

Guarding what is good

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[0 : 0 0] Let's ask God for his help. Heavenly Father, the scriptures say that you are a jealous God. You are zealous for what belongs to you.

And Father, you say that we are your treasured possession. And Lord, you want to make sure, Lord, that we are protected, that we are on the right path, that we do not fall off and stumble.

So Father, will you protect us? By what you say this morning through your word, will you help us, Lord, to pay attention and to listen to what you have to say?

And with what you have to say, be able to be on our guard and to be discerning and to live the lives that you want us to live in this world. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Now, every once in a while, you'll read some sad news of some plastic surgery gone wrong. It usually involves someone clicking on some advertisement on social media where promises are made that you look much better for cheaper.

[1 : 0 8] Unfortunately, what happens is that these surgeries are often performed by unlicensed parties on unregistered premises. And in many cases, they lead to many complications, infections, defamation, and yes, even death, as happened in one case in Johor a few months ago.

They promise transformation, but end up wrecking devastation. And this morning, that is the kind of thing Paul wants to guard against.

Not so much against unprincipled beauticians, but against false teachers, who also promise much but deliver little. You see, what have we learned in the book of Titus so far?

We've seen that it's very much concerned with the good life. Christians, we've learned, are people eager to do good. And we've seen that a truly good life can only come about when we know the truth that leads to godliness.

We need to know Jesus for ourselves more and more and take to heart his godliness-producing gospel. And last week, we've seen one key step towards producing churches full of goodness is to have elders who model such goodness for us.

[2 : 3 6] We need elders who are godly, who will steward God's household properly, and who are committed to teaching God's truth unfailingly.

That's the way God's world will then be impacted by God's people. But last week, we also ended on a little bit of a down note.

In 1 verse 9, we saw that elders don't just encourage others by sound doctrine. They also refute opponents. And well, that sounds a bit negative, doesn't it?

Doesn't sound like a fun or enriching activity. So why is it necessary? Well, it's for the same reason why our authorities need to regulate cosmetic surgeons.

You see, Paul is not naive. He knows very well that on Crete, just like in almost every other place that he's been, there are plenty of people offering their versions of the truth.

[3 : 4 0] There are plenty of teachers making promises, offering alternatives, and marketing their gospel as the real thing. Their way, they say, is what will transform you.

But we know only the true apostolic gospel can produce changed lives. And because Paul knows that, he tells Titus, we need to spot who the false teachers are, and deal with them.

We need to safeguard what is good. And that's something we still need to do, because false teachers are still with us today. And even though we might not face exactly the same kinds of teachings as those on Crete, there is nothing new under the sun.

False teaching are often variations of the same untruth. And so this morning, let's learn how we can deal with false teachers from Titus 1-10-16.

Let's learn what these teachers are like, how their teaching impacts people, and what we must do in response. So let's begin by looking at what these teachers are like.

[4 : 59] And actually, I hope to persuade you that at their core, these teachers are actually a reverse of the picture of the godly elders we got in Titus 1-9.

Now, do you remember last week the two essential criteria of a good elder? Elders are those who have been transformed by truth, and who are trusted to teach the truth.

But these false teachers are essentially the opposite. Let me show you how. First off, they are untrustworthy people who teach an empty truth.

You see, false teachers are dangerous not because what they teach is a million miles from the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are dangerous because what they teach is almost true.

It sounds plausible. And these teachers on Crete are like that. Look at the end of verse 10, and notice how Paul describes them. They are of the circumcision group.

[6 : 07] They are people who are identified by the key symbol of the Old Covenant. Now, that must mean they are familiar with the Old Testament.

In verse 14, you can see their Jewish orientation again. They seem to be familiar with Jewish myths. Now, these are stories that revolve around minor Old Testament characters.

And if you look later, just over the page, at Titus 3 verse 9, it appears that they have a working knowledge of the law of Moses and even the genealogies.

So, if you told them that you've been listening to Ezra's sermons at KEC recently, they might tell you, ah, those lists in Ezra, let me explain them to you.

Now, that's impressive, isn't it? So, what we have here is a picture of a people who are knowledgeable. They are people who can claim to be Bible-based.

[7 : 13] They know their Old Testament well. And they seem pretty concerned with purity. Look at verse 15, which we'll look again in more detail a little later, and notice that's the subject matter.

And indeed, whenever you encounter the circumcision party in the New Testament, Crete is not the only place that they've been, you'll find that that's often a concern of theirs.

And doesn't that sound good? I mean, after all, Leviticus tells us to be holy as God is holy. So, does Peter in the New Testament? So, if that is what the circumcision party is offering, surely what they are saying must be good?

Certainly, verse 16, they claim to know God. So, by implication, their teaching will help you know him too.

And yet, Paul doesn't think so. Look at how he describes these teachers. In verse 10, he says, they are full of meaningless talk.

[8 : 29] They literally speak empty words. It's hollow. So, imagine that you are climbing a tree and there is a branch that is rotted out on the inside.

It's hollow. Now, you don't want to be stepping or holding onto that branch. It's not healthy. It's not sound. It's not solid. It's not connected to the rest of the trunk, which is supported in turn by deep roots.

It will give way easily and leave you with a broken leg or worse. Well, that's what the words of these teachers are like, Paul says.

The words that they use might sound very spiritual and pious. Maybe they'll refer to their own teachings as priestly or prophetic. Maybe they'll tell many fascinating stories, but in the end, they have no substance or significance.

After all, these Jewish myths that they like so much, which revolves around those Old Testament characters, they have no credible basis in fact.

[9 : 42] Historians have uncovered evidence of such stories in circulation around that time, and they are simply products of speculation. So, their words are hollow, it looks like truth on the outside, but it's empty and untrustworthy on the inside.

But, how can we be sure of this? Well, that takes us to the second thing we can observe about these teachers. Secondly, they are people who are not transformed by their truth.

they are people who are not transformed by their truth. Paul makes that clear in verse 16. They claim to know God, but by their actions, they deny him.

They are detestable, disobedient, and unfit for doing anything good. You see, the problem is not just that their gospel is technically incorrect.

Rather, their truth does not seem to lead to godliness. They claim to be pure and holy, but their works show otherwise.

[11 : 00] As Titus 3 verse 9 will later put it, their truth is actually unprofitable and useless. And that's why Paul says their talk is meaningless, because it doesn't actually change anyone.

And we know this because the teachers themselves do not lead changed lives. They look no different from those around them. Look at verse 12.

We've already referred to this verse in previous weeks. And we've said that this verse, which is a quote from one of the locals, gives us an idea of what Cretans are generally like.

They are liars, evil broods, lazy gluttons. But when we look at this verse in its context, we realise verse 12 is not just general commentary on Cretan society.

Let me paraphrase verses 11 to 13. So in verse 11, Paul says, look, these teachers they are teaching bad stuff.

[12 : 11] And only for money. And then verses 12 and 13 he says, and hey, you know what they say about Cretans, right? As even one of their own prophets have said, they are all liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.

And guess what? Well, that's true of these guys as well. Do you see? Verse 12 is really about the false teachers.

He is saying, you know what? I know Cretan society is like this and these guys are no different. This is true. Instead of being distinct from the world, they have adopted the standards of the world.

Instead of being transformed by God's word, they are being conformed to their surrounding culture. They are filled with deception, verse 10, just like Cretans who like to lie.

They are disobedient, verse 16, just as Cretans are wild. They chase after dishonest gain rather than do an honest day's work, verse 11, just as Cretans are lazy and greedy.

[13 : 27] And that's the profile of these false teachers, Paul says. They teach what sounds like truth, but based on their lives, their truth in no way leads to godliness.

Like the world they want applause and influence, like the world they crave big houses and VIP treatment, like the world they care about themselves first.

And here is what is so stunning. Remember, these people say they are after purity. But when you look at them closely, you realize that they are very worldly.

But how can that be? How can people who want purity end up looking so impure? Isn't that a paradox?

Well, let's explore this a little more. What exactly were the circumcision party teaching? Paul never gives us the exact details.

[14 : 38] But we have some clues. We already know from verse 14 that it has something to do with Jewish myths and merely human commands. Now, these commands probably didn't have anything to do with circumcision, despite the group's name, because we hear nothing about this subject in Titus.

people's love. But back in 1 Timothy 4, which is close to Titus' time and setting, we do know that there is some teaching going around about avoiding certain foods and even about living celibate lives to become more holy.

So it seems as if these teachers were probably teaching something along those lines. Perhaps they were requiring people to eat only certain types of food.

Perhaps they said, hey, King Jehoshaphat, he fasted in the Old Testament, so we better do too, that's how you're pure. Now, whatever the details were exactly, the point seems to be this, just make sure you keep the right rules and you will be pure.

If they were around today, perhaps they would say, you must give 10% of your salary every week to church, you must not get any tattoos, just make sure you do the right things in church and you'll be fine, spiritually speaking.

[16 : 08] Now, that might sound harmless, perhaps even good, but what sort of impact does such teaching actually have on people?

Well, let's come down to our second point for today, how this impacts people. Here's the problem. Such law keeping, you see, looks like they are promoting godliness.

Don't wear revealing clothes, don't play certain computer games, make sure you say grace before the meal, make sure you share Bible verses with your friends every day. Surely all those rules are good, right?

But there is a problem, and the problem is this. They actually limit godliness. They reduce godliness to a checklist, so that you will say, as long as I tick those boxes, I'm okay.

So, at Crete, someone might say this, ah, I don't eat this food, or I observe that festival, so I must be okay.

[17 : 22] And so, even though they are actually lying gluttons at their workplace, they are convinced they are godly. Or today, we might say, I listen to nothing but Christian music.

I share videos on my Instagram stories about God's blessings, so even though I lose my temper easily with my friends at school, or my staff at work, oh, I'm okay. Or hey, I show up early to be an usher at church, I help out in the Sunday school, so I tick the boxes.

Even though I might actually be overbearing to everyone else, oh, it's fine. They need a firm hand anyway. Do you see what this message of these false teachers can end up doing to you?

They make you feel good. Because it seems like you're pure, because you've done certain spiritual things, or tick certain religious boxes. But actually, you still behave like the world, and you don't see that as a big deal.

And that's why Paul calls their teaching a deception in verse 10. Because here is their deception in a nutshell. as long as you keep certain religious rules, that's good enough.

[18 : 44] Or to adapt something a pastor friend of mine says, you can be bad outside church as long as you're good in church. And that sort of message is attractive, isn't it?

Again, as my friend points out, basically, it's saying to us, you don't really need to change all that much as long as you play by certain religious rules.

And many of us might look at those rules and say, ah, actually, they're not too bad. I'm willing to abide by them. Okay, you want me to show up at church every Sunday?

Okay, you want me to be polite and say all the right words and maybe put something in the offering box when I do come? No problem. I'm willing to do that if you basically leave me alone from Monday to Saturday and let me live how I want to live.

Many people actually don't mind that trade-off. Because think about the alternative. Think about what happens if you are actually serious about following Christ.

[19 : 59] So let's say you are a cretin who has become a Christian. Now that means not lying anymore unlike your fellow cretins.

So that means actually being honest about the expand claims that you submit. That means not massaging the figures on your income tax forms. That means having to actually admit to someone else when you are really the one at fault.

And that is tough, isn't it? It's actually much easier just to play the religious game without really having to change. So again, imagine that you are that neo-Cretan Christian and you know that you're meant to be eager to do good and live a good life for Christ.

yes, but you're finding it hard, but now comes along these teachers and they say to you, ah, that poor, what does he know?

Listen to me instead. What if I told you all you have to do is just take all of these rules on the box about avoiding certain foods and so on? And that way, you can really know God.

[21 : 16] Ah, that's all it takes. It would be tempting to listen to them, wouldn't it? It just sounds simpler. That way, you don't have to count the cost.

You can still run your business the same way. You can still talk to others in the same way. You don't really have to change. And in fact, you might be praised more because now you look even more religious.

And all this without having to be more godly. which, in fact, might not win you praise from the world. I mean, just last week, someone was telling me about how she often clashed with a non-Christian colleague about putting in accurate claims.

So, becoming more religious without being more godly, well, it sounds like a good deal, doesn't it?

But such teaching corrupts in the end. That's a word mentioned twice in verse 15. Because what you end up with is external purity and worldly living.

[22 : 28] You end up looking more like a cretin than a Christian, such that people will wonder why bother becoming a Christian in the first place if there is no difference.

deception leads to corruption. And that is why Paul says the second half of verse 15, to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure.

What he means is this, if a person's heart has never been cleansed by Christ himself, then it doesn't matter how many religious rules or so-called spiritual formulas you follow, you will still be defiled on the inside.

As Jesus once said of the Pharisees, their lips might honour God, but their hearts are still unclean. And, if you have a defiled heart, and your minds and your consciences are corrupted, they have not been recalibrated by Christ, you will eventually act out in ungodly ways, even if you go to church three times a week and blast Christian music the entire day and pray long prayers.

To those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. So, do you see, if these false teachers have their way, how can anything good come out of Christian churches?

[24 : 09] Because they teach a hollow truth, an empty truth, a truth that does not transform. You see, if you change the gospel, that means you are not being changed by the gospel.

Let me say that again. If you change the gospel, that means you are not being changed by the gospel. And that is tragic because the true gospel brings about the opposite result.

The true gospel brings about internal purity and godly living, not just in church, but in the world as we'll see over the next two chapters.

You see, what is the gospel? gospel. The gospel is the good news that in Christ, you have been made pure, not because of anything you have ever done or will ever do, but on the basis of what Christ has done.

It is the good news that Jesus has shed his blood on the cross to cleanse us from all unrighteousness so that our sin no longer counts against us.

[25 : 25] And it is the good news that Jesus then sends his spirit to remake our hearts and remold our character, something that we'll see in Titus 3, to show that we are truly united with him.

And that is why verse 15, Paul says, to the pure, all things are pure. What he means is this, if your heart and your conscience is pure, if he has been truly cleansed and changed by Christ, then you wouldn't be depending on food laws and traditions to keep you clean.

You wouldn't be looking to external religion to gain righteousness. You know better. You know God's approval doesn't rest on your goodness, it rests on Christ alone.

And that actually frees you to live the way that God wants us to. Because you don't have to feel the crushing burden of trying to live up to God's standards to gain his favour and invent all sorts of rules.

Instead, you will receive gifts like food and drink and sex as good gifts from God, not to be rejected out of hand, but now to be used in the right way for his glory.

[26 : 54] You have been made pure by grace, and so now you live pure lives by grace. So I hope all this changes our perspective on what false teaching does, doesn't it?

I think we often think that the danger of false teachers and false teaching is simply doctrinal. we think it is simply about people who deny that Jesus is God or that he rose again from the dead or something like that and we go, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, they shouldn't say that, no, no, that's wrong.

But we simply think that they are wrong only on the level of belief and we don't see how they are also dangerous at the level of practice.

But Paul shows us differently. he is concerned with false teaching precisely because it is teaching that does not lead to godliness.

It is teaching that covers up rather than cleanses our impurity. It is teaching that not only deceives and corrupts but verse 11 disrupts entire households.

[28 : 11] Now that could mean the faith of members of these households were being shaken or that it was causing conflict between those who were taken in by the false teaching and others in the household who were still holding on to sound doctrine.

It might possibly even be referring not just to biological families but churches because many churches met in houses. Now whatever the case it was having a huge negative impact.

So what form does that take nowadays? What teaching exists out there that doesn't lead to godliness? There is actually a quite wide variety and this week I was trying to think what's a good modern day example to give to you.

So I've come up with this one. I'm not sure if it's the best example but hopefully it will help. About two decades ago there was a best selling book called The Prayer of Jabez.

Now those of us who've been around for a while might remember it. Everyone was talking about it at that time. It is short less than 100 pages long and this book zoomed in on an obscure Old Testament character who is only mentioned in a couple of verses in 1 Chronicles called Jabez.

[29 : 34] And so that fits with the definition of Jewish myth here in Titus 1 verse 14. Remember Jewish myths are speculative stories about minor Old Testament characters. And the author claimed that hidden away in these verses was the secret to the Christian life.

The basic idea was that if you prayed the way Jabez prays God will always answer you and bless you with blessing here being defined as earthly success.

Now there are a lot of issues we could pick up with the scripture but here is the big thing I just want us to observe. In essence the author was simply offering a religious or a spiritual rule in this case praying the prayer of Jabez and his promise was follow this rule and you will be fine.

This prayer will make you so acceptable to God he will definitely answer your prayers without fail. Do you see how that is not a million miles away from the wrong teaching on creed?

It is a kind of shortcut. Pray this prayer religiously. Watch God enlarge your territory. Don't stress out about being godly.

[30 : 55] And you are set up for life. Don't need to change too much. And interestingly, for a book that majors on the secret to an extraordinary Christian life, there was almost no mention of Jesus.

His name appears just three times and each time just in passing. And not a single time is there a mention of his death, his work of cleansing, his resurrection, those kind of things.

So there is zero gospel. Now do you think this led to an outpouring of Christians being eager to do good? I think after 20 years, you know the answer.

So what must we do in response? That is our third point today and perhaps the most straightforward. Paul is crystal clear.

In verse 11, he says, they must be silenced. In other words, notice it what they say that Paul identifies as the main problem.

[32 : 03] It's the teaching. And so you need to put them on mute. Silence them. Now, probably not literally, of course, since you can't go around literally trying to gag these people.

But notice throughout Titus, what kind of actions Paul stresses. In verse 13, he says, rebuke them sharply.

Next week, in 2 verse 1, he will say, teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. In 2 verse 15, he'll say, encourage and rebuke. In 3 verse 9, he'll say, avoid.

In 3 verse 10, he'll say, warn. These are the kind of instructions Paul issues. And so that is why I preach how I preach this morning.

In part, I've been trying to teach, and warn so you know what to avoid while hopefully encouraging you with the gospel.

[33 : 06] And actually, the best way to silence false teachers is quite simply, don't listen to them. Don't give them a platform. Don't buy their books.

Don't go to their conferences. If there is no money to be made, quite often these teachers will exit the stage because verse 11 tells us that's often their primary motivation.

And there is a restorative aim with our rebuke. It is quite possible in verse 13 that some simply need to be corrected and with time, they will come back to a right understanding of the gospel.

I mean, that's what we pray for, isn't it? So this morning, we've covered what false teachers are like. They are the reverse of godly elders teaching an empty truth which doesn't transform even them.

We've seen what their impact on people is. They deceive, corrupt, and disrupt with a message that does not purify. And we've seen what we must do in response.

[34 : 21] We know such teachers are to be silenced and rebuke. And as we finish, let me briefly just draw out some concluding implications. Firstly, I think this passage reminds us to take false teachers and teaching seriously.

Sometimes we can take it lightly, can't we? We say, oh, well, I know it's wrong, but let's be nice. We don't think it actually causes any harm.

But Paul is clear. The degree to which false teaching is present is the degree to which Christians will be obstructed from doing good.

And just have a look at verse 10 again. Is there just one or two false teachers? Paul says there are many. many. And it's true, isn't it?

They are everywhere in the New Testament. It doesn't matter if you turn to Galatians or 1 John or 2 Peter, they are there. And we must not be naive to think they are not here today, even in Kuching.

[35 : 35] The truth is they are there on the shelves of your Christian bookshop. They are there on the podcasts on your phones. And like it or not, they might even be there too in churches in our city.

We have to be on our guard. Secondly, I think this passage reminds us not to be consumed by false teachers and yet have the courage to confront where necessary.

Now, it is the gospel that is the most important. It is the gospel that purifies. It is the gospel that leads us to godliness. And so that is where our focus should be. It is not healthy to focus purely on looking for the latest heretic like some people do on the internet.

But from time to time, we must speak out against false teaching, especially when it threatens the health of our church. So if ever you find me having to do this, well, know that this is the heart of where it comes from.

And thirdly, this passage reinforces the need to keep raising godly elders. What is one of the best ways to fight the false teachers of Titus 1 verse 10 to 16?

[36 : 54] It is to work hard to raise Titus 1 verse 5 to 9 leaders. We have to work hard to produce them, not just because they can refute such people, but also to reduce the number of people becoming false teachers in the first place.

Now, it's hard work, and I'll be the first to admit I want to do a better job of it than I currently am, but that is one thing we should keep on our agenda.

So let us not be taken in by empty and hollow words. Let us not reduce godliness to a checklist, but let us keep holding on to the truth that leads to godliness, Jesus himself.

And that way, we can become good people who will bless God's will. Let's pray for that now. Father, we thank you for your word today, and even as we listen to your word, we pray that we will hold fast to it, we will not harden our hearts to it, but we will receive it as your word, your life-giving transforming word.

Help us, Lord, to be discerning of those who are full of meaningless talk and deception, and help us, Lord, not to be taken in by them, but instead, Lord, help us to keep hanging on to Jesus, knowing that he alone purifies us, and he enables us to live pure lives.

[38 : 35] And so, Father, day by day, we know that we face the challenge of aligning our lives with the claim that we know you. Will you help us by your spirit every day to make sure that those two are in alignment as closely as possible?

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.