It's funny, but that's legalism. It's performance-based, it's doing stuff for God to somehow impress Him when the truth is – God has already done it all for us – He

simply wants us to grow in grace and godliness in a loving relationship with Him. We just make things harder than it has to be, and that's the truth.

So, Paul said it isn't enough that elders should teach the truth – they must also silence certain people who spread lies. That word **silenced** literally means “*to muzzle*” usually by stuffing something in a person's mouth. That's the picture we are presented with here. Now, I have no intention of stuffing something in a person's mouth to shut them up, although the thought has crossed my mind a few times, **so how might I as an elder – as a pastor – silence someone?**

That's a tough question because I know I have no control on what someone says on social media – they can spew whatever garbage they want to spew, and there are many who are doing just that – they have freedom of speech to do so, but when it comes to this church, I don't have to give them a platform to preach, or to teach, or to speak from. As the pastor, I don't have to do that, and secondly, and I think more importantly – and this goes for all of us, we can silence the lies with the truth – and not your truth, but biblical truth.

Now, if you look at **verse 12**, I will admit this was somewhat of a head-scratcher for me – it almost sounds like an inside joke, but I think because this letter would be read openly to the various church congregations, it was said to counter any potential arguments by some in Crete who may say they would not be the victim of deception – they would not pass along any false teaching – to which Paul states,

“One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.”

About 600 years before Christ, a famous Cretan philosopher named “*Epimenides*,” made that statement about his own people. Paul didn't say it – one of their own said it about themselves. Paul is pointing out that deception is definitely a serious character problem in Crete – it's rampant, apparently the people there can't tell the truth from a lie, and therefore, the Christians in Crete needed to be on their toes.

Paul continues, and beginning with **verse 13**, he says,

¹³ This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith, ¹⁴ not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth.

Paul says we are to confront the lies and the liars directly. Notice the words “**reprove them severely**” which are some very strong words. It means to *cut off*, like cutting off the branch of a tree, and I think Paul is using these strong words because for some people, they are so deep into the lies – so deep they even believe their own lies, greater firmness may be necessary.

Now granted, they may not listen, in fact, many religious people didn’t listen to Jesus, but still, we confront the lies and the liars with the truth, and **why?** So hopefully, they may be sound and healthy in the faith. That’s the goal.

Jesus said in **Matthew 18:15**,

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”

Later in **Galatians 6:1**, Paul says,

“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.”

The ultimate goal is not to crush someone, even when the truth might seem harsh, but rather to restore the fallen and to strengthen the weak in the faith, and hopefully this will persuade them and others to turn to the truth and turn away from the lies which were circulating throughout the island – to include **Jewish myths** and **commandments of men** – teachings that were masquerading as being truth from God, when in fact, they were not grounded in His word.

Now we come to the last two verses in this first chapter, and beginning with **verse 15** we read,

¹⁵ To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. ¹⁶ They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.

In these verses Paul confronts false teachers with a test of character and with a test of conduct. He explains that what’s on the inside, what’s in the heart of a person, what’s in their character will sooner or later be revealed on the outside by their conduct. What a person believes, how a person thinks, affects how they behave.

To the pure, all things are pure. True purity is from the heart, and it produces outer purity. True purity resides not in the practice of legalistic man-made rules, but rather it's rooted in a character transforming relationship with Jesus Christ and then it's revealed in our conduct. To the pure, all things are pure, and just for clarification, Paul does not mean that sinful things are pure to the pure. He's talking about those things clearly permitted in God's Word that the legalists want to forbid with their man-made rules.

Paul continues and says, **but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure.** To those who are corrupted on the inside with false ideas, and legalistic teaching, and empty philosophies – everything is corrupt – nothing seems right.

The Apostle Paul warned another young coworker named Timothy of this very thing. In **1 Timothy 4**, beginning with **verse 1**, Paul said,

¹But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, ²by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, ³men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; ⁵for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

Paul knew that if a Christian walked in the purity of the Lord, these things were pure to him, but to those with a legalistic mindset – to them nothing seemed pure, nothing seemed right, and so of course to fix it, you needed more rules.

In **verse 16**, we read once again,

They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.

Here's what I want to say about this last verse. It is Christ and Christ alone who saves. There is no else who saves, there is no other name given under heaven by which men may be saved, there is nothing that you can do to be saved other than placing your saving faith in Jesus Christ. He paid it all. He finished the work. Period. That's it. Now with that said, once you are saved, indwelt by the presence of the Holy Spirit and influenced by His Word, over time, from the inside out, your life should change. It has to. **How can it not?**

And for those who **professed to know God** – yes, they said that “*Jesus is my Lord*” and they bragged about their good hearts, but their lives said something different. They used the right words, and said the right things about God, and yet their lives **denied** that God even mattered. Their consistent crooked conduct was evidence that there had been no character transformation by God. Changed character will lead to changed conduct – it has to, at least to some degree!

In his book “Habits of the Heart” sociologist Robert Bellah reported that 81 percent of the American people he interviewed said that “an individual should arrive at his or her own religious belief independent of any church or synagogue” meaning that those who claim to be Christian are arriving at faith on their own terms – terms that make no demands on their behavior.

A woman named Sheila, who was interviewed for the book, embodies this attitude. She said, “I believe in God,” “I can’t remember the last time I went to church, but my faith has carried me a long way. It’s ‘Sheila-ism.’ Just my own little voice.”

Listen, I think I have a pretty good grasp on reality, and just like those in Crete, I know that people are going to choose to do whatever they want to do. I know that people are going to choose to believe what they want to believe – I know that, but I also know this – in the end, you cannot choose the consequences. That, you cannot do.

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