

Titus 1:9–16

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake. One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth. Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.

Clinging to the Faithful Word

Verse 9 adds the seventh and climactic quality of the overseer: holding fast — Darby renders it *clinging to* — the faithful word according to the doctrine taught. The word fast in old English could mean speedy; here it means exactly the opposite — firm, unyielding grip. Clinging implies not just possession but intensity of hold, and dependency. In natural life we might think of clinging as a sign of weakness; clinging to the word of God is the very opposite — it is the strength of the overseer's whole ministry.

The purpose is double: that he may be able by sound doctrine both to encourage and to refute the gainsayers. The word sound — healthy — runs through these epistles to Timothy and Titus. Healthy teaching is what the people of God need to be fed on; it is what makes for healthy Christians. The overseer must be able to do both: to build up those who are willing, and to stop those who resist. The latter requires a particularly clear and firm grasp of what the truth actually says.

Many Disorderly — Especially They of the Circumcision

Verse 10 identifies the opposition: many unruly — disorderly, Darby translates — vain talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision. The word disorderly is one of the keynotes of the whole epistle, and its appearance here shows that this kind of opposition is precisely what produces and sustains the disorder that Titus was sent to set right. Religious disorder — teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of base gain — is the particular form of disorderliness in view, not merely social or secular confusion.

The Judaizing tendency was not limited to Jewish believers. Even Gentile professors followed suit, and there has always been a pull toward importing Jewish categories into Christianity. The so-called Jewish roots of Christianity movement represents exactly this in a contemporary form — a blurring of the distinction between the church and Israel, which leads inevitably to importation of Jewish observances and a weakening of the truth of the one body. Covenant theology makes precious little distinction between Israel and the church, and it is correspondingly easy to Judaize on that theological foundation.

Their mouths must be stopped — the must is emphatic. These things cannot be permitted to go on unchecked, because they subvert whole houses. Unhindered error always finds its way to those who are least able to resist it: the children, the wives, the weak. The question to ask of what is being spoken is not what is wrong with it but what is right with it — is it profitable, is it edifying, is it

bringing souls closer to God and to His word? If not, it must be met.

This Witness Is True — The Apostle's Directness

A native prophet — the poet Epimenides, around 600 BC — had said that Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. The apostle cites this and says simply: this witness is true. He does not soften it, does not make it into a riddle, does not treat it as an occasion for literary cleverness. He takes the words at face value and says it is true.

There is an additional lesson buried in those words from Epimenides. He was a Cretan himself. A man who says that all Cretans are always liars is in a logical bind — if he is telling the truth, then as a Cretan he must be lying, and so the statement is false; but if he is lying, then what he says is true. The Greeks were very clever and would have savoured the puzzle. The apostle refuses to play that game. He cuts through the lightness and the levity and says: this witness is true. That is what the truth does — it speaks straight. Bending of words, double meanings, the making of points by means of clever ambiguities, is not the character of the truth of God. The truth is a straight thing, and those who carry it speak plainly.

Rebuke Them Sharply — That They May Be Sound in the Faith

The purpose of the sharp rebuke is not punishment but restoration: *that they may be sound in the faith*. These were likely believers among whom the characteristics of the Cretan flesh were asserting themselves — the things of the old man that should have been put off. The sound faith is the spring of godliness. Sound doctrine taken into the soul, becoming part of the life, coming out in energy and display — that is what displaces the old man and his ways. Where there is a reluctance to hear sound doctrine, where the word doctrinal has become a mild term of disapproval for those who are thought to be too theoretical, that is

a symptom of the very disorder that verse 11 describes.

Not Giving Heed to Jewish Fables and Commandments of Men

Verse 14 specifies the content of the disorder: Jewish fables and commandments of men that turn from the truth. Religious imagination dressed up as teaching, human traditions given the force of divine commandment — these are what turn men from the truth. The rabbinical writings are full of exactly this kind of thing: a vast accumulation of human opinion and imagination layered over and eventually obscuring the word of God. The result is that men become occupied with externals and rituals, fastidious about the minute details of what is forbidden or permitted, while inwardly their minds and consciences are defiled.

Unto the Pure All Things Are Pure

Verse 15 has been misused to justify what it was written to condemn. Taken out of its context, the words *unto the pure all things are pure* have been used to justify doing things which are impure on the grounds that one's own mind is pure. That is exactly backwards from the verse's meaning. The context is Jewish dietary regulations and ritual distinctions. To the one who is genuinely pure before God — the true believer — a piece of meat is simply a piece of meat; it does not carry ritual defilement. But to those who are inwardly defiled — whose minds and consciences are stained by unbelief and self-will — nothing is pure, because they have turned everything, even food and drink, into a system of self-righteousness and religious control.

What God has declared pure is pure. What God has declared impure is impure. A thing does not become pure because a person thinks it so. The whole passage has to do with the Jewish fables and commandments of men — the ritual system that was being imposed. The genuine believer is not under that system and is not defiled by what it declares impure.

They Profess That They Know God — But in Works They Deny Him

The closing indictment of chapter 1 is sharp: *they profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate*. The Pharisee is the enduring type of this: outwardly religious, whited sepulchres, full within of dead men's bones. Their minds and consciences are defiled. Because the conscience is the gate through which the word of God enters the soul — if the conscience is closed, the word stops at the head and does not become part of the life.

The word reprobate here means found worthless — found, not decreed. Reprobation in Scripture always follows a manifested course; it is never the prior determining cause of the state. Hardening follows disobedience; blindness follows rejection of light; God giving over to a reprobate mind (Romans 1, repeated three times) follows an established pattern of refusing what God has made known. These persons are found worthless for every good work because they have systematically turned from the truth and toward Jewish fables and commandments of men. Compare 2 Timothy 3:17: the man of God is *thoroughly furnished unto every good work* by the word of God. These two stand in exact contrast — one is furnished for every good work, the other is worthless for every good work. The difference is the word of God, received and held fast or rejected and replaced.

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