

Dangers, Toils, and Snares

Titus 1:10-16

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Many years ago, there was a series of movies made about a fictional archaeologist and adventurer named Indiana Jones. Harrison Ford played the hero who often found himself in trouble, but managed to figure out the clues that would lead him not only to the treasure, but to avoid the inevitable traps and pitfalls he would have to face. I always enjoyed these moments when he would cleverly find ways to avoid the traps others had set for him.

In our passage today that's kind of what Paul is doing. He has begun telling Titus that he needs to set up the church in Crete and select some solid leaders, but now he will also tell him the pitfalls he needs to be prepared to face. He not only names these pitfalls for Titus but gives him guidance on how best to conquer them. As we look at the pitfalls Titus faced, we'll discover that the dangers facing Titus are not much different from the dangers we face today. Thankfully, the remedy is the same as well.

Rebellious People

At the end of verse 9, which we looked at last week, Paul told Titus he should show those who oppose wholesome teaching where they are wrong. Now Paul talks about why they are wrong and how to approach them. We see this in verses 10-11.

¹⁰ For there are many rebellious people who engage in useless talk and deceive others. This is especially true of those who insist on circumcision for salvation.

¹¹ They must be silenced, because they are turning whole families away from the truth by their false teaching. And they do it only for money. (Titus 1:10-11, NLT)

Paul said the problem facing Titus was "rebellious people who engage in useless talk and deceive others". This statement is heavy with meaning. **First, Paul described these false teachers as rebellious.** Paul didn't call them ignorant, but rebellious. That is an important distinction. The issue wasn't that these false teachers hadn't been correctly taught the truth (as had been the case with Apollos in Acts 18), but that they had chosen to rebel against it. This is a far more dangerous issue. Ignorance can be corrected by education and instruction. Rebellion is a completely different animal.

This is the issue we often see in our own culture. Many of the false teachers of our day are not ignorant of Christian teachings or the Bible. Most are not nearly as learned as they would imagine, but many false teachers know a fair bit about the Bible and historical Christianity. Their issue is not ignorance. Rather, they have concluded that they do not like what the Bible teaches, so they find ways to twist it to suit their needs.

This can show up in various ways. Some claim that things were translated incorrectly, and they concoct new ways of interpreting a text or specific words to give them an entirely different meaning. (I should note that few of these people are actually fluent enough in these languages to offer alternate translations.) Others try to discredit the

Bible as merely a work of human beings and claim that the principles taught there are just a collection of the wisdom of ancient men and nothing more. They conclude that our modern, enlightened minds have seen that not all these commands are good. Or they simply try to make the Bible align itself with whatever the current trends in our society are. There are many today who are rebellious. This was the same issue Titus faced in Crete. The people knew the truth, but refused to submit to it.

Second, he said they engage in useless talk. These false teachers were great at talking...but they didn't say anything of substance. Rather than talking to people about things that matter (like submission to Christ), they would talk about anything else. Maybe they talked eloquently about the finer points of theology and philosophy while ignoring the whole point of trying to know who God really is. Or maybe they devolved into talking about myths and bizarre interpretations of scripture. Those may be new and interesting to people, but it doesn't make them true or important.

This happens often today with Bible influencers. They try to make esoteric connections in the Bible that seem new and novel. The implication is that they have discovered something that no other believer has discovered in the preceding 2,000 years. Sometimes this is because of their supposed knowledge of original languages, obscure references, or invented "facts". Why do these false teachers do this? Because people are always eager for something new and exciting. Often, people are looking for exciting new knowledge instead of looking to dig deeply into how to apply what they have already been taught. We must be careful not to be people who are simply looking for what is new; we must instead be looking for what is true.

Useless talk can also take the form of moving people away from the things of God and to issues of secondary importance. Many false teachers spend more time talking about the ills of the culture wars or participating in politics in a certain way than they do about Jesus! While our faith should certainly impact the way we live, the way we vote, and the things that we value in our world, the gospel should be central to all of them. When we are trying to win people to our position rather than win them to Christ, we have become false teachers. Those who do this have conflated their cultural convictions or political underpinnings with the truth of God's Word. And at that point their talk becomes useless.

Third, their rebellious, useless talk deceived others. This is the crux of the issue. Paul said this kind of false teaching leads people away from the truth. Paul said they must be silenced because they were leading whole families away from the truth. False teachers must be confronted because of what's at stake.

Paul gave Titus a particular example. Some were insisting on circumcision as a condition of salvation. These people were claiming to be Christians while telling people that the only way to experience Christ's salvation was to become a Jew and follow all the Jewish regulations, including being circumcised, keeping kosher, and following all the other laws associated with Judaism.

Paul knew this was a distortion of the truth. The gospel is not a matter of obedience to the law. We can't measure up to that standard. We all know that intuitively. We have messed up many times. Our only hope is to throw ourselves upon God's mercy and grace and ask for His forgiveness. Nothing more is required of us—not circumcision or anything else we might try to add. Paul understood that the notion of trying to earn salvation is a very tempting one, however, and it can lead many astray.

People still distort the gospel like this today. They teach that you cannot be saved unless you trust in Jesus *AND*. Trust in Jesus and get baptized, or become a member, or attend church every week, or give a certain amount of money, or speak in tongues, or stop living a certain way. People will say that you can't be a Christian if you drink, smoke, dance, watch certain types of movies, swear, play cards, or wear certain types of clothing. They will declare that real Christians must vote a certain way, boycott certain products, or support (or oppose) certain causes.

Now, it's possible that Christians *should* do these things. Many of these things are good things. But the moment we give people the impression that these things are what saves them, we are distorting the gospel! When we tell people that because they do something we think they shouldn't (or even that the Bible says they shouldn't), we are making salvation dependent on performance—just like the Judaizers were doing in Crete. Our focus should be on submission to Christ and to his Word. After that, the Holy Spirit will help people work through those other issues on their own.

Paul pointed out that for many, the motivation for false teaching is money. That is still true. If you will take controversial positions and keep churning out new content that draws attention, clicks, likes, and shares, you can make money while pretending to preach Christ. It's an incredibly tempting thing to do. But we must be careful not to allow ourselves to water down our faith in search of fame or fortune. And Paul tells us we must silence those who are doing exactly that, because they will lead others astray.

Dealing with Cretans

Paul begins to frame the challenge facing Titus in verses 12-14,

¹² Even one of their own men, a prophet from Crete, has said about them, "The people of Crete are all liars, cruel animals, and lazy gluttons." ¹³ This is true. So reprimand them sternly to make them strong in the faith. ¹⁴ They must stop listening to Jewish myths and the commands of people who have turned away from the truth. (Titus 1:12-14, NLT)

Paul quotes an ancient poet (who the Cretans referred to as a prophet) named Epimenides, who described the people of Crete as liars, cruel animals, and lazy gluttons. If Paul had said that, everyone would have been up in arms. But Paul was just quoting from a man who had lived on Crete. Nonetheless, Paul agreed with his assessment, saying this is true.

Paul gives Titus the prescription for how to stem the tide of false teaching in Crete: reprimand them sternly to make them strong in the faith.

Paul did not give Titus the option to just sit back. If he did nothing, these false teachers would continue to teach false doctrine! So, Titus needed to rebuke them. And Paul told him to do so sternly. Titus was not to be wishy-washy about what is right and wrong but should directly confront those who are teaching false doctrine.

For some people (like me), this is an important command. I am, by nature, a generally non-confrontational person. I much prefer to keep the peace than to fight. Most of the time I can convince myself that much of what we fight over really isn't worth it. Paul is reminding people like me that sometimes it is necessary to offer a stern reprimand, because that is the only way to stop the evil from spreading. Sometimes it's necessary to run the risk of offending someone prevent others being led astray.

Some of you, however, do not need much invitation to fight. You enjoy arguing or confrontations. If you fall into that category, you face an altogether different kind of danger: you can become a jerk! Paul is not telling us that we should jump on every little issue we see around us and try to fix everyone (which we often define as getting them to think like us). Notice what he says is the goal. We should sternly rebuke people "to make them strong in the faith."

This means our approach has to be stern, but gentle and loving at the same time. When we come to someone with a big list of their failures, they are unlikely to listen to us. A better approach is to come to people humbly but firmly and seek to show them where they are wrong and what they can do to get back on the right track.

Here are some suggestions about how to go about this.

1. Talk directly to the person rather than about them. Many times, we want to involve others instead of going directly to the person with whom we have the issue. Biblically, our first step should always be to go to the person first.
2. Make sure you understand what they are saying. Take time to listen. Ask them to explain their perspective. Sometimes the issue is not false teaching but a failure to fully grasp what a person is saying.
3. Come with scripture. Your opinion means very little. Showing a person where scripture corrects their view is the only real basis for rebuke.
4. If they remain unwilling to change, involve a pastor or other church leader in hopes that they will listen to them.
5. If that still doesn't work (and the others are also convinced of false teaching) then the church at large should also be involved, both to try to bring the person back into the fold and to protect the others from the false teaching.

Paul does not mince words. He does not water down his assessment of those who are leading others astray. But he also kept his goal in mind. He didn't want to destroy the false teachers, but to make them strong in the faith. This must always be the goal we take when we seek to correct another believer. It should not be about us or our pride, but about the good of the other person and those they may influence.

Pure vs. Defiled

In this last section of chapter 1, Paul makes a provocative statement.

¹⁵ Everything is pure to those whose hearts are pure. But nothing is pure to those who are corrupt and unbelieving, because their minds and consciences are corrupted. ¹⁶ Such people claim they know God, but they deny him by the way they live. They are detestable and disobedient, worthless for doing anything good. (Titus 1:15-16, NLT)

Paul is saying the same thing he has said in other places—that a person who is genuinely living their lives seeking to please God is acceptable to God even if they do things we might choose not to. God is gracious to each of us and leads us in different ways at different times. It's possible that another person may be at a place where their faith can handle certain things and yours can't, or vice versa. Or maybe you've come to a place where you've seen the evil of something you once thought was ok. Paul is trying to remind us to be gracious with other believers who are genuinely trying to live their lives for Christ. We can discuss and debate with one another, but we must always treat each other with grace, knowing we've been made pure in Christ.

But Paul also gives a corollary to us. Those whose hearts are corrupt and unbelieving (those who are not believers in Christ, whether they claim to be or not) are corrupted in their minds and consciences. They cannot please God.

Why does this matter? Because sometimes we look to people who are not Christians for wisdom. We conclude that since they are right on certain things, they are worth listening to and can be trusted. This is very true in the political arena today, but it shows up in all sorts of places. Paul reminds us that just because they got the right answer on a few issues, or because they are saying things we like, it doesn't mean they are trustworthy. Their minds, hearts, and consciences are still corrupted.

It's kind of like trying to solve a physics problem while using the wrong formula. You may get the right answer sometimes, but if you're using the wrong formula (even if it's close to being right), you're going to be wrong most of the time. Those who are looking for answers somewhere other than in God's Word are not worth following. They will absolutely lead you astray. Their lives will demonstrate whether they are truly believers or not. A person who is not a believer is not worth following. Not only can we be led astray, but many others will be too. We must guard carefully against false teaching, no matter where we encounter it.

Conclusion

So, given Paul's instructions to Titus about how to guard against the false teaching of his day, how do we do the same in our own day?

First, be discerning about what you allow to influence you. Much of our world today is focused on trying to influence us. Most of the social media we use today don't cost us anything. We don't pay for Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc. There's a common saying that if you're not paying for a service, it's because you are the product. Much of our

world today is tailored to get us to engage, to sell us things, to gain more of our attention. And many of these things are tailored to subtly influence the way we think and act. So be very discerning about the messages you see each day and how they influence you. Start with the obvious things: what teachers or commentators do we listen to or follow? Are their motives to lead you along the path of righteousness, or is there another motive there? Be careful about following people who may have ulterior motives, because it makes it very hard to trust what they say.

Similarly, think about how the media you consume influences how you think. How does the music you listen to change you? What messages are communicated in those songs? The same goes for movies and TV shows and the short-form media present in our lives today too. Many of these things are designed to subtly move us in a direction (usually away from God) by desensitizing us or convincing us that these things are “normal” or even good. Be discerning in what you allow to influence you.

Second, study God’s Word so you can recognize falsehood. We’re surrounded by all sorts of false messages. The best remedy to falsehood is a steady dose of the truth. It’s not enough to listen to a good Bible teacher once a week. You need a diet that is heavy in messages from God, because you are inundated with messages from the world as well. If we want to be able to know right from wrong, we must immerse ourselves in God’s Word. Once we know what is right, the things that are wrong will stick out to us like a sore thumb.

Third, be willing to confront false teaching with love. Sometimes we avoid talking to someone who is teaching the wrong things and correct them. But that is not only harmful to them, but to everyone they impact as well. Confrontation is uncomfortable and fraught with danger. We don’t want to lose friendships or harm another person. But sometimes the most loving thing we can do is confront falsehood. Until we do, the person won’t know they’re on the wrong path! But we must do so in love. We cannot blast away at people or approach them with selfish motives. We must always confront false teaching with a desire to help them become strong in the faith. If we approach people with any other motive, we may end up doing more harm than good. Spend time praying to make sure your heart is in the right place. Study God’s Word to make sure you know what is true. Then talk to them (rather than about them), seeking to put them back on the right path. That is how we bring false teachers back and protect others from following their mistakes.

This is a strange passage in many ways because it feels like Paul is describing the culture in which we live today. But he was talking to Titus, trying to interact with a completely different culture 2000 years ago. That should be a lesson—there will always be those who deny the truth and seek to distort it. So we must always be on guard, seeking the source of genuine truth for ourselves, and helping to confront, correct, and even restore those who are led astray. If we do nothing, we should not be surprised when people (maybe even us) are pushed further and further from God.

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