

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Legalism & Accountability*

SERIES: *Titus*

SCRIPTURES: *Titus 1:10-2:15*

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**Credit to Bible Gateway; Bible Project;*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church, to everyone here in the room and also to those of you tuning in to the livestream.

Hey we have been on this journey, you might say, exploring a little-known book of the Bible in the New Testament called **Titus (Series Graphic)**. And if you've been following our series you'll know that Titus is a letter that Paul wrote to one of his partners in the early church, Titus, who was tasked with bringing order and recruiting leaders for the church on the island of Crete.

If you have your Bible, turn with me again to the book of Titus. This morning's message is going to incorporate the end of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2. Obviously not gonna be able to hit every little detail. But there are a couple of overarching themes that pulls this chunk of Paul's letter together.

I. Titus 1:10-16

¹⁰ For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. ¹¹ They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

Ok, so there is a problem in Crete with **misguided teaching** about what a life of following Jesus looks like and should incorporate and we'll talk specifically about the issue Paul is addressing here in a moment.

And I'm not going to read to you all of chapter 2. But if you just kind of skim over it, you'll see that in this chapter Paul describes the kind of teaching and life-style, that should be expected for followers of Jesus on the Island of ancient Crete.

And just a quick clarification on this section: It's important to note that **we should NOT flatly apply Paul's familial expectations in our lives today**. As if Paul's instructions, to the church in Crete are simply directly applied to our lives today, as a universal command for all times and all places. That kind of thinking is what led to Christians supporting the slave trade 200 years ago. For example...look at verse 9. Paul writes...

⁹ Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything,

We should not read that and say, "Oh see, God endorses slavery." Whenever you come to sections like this in Scripture, you need to remember that Paul's expectations of family and societal life should be read, within the setting of ordinary life in ancient Crete. Slavery, in that world, was a given...even though we believe that the true trajectory of Scripture forbids owning other people as property.

Ok, there are two important concepts I want to highlight from this portion of Paul's letter.

First, what was the primary misguided teaching that Paul was addressing and then second, we'll talk about the importance of "admonishing" or confronting others. Because that's certainly something Paul is doing in this portion of the letter. So, first,

A. What was the primary misguided teaching?

that Paul was concerned about.

Often when we think about misguided teaching or people who are leading Christians astray we think about those outside of the church. Secularism. Atheism. People from other religious faiths. Interestingly, that is not who Paul is primarily concerned about on the Island of Crete.

¹⁰ For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. ¹¹ They must be silenced,

The circumcision group, would not be those outside the church, it would be those within the church community.

There was a fascinating recent article written by author Russell Moore where he argues that today, in modern North America, **“the evidence is mounting that a significant amount of secularization is accelerated and driven not by the “secular culture,” but by evangelicalism itself...We see young evangelicals walking away not because they do not believe what the church teaches, but because they believe the *church itself* does not believe what it teaches. This secularization comes not from scientism and hedonism but disillusionment and cynicism.**

He’s saying, young people are noticing the hypocrisy and misguided teaching within the church and that’s what’s driving them away. And that’s what Paul is addressing on the Island of Crete.

Don’t do this often, in fact in the 13 years that I’ve been preaching, I’ve only addressed this topic one other time, a couple of years ago, when we looked at Paul’s letter to the Philippian church. But it comes again here in Paul’s letter to Titus so

let's talk about **circumcision** and this circumcision group that Paul is especially concerned about.

It's important to remember that the early church movement was a very Jewish movement, right? Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi. Much of his identity was tied up in Jewish theology, as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Most of the first Christians were Jewish.

So, think about it, if you had grown up as a Jew. It means that your entire life had been built around following the Jewish law (OT). You grew up following kosher food laws, ceremonial cleansing laws, laws pertaining to sacrificing animals at the temple, even circumcision. After Jesus death and resurrection, do you just stop participating in those practices? Do you just cut them off...bad expression to use when we're talking about circumcision. I mean the way you function in the world, had been built around those religious practices. It would be incredibly difficult to expect that kind of change, at least very quickly? And so many of the initial followers of Jesus maintained much of their Jewish life-style practices, while choosing to follow Jesus as Lord.

And so one of the big questions in the early church was, do gentiles have to become Jews, follow Jewish law, in order to be followers of Jesus? We actually still wrestle with elements of those questions today. How much of OT Jewish law do you have to obey?

One of the clearest symbols of Judaism was the practice of circumcision. Titus, remember, is Greek, he's a gentile.

A couple of weeks ago, I had mentioned to you that Titus name is mentioned in the book of Galatians. In Galatians, *Paul writes about a trip that he and Titus had made to Jerusalem. Center of Jewish life. The circumcision capital of the world! While they were there, a group of Jewish Christians found out that Titus was a Gentile and they*

discovered that Titus had not been circumcised! And they were furious. This is where the story gets interesting, perhaps even a little bit humorous. These Jewish Christians said to Paul, "Titus has to be circumcised." Paul said, "No, he doesn't." They said, "Yes, he does. Titus has to be circumcised right now."

If you understand the process of circumcision, you have to believe that Titus was very interested in the conversation. Imagine, you are a man who agrees to go on a mission trip and out of the blue someone says, "And by the way, someone needs to take a very sharp knife and circumcise you." You can almost hear Titus say, "Well, I wasn't really planning on being circumcised this trip. Maybe next time when I come back."

At great personal risk, Paul refuses to cave in to the legalistic circumcision group. He basically says, "I won't allow Titus to be crushed by legalism in an oppressive, mechanical, ritualistic approach to God. (Credit to commentary by Kevin/Sherry Harney pgs. 19-20)

This whole conversation brings up **the challenge of legalism and ritual** within the church community.

Many Jews had turned circumcision into a rule, something to make people right with God. They were replacing relationship with ritual/legalism.

In Greek the word, for circumcise is the word "**peritomae**" and literally means **to cut around**. The symbolism of circumcision, for the Jews, was the cutting away of that which separates personal intimacy. Circumcision was never the thing that made people right or intimate with God. It was a symbol or an expression that intimacy (relationship) with God already exists. Circumcision was intended as a symbol to reinforce the spiritual reality of closeness or intimacy with God.

What Paul is warning the church in Crete about is just as valid for us today: beware that your symbols and traditions, your rituals and your rule...don't replace

relationship with Jesus. We must be very careful when we start to tell people they need to follow our rules and our traditions in order to follow Jesus.

“The problem with organized religion is not that it is organized. The problem with organized religion is that it is religious – believing that it’s own set of rules, regulations, rituals and routines are the exclusive way to God.”

And it makes me wonder...for the first century Jews is it was kosher food, it was circumcision...but what are the systems, programs, the traditions, the rituals...that we, the church, are inclined to hang onto as our source of security, in place of an intimate relationship with Jesus?

We talked just a few weeks ago about the danger of turning the Gospel into our version of the salvation formula. We turn Christian faith into believing the right things (my list of things) and following the right process (my process) and never introduce people to actual personal relationship with Jesus.

Church attendance. You're Sunday morning routine, just becomes rote.

A prayer we said one time.

Our Bible reading schedule.

This is why in the BIC church when we talk about baptism. It is symbolic...an outward expression of an inward reality. Baptism is not what makes us right with God. Baptism is a celebratory marker of the inner reality we already know to be true...someone has a personal relationship with Jesus.

When we turn our traditions and rituals, into a form of righteousness...we're replacing personal relationship with legalism.

And if that's what following Jesus turns into, is it any wonder so many are disinterested in organized religion? Sometimes the church seems so bent on making sure everyone knows and follows the rules and traditions, we fail to introduce people

to Jesus. But it's only as we fall in love with Jesus that the rules and the traditions begin to make sense and carry meaning.

So, one of the warnings in Paul's letter to Titus is about this legalism mindset. Replacing relationship with empty religious rituals. But then second...let's also talk about

B. The importance of admonishing others.

¹⁰ For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. ¹¹ They must be silenced...

Or literally this word means their mouths must be "bridled" or "muzzled." The idea is not so much about "silence" as it is about preventing these folks from doing damage by their misguided teaching.

And if you jump to the end of chapter 2, after Paul has listed the various expectations of life-style for century Cretans, he reiterates this concept:

Titus 2:15 - ¹⁵ These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority.

When you live in community, and you can apply this to all different levels of community...family, work, school, church... Paul says, you are signing up for **shared accountability**.

There's all different kinds of words we use for this concept: Admonish, exhort, rebuke. The idea is...

When you're off the mark, you might need someone to let you know.

When I'm off the mark, I might need someone to let me know.

Just a couple of weeks we brought a few folks into church membership and we had them stand up front and commit to our membership covenant. If you were listening closely you remember hearing this line:

I covenant as a member of the Five Forks Church to be loyal to the congregation, to consent to instruction in Biblical doctrine,

And I know this is probably not a popular conversation in our world. On initially hearing this concept many people are uncomfortable. *I don't need someone else telling me how to live my life. You worry about yourself. I'll do me and you do you.*

And there are aspects of truth in each of those suggestions. But I think we would all agree that there is something significant about accountability, exhortation that helps us to change and grow into the person we want to be.

Suppose, you are picking your car up from the shop after a routine tune-up and the mechanic says, *"This car is in great shape. There is not a single problem with it—bumper to bumper. You have obviously taken great care of your vehicle."* You thank him and drive off—but later that day you hit the brakes—and the car keeps rolling. You rear-end another vehicle. Thanks to the airbags you're okay and so are the people in the other car, but an investigation shows the reason the brakes didn't work is you were out of brake fluid.

You go back to the mechanic, and you say, *"Hey—I was out of brake fluid! Why didn't you tell me?"* He replies, *"Well, I didn't want you to feel bad. Plus, to be honest, I was afraid you might get upset with me. I want this service area to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted."*

How would you feel about that? You wouldn't be happy would you? When you go to get your car checked—your not looking for a good feeling— you want the truth! A good feeling won't stop your car?

And you see this is why admonition and rebuke can be a helpful thing in community.

John Ortberg, says the place where we most need this kind of admonition is right here—in the church. Imagine going to a church where you hear, *“Don't worry if you can't control your anger. No one here will confront you about that because we don't like conflict around here. We don't want anyone to feel uncomfortable. And—don't worry if you commit sexual sins—everybody does it! There will be no talk about that in this place. By the way—in this church we don't worry about the injustice that is in this fallen world. Around here we prefer passivity. Oh—we might talk occasionally about sin, especially sin out there, but nobody in here will talk to you about your sin because then you wouldn't feel good.”*

And the goal is to walk out of this church feeling good!”

Would you like to attend a church like that—a church that just made you feel good—even if that involved ignoring the truth?

So, I'll admit to you there's a part of me reading Paul's letter to Titus that says, *“Hey Paul, just chill out a bit. Why are we talking about silencing a certain group of people and rebuking others within the church.”* People might get upset. But Paul understands that there is a helpful side to admonition and rebuke if the church is going to grow and mature. Learning to receive criticism well and grow from it may be one of the clearest signs of maturity in our lives.

I remember many years ago, when I was younger, I was in a spiritual discernment group. A group trying to help you discern your spiritual gifts. The leader said that they believed one my spiritual gifts was encouragement. I like to encourage other

people and make them feel good. But he said, you should be aware of the one danger associated with the gift of encouragement. He said, *“it’s that sometimes you won’t want to confront people who you believe need to be confronted and at times you may even encourage people to do things you think they shouldn’t do.”*

I was actually reading an article that suggested, that we can only see about 60% of our own physical body. What this means is that sometimes other people can see things about us that we don’t see.

And the same is true, when it comes to our character and spirituality. If I am going to grow and mature and change, then Scripture teaches, that I must be willing to listen to and receive that admonition of others well. This week, can I encourage you...find a trusted person and allow them to give you feedback and critique related to your job, your character, your habits.

Now there’s another side to this rebuke conversation as well. Just because admonition and rebuke can be helpful to us as we seek to grow and mature and live in community with others, this does not mean that we have a free license to say anything we want to other people in the name of speaking truth.

The effectiveness of our admonition and rebuke, is often dependent on many factors.

Let me just suggest a couple of them to us.

1. Relationship matters.

I think there’s something to be said for the group of people that Paul calls out in Titus. Remember the misguided group that he confronts are legalistic, Jewish Christians, not secular outsiders. This is the group of people that Paul comes from and knows the best.

Philippians 3 - If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Jesus seemed to reserve his harshest criticism as well for the legalistic religious communities. Just read Matthew 23, Jesus list of 7 woes...woe to you, all directed at the religious leaders...

¹³ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. ^[14] [b]

¹⁵ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

I think sometimes as Christians we seem very intent on rebuking people who are outside of the church. We are quick to judge those with whom we disagree with about beliefs or lifestyle. I just wonder if we wouldn’t be more effective in addressing the people in our own community, because we belong to this community.

The same is true when it comes to rebuke in our individual lives. If someone who is a stranger tries to rebuke me, I’m probably not listening to that person because I don’t think they really know me or understand me. It’s much more effective when someone who loves me and knows me, someone I trust, calls me out. Then I know they have my best interest at heart. So, rebuke, admonition seems more effective in trust relationships.

Second,

2. Start with encouragement.

Even as direct and blunt as Paul is in much of his writing, notice how he words verse 15...

Titus 2:15 - ¹⁵ These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority.

He follows this up right at the beginning of chapter 3 with these words...

...to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.

There is a time and place for rebuke and admonition. But it starts with the practice, that habit of encouragement, the desire for peaceable outcomes, consideration and gentleness towards the person you are addressing. Often when we encourage others first, it builds up trust, it builds up that relationship that we need in order address the matters of rebuke.

Paul also wrote to the church in Ephesus – **4:15 - ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.**

Situations that require admonition and confrontation require a great deal of thought about our tone and approach...with encouragement, with love. Remember the purpose of rebuke is not so that you can take pleasure in watching someone else squirm. If that's what going on in your heart, you're already at the wrong place and should not speaking up. Rebuke is always done with the best interest of the other person in mind. And so a habit of encouragement is the place to begin.

And then finally, one more suggestion when it comes to admonition and rebuke is that...

3. Face to face

Is almost always the best way to go. And I know your immediate thought, might be, yeah but Paul sent a letter, he didn't go face-to-face. Which is true. But he sent his letter to Titus and Titus was on the ground in Crete, face to face. Imagine if Paul and Titus had just written this letter and sent it off so that they didn't have to deal with the confrontation? That never leads to deeper relationships, trust, resolution.

In fact, Jesus had his own words of wisdom on this in Matthew 18 he says - ¹⁵ **"If your brother or sister^[b] sins,^[c]** (write them a nasty email, then go tell all of your family and friends and be sure to post something publicly on facebook about it.) **go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.**

It takes a great amount of courage. It takes humility. It takes integrity to meet with someone face to face, but it's often the way that leads to the best solution and reconciliation in matters of rebuke. So, can I just encourage you this week: If there is a matter that you need to address with someone. First, consider your **relationship**. Make sure that you have created this habit in your interaction that is **encouraging and positive and loving**. And then be willing to speak **face to face**.

It's pretty incredible, isn't it? That a letter written almost 2,000 years ago in a culture very different from our own, still has such practical wisdom for our lives today?