

The Intersection Of Truth And Godliness

Titus 1:1-4

August 29, 2021

I wonder if you are ever tempted, as I am, to skip past the introduction section of Paul's letters.

Perhaps we view the opening of Paul's letters as the equivalent of the opening sentences of an email...

There are some obligatory pleasantries that precede the primary message of the correspondence.

With Paul's letter to Titus, we must fight the urge to skip ahead.

Some vitally important biblical themes are touched upon in the introduction as a way to provide a framework for the rest of the letter.

Titus is providing pastoral leadership in Crete, and Paul's letter is designed to help Titus to put certain things "**into order**" as it relates to the local church (1:5).

Crete, you may be aware, is an island located approximately 200 miles south of mainland Greece.

As we wade through this letter, we learn that Cretans in the 1st century were not regarded as sophisticated or as morally upright people.

Accordingly, Paul writes Titus in order to impart to the followers of Christ living in Crete that there is a particular manner in which they ought to order their lives.

But first, there is the introduction—4 verses in our Bibles, but in the Greek the introduction is one long sentence, which begins:

“Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1).

We live in a day and age where self-identification has become primary.

In our day, there are seemingly innumerable ways in which we can identify ourselves in relation to our preferences, habits, and lifestyles.

Did you know that there was a time when Paul (then named Saul) identified himself in a number of different ways?

Paul outlines a kind of *spiritual resume* in the opening verses of chapter 3 in his letter to the Philippians.

Paul identifies himself as a “**circumcised**” Jew.

He identifies himself as a member “**of the tribe of Benjamin**”.

He refers to himself as “**a Hebrew of Hebrews**”.

In reference to the Law, Paul identifies as “**a Pharisee**”.

But all of this changes the day Paul meets Christ.

When Paul meets Christ, on the road to Damascus, he sets aside these identifying marks.

Paul tells the Philippians, “**whatever gain I had, I now count as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss**

because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him” (Phil. 3:7-8).

Notice how the “**rubbish**” to which Paul refers is *not his sinful pursuits, but rather his spiritual credentials.*

Paul came to understand that the most valuable thing in his life is his relationship with Jesus Christ.

It’s not even a close comparison for Paul.

For Paul, there was a “**surpassing worth**” to knowing Christ, and being found in Him.

If ever there was a time for present-day followers of Christ to scrutinize how we self-identify, it is now.

In our day there is pressure to be *proudly nationalistic*—there is pressure to say, “I am a proud Bahamian”, or “I am a proud American”, “Canadian”, “British”, and so on.

And then along comes the former Hebrew of Hebrews saying, “I count my national and ethnic roots as **rubbish** in comparison to the surpassing value of being found in Christ.”

During election seasons we are tempted, I think, to detail our national allegiance even further...

“I am FNM”... “I am PLP”... “I am a Democrat” ... “I am a Republican”.

It is in our nature to align ourselves in particular tribes.

Paul’s message, however, is that *in Christ all other tribal distinctions become secondary.*

We might even say, as Paul did, that all other tribal distinctions are “**rubbish**” in comparison to identifying oneself with Jesus Christ.

I am not suggesting that you don’t need to vote on Election Day.

It is not necessary for you to quit your sorority, your service club, or your social club.

I don't recommend that you skip all of your family gatherings.

I do, however, want you to consider this:

When you come to the minds of other people, what do they think of first? [R]

Do others identify you primarily by your political views?

Do others primarily see you as a member of a particular organization?

Are you known as a kind of activist?

Are you known primarily by your occupation?

Are you known primarily by some athletic or musical talent that you possess?

How do others identify you?

How do you identify yourself?

There are so many ways Paul could have identified himself to the Christians living in Crete.

Paul's resume was comprehensive, and yet he distills it down to what matters most:

“Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1).

We must follow suit.

It is my privilege to be Allie's husband and Anya's father.

It is my delight to be a pastor within a Presbyterian denomination.

And yet, my greatest honour is to identify as “Bryn MacPhail, servant of God; follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Dear friends, will you primarily identify yourself with Christ—above all else?

Not only am I fond of Paul's precision with how he identifies himself; I am also fond of the fact that he tethers *a purpose* to his identity.

Paul is who he is for the benefit of other people!

“Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness” (1:1).

We live in a highly individualistic age.

Even as it pertains to our faith, there is often a drift toward a “Jesus and me” posture, as though you can isolate your relationship with Jesus from the wider Body of Christ.

An individualistic approach to Christianity doesn't pay attention to the spiritual health of others.

An individualistic approach to Christianity tunes into a podcast, or attends a Sunday service, primarily concerned with whether or not “I am being fed”.

Paul had a very different orientation.

Paul’s focus was on others.

Paul saw himself as God’s servant ***for* the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness.**

Here is the intersection of **truth** and **godliness**.

One is supposed to lead to the other.

Implied in this statement is a warning against two kinds of living.

Paul is warning, firstly, against persons who possess some knowledge of the Scriptures, but whose behaviour remains unchanged.

Commenting on this verse, Pastor Alistair Begg notes that there is “a gap between their *creed* and their *conduct*.”

Or, we might say that certain persons do not “*practice* what they *preach*”.

Paul reminds Titus—and he reminds us—that an increase in our **knowledge of the truth** is designed to overflow into increased **godliness**.

What we *believe* ought to set a course for how we *behave*.

Secondly, Paul is warning against those who imagine they can lead a life pleasing to God apart from having a strong apprehension of what the Bible teaches.

There are many people who want to “be good” and “do good”, but on their own terms.

We are tempted to be good to others in ways that suit us and make us feel good.

To my shame, I recall the Christmas when one of my gifts to Allie was an amazing pasta maker.

On the surface, you could argue that this was a really great gift...

But dig a little deeper and it becomes obvious that Bryn buys a pasta maker for Allie so that Bryn can enjoy fresh pasta!

In this instance, I haven't done something pleasing to Allie as much as I have done something pleasing for Bryn.

To advance in our capacity to please God we must grow in our understanding of that which pleases God.

So, we have Paul identifying primarily with Christ, and for the benefit of God's people he commits to conveying God's **truth** in a manner that **accords with**—or leads to—greater **godliness**.

Now, we may ask, “*Godliness to what end?*”

Is our growth in godliness merely to please God, or does Paul have something else in view?

He does.

Paul has eternity in view.

Our acquisition of the truth and our growth in godliness has in view the **“hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in His Word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour”** (1:2-3).

Our acquisition of the truth and our growth in godliness is preparatory for our eternal fellowship with God.

Paul uses the phrase **“in hope of eternal life”**, and I want to make certain we understand what he means by this.

When I use the word “hope” I’m simply noting the outcome that I desire.

I might say, “I *hope* the Toronto Maple Leafs win the hockey game.”

Or, “I *hope* that beef tenderloin is being served for dinner”—and I use the word *hope* without having any certainty of the outcome.

This is *not* how Paul uses the word.

When “**hope**” is grounded in God’s faithfulness, and is tethered to His promises, “**hope**” is something *certain*.

For Paul, it is an *expectant hope*.

The best analogy I can think of comes from our dog, Snickers.

I have a pretty good idea most days when Allie will return home from work, and so I will often say to Snickers, “Mama will be home soon.”

As soon as I say those words, Snickers promptly heads to the front window and waits expectantly until Allie gets home.

You see Snickers has come to understand the connection between the spoken promise of Allie’s return and her actual return.

Once I say the word, for Snickers, it becomes a certainty that Allie will be home soon.

Why do I share that?

For the Christian, our eternal life is a certainty—God has promised it to those who have believed in His Son.

And the Christian equivalent to sitting at the front window waiting for our Master, is immersing in the Scriptures and committing to godly living.

Snickers proximity to the front window doesn't make Allie come home; it's simply how she prepares herself according to what has been promised.

Similarly, we don't gain eternal life by becoming an expert in the Bible or by growing in godliness, but this is the most suitable way to prepare ourselves for eternity with Christ.

Paul writes to Titus in an effort to prepare the people of Crete for eternity.

My burden is to prepare you for the same.

Pledge yourselves to Christ above all else.

Seek the truth from God's Word.

Pursue Christ-likeness.

Prepare yourself for the return of your Master, Jesus Christ.

Amen.