

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 17 – Titus

Like Timothy, Titus was another young friend and travelling companion of the apostle Paul. Titus had, however, greater physical stamina than Timothy and seems to have been better suited for confronting opposition. This letter to Titus was written shortly after 1 Timothy, and, if it seems that these two letters have a lot in common, it is probably because both young men had to face similar troubles in the very difficult churches they were seeking to pastor. Paul is eager to encourage them and, at the same time, to challenge them to press on.

We first learn of Titus in Antioch. He was a Greek who was converted to faith in Christ under the ministry of Paul. There were some Jewish Christians who wanted him to observe Old Testament ceremonial laws and even insisted that it was necessary to salvation to do so. Paul was opposed to that thinking, and, taking Titus and others with him from Antioch, they went to Jerusalem to attend the first Jerusalem council where this matter would be settled once and for all in 50 A.D. In spite of the initial division among the delegates on this subject, it was finally decided that Gentiles, too, could be converted, that those who were made new in Christ received the same salvation as converted Jews, and that they would not have to be circumcised or submit to ceremonial regulations.

On Paul's third missionary journey, while he stayed for an extended time in Ephesus, he sent Titus to deal with problems which had been brewing in Corinth. The problems there had to do with serious divisions among the members of that church, a case of gross immorality, irreverence in worship and false teaching. The fact that Titus was able to calm those troubled waters and was an instrument of God to help bring revival to that congregation, all of which is positively reported in 2 Corinthians, is a testimony to his character and ministerial skills.

(Please note: Where we read that Titus has departed for Dalmatia, 2 Timothy 4:10, that is not to be understood that he had, like Demas, forsaken Paul in order to take up with the world, but that he had most likely been dispatched to another mission. Paul is expressing the discomfort and loneliness of his circumstances in 2 Timothy, but we should not read more into it than what we are told in 4:9-16.)

Paul would at some point in time visit the island of Crete. It seems that a number of Cretans were converted under Peter's preaching at Pentecost, but were further strengthened under Paul when he came and ministered the Word to them where they lived. The apostle later departed to the mainland, leaving Titus behind to complete that work. Paul now writes this letter, and this is where we find Titus, fulfilling his own ministry among the Christians of Crete, seeking to establish churches there and further develop their outreach to the world around them.

It should be noted that the mission to Crete was particularly difficult and had its own peculiar problems. As an island in the Mediterranean Sea, it was remote and somewhat cut off from the rest of the world. The inhabitants had their own culture, for instance, and were notorious for being liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons (1:12). Paul did not dismiss that assessment, but acknowledged it as true (1:13). As one commentator put it, "Such was the national, environmental heritage of most of the Cretan believers with whom Titus had to cope."

Many in today's world would judge such statements as racist. That has become a standard slur, in fact, to virtue signal something as racist even where not a trace of racism can be found. The intended purpose of a judgment like that is to pit whites against everybody else, which of course is a racist thing to do in itself.

But let us examine this charge against the Cretans carefully. First, sin entered the world through Adam, and it has affected all of us – corrupting our nature and distorting us as image-bearers of God – it has affected us as a result of our being born of Adam and of his original sin being imputed to us. Second, we are all affected as well and to varying degrees by our culture, by our own culture, and even those people who try to avoid these subtle but often harmful influences are never as successful in doing so as they think they are. If we are taught to lie, for instance, and if that is virtually all we ever see being done by others all around us, then we will probably proceed down that same path ourselves, not placing any real value on truth, but viewing the lie as a small thing and an effective way to get what we want. This is a cultural flaw which is aided and abetted by our fallen nature in Adam, and there is nothing racist in acknowledging it to be so.

The Christians in Crete had a new nature, to be sure, they had been made a new creation in Christ. Like all Christians, however, they still had to mortify the old man, to put their old ways to death, and if we understand anything of ourselves,

believer, we should know that that is a long and arduous process. It can be very difficult to put away old sins, especially those sins which we learned when we were young and have become entrenched by habitual practice. We need the means of grace, public and private, plus the good example and ongoing encouragement of other Christians to help us.

Chapter 1 of Titus is therefore devoted to church organization – to the dire and very immediate need for it in light of the above cultural problems – church organization, especially the appointment of suitable men to serve as elders. Since Titus could not be there forever, or even everywhere at the same time, the presence of other trained elders in each house-church would help prevent false teachers from having opportunity to preach and exercise their wicked influence on the believers.

Paul first lists the qualifications for the office of elder (1:5-9), and then the kind of opposition each one could expect to face as he sought to serve in that capacity (1:10-16). The false teachers these elders would be up against would be Jews, primarily, yet not this time legalistic Judaizers who were a problem to the Galatian churches and in so many other places, but wreckless souls, rather, who were caught up in every kind of moral perversity and who sought to take advantage of others for dishonest gain.

Chapter 2 goes on to emphasize the need for sound doctrine. This is really the main theme of the entire letter – sound doctrine – teaching it is something that Titus is to make a primary focus of his ministry, and maintaining it is something the elders would have to be diligent to do if they were to serve the Lord and His people effectively in their role as office-bearers.

The purpose of sound doctrine was never to be considered a sufficient end in itself, as if it had no practical value in view, but was always intended, as it should be today, to bring about much needed change in the lives of believers, to instruct and encourage them in the pursuit of holiness, and to do so for both old and young alike, for men and women, for bond and free. Sound doctrine is meant to be adorned with good works (2:1-10).

People too often assume that there is a contradiction between the teaching of Paul and that of James, that good works were not of any great interest to Paul, and that, as he saw it, they have nothing to do with one's salvation. That

assumption is fundamentally wrong and is not the teaching of the letter before us. Paul taught that, while we are justified (declared righteous) by faith apart from works, it is not by faith without works – or, to put that another way, the faith that saves is a faith that works (Ephesians 2:8-10) – a teaching with which James was in full agreement. Good works are not the means of salvation, no, but they are the intended end of it, what one is saved for, and, if those works are truly good and pleasing to God, they are the genuine fruit and confirming evidence of a true and living faith. They are the undeniable proof of God working in His people to will and to do His good pleasure. Without such works faith is dead (James 2:17,18). Rightly understood, therefore, we cannot say that works have nothing to do with one's salvation. Christ redeemed His people, not merely to cover their sins, but as well to supply the grace they need to walk in paths of righteousness, to make them zealous for good works, until they appear with Him in glory (2:11-15).

Chapter 3 continues the call to holy living (3:1-8). Are you a Christian, dear reader, someone who has a saving interest in Jesus Christ? If so, believer, rejoice that you have been so equipped to serve the Lord, that you have been given the Holy Spirit who helps you in all your weaknesses – but do not stop there – commit yourself to keeping in step with the Spirit and to staying on track with the way everlasting! Those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works, writes Paul. These, we are told, are good and profitable to men.

On the other side of this call to holy living is a warning to avoid foolish disputes which are unprofitable, and with that the elders are given instruction on how to bring contentious members under discipline (3:9-11).

Finally, Titus is summoned to meet Paul in Nicopolis, but only when the apostle has found someone to replace him. On account of their need, which is not specified but has, apparently, greater urgency, Zenas and Apollos are to be sent out on their journey, too (3:12-15).

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