

# Not Fruitless

Titus 3:8-15 | Bryce Beale | October 21, 2018

They say that Thales, the first philosopher history knows, was once gazing straight upward, studying the stars. And stepping backward, he slipped into a well. “Ha,” laughed a little servant girl who saw the incident, “you are eager to know the things in the heavens but have failed to notice what was just behind you and right at your feet.”<sup>1</sup>

Some have leveled the same charge against Christians. “You Christians,” they say, “are so heavenly minded that you’re no earthly good. You spend so much time gazing up into the heavens that you don’t notice the things happening on earth right around you.”<sup>2</sup>

The charge is made in regard to science: we are so engaged with an outdated book, that we fail to face the facts of modern science. Or again, it appears in regard to morality: we are so devoted to an ancient set of ethics, that we will not accept the moral changes of society today, like gender fluidity or women’s rights.

But maybe the most piercing charge is in regard to charity: they say we spend so much of our time and energy attending to religious rituals, gazing up at the stars as it were, that we miss the need of our next-door neighbors. When the early Christians would not hail the Roman emperor or attend the patriotic festivals, they were labeled anti-social; the same charge is laid at our feet. We are thought to care very much about the Bible and about our churches, but very little about the actual welfare of our society.

Well, what is our defense?

First, we can accept whatever blame is due. We have not always cared as we should care; we have, in fact, done more poorly at times than our opponents can possibly know. As those who drink the saving waters of the gospel, we have nothing to hide here; we have often failed, and just as often we have been forgiven and received grace, upon repentance, by our loving Father, through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

That is our first defense, the blood of Jesus.

But we must not stop there, for the second point of our defense is this: anyone who thinks that true Christianity makes a person less likely to

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, cited in *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, 2nd ed., trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd, ed. Patricia Curd (Indianapolis, IN; Cambridge, England: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), Kindle ed., 13.

<sup>2</sup> This saying originated with Oliver Wendell Holmes.

benefit his neighbors and society simply has the facts wrong. Yes, some Christians are less likely to be useful than others, but do not blame that on their Christianity; blame it on the parts of their life yet to be brought under the sway of their Christianity. Blame it on their remaining atheism.

For the teaching of Christ, when taken into the heart by faith, puts a man's hands to work on earth. It is like a fresh battery that, when snapped into place, makes us start to move. We found hospitals and pregnancy clinics and charitable organizations. We spearhead emergency relief operations, and donate to important causes. Sure, nibble on some false version of Christianity and you will become sick and not care for anyone at all; but feast on the pure teaching of Christ, and you will have the strength to serve beyond your own capacity.

The Christian may gaze into the heavens when praying to his Father, but he must look back down at the earth if he would see the work of Christ. Our citizenship is in heaven; but our salvation was accomplished on the earth, on Calvary. And so we, like our Savior, are not loathe to inhabit two worlds.

Today, as we conclude Paul's letter to Titus, we find summarized the biggest theme of this little letter: good works. And Paul's message is what it has consistently been throughout: Christians do good works. We are earthly good, or we are not Christians.

### **TITUS 3:8-15**

Here two kinds of so-called Christians are described: those who do good works, and those who do not. There are the useful Christians who are Christians indeed—who do good, and are encouraged to do even more good. And then there are the men and women who call themselves Christians but busy themselves, not in doing good, but in doing bad. And so long as they persist in doing bad instead of good, they are useless.

My aim today is to consider both groups. Paul wants Titus to fan the flame of good works in those already doing them, and to stifle the embers of division in those causing it. My prayer is that we would be heavenly minded enough to be earthly good, that we would turn ourselves from useless controversies and distractions, so that we may devote ourselves all the more to good works. For then men will see our good works on earth, and glorify our Father who is in heaven.

### **Useless**

First then, let us consider the fruitless conduct Paul forbids in the middle of our passage. If we want the world to know that Christianity is good, and no waste of anyone's time, we must not waste our time on what follows.

Verses 9-11:

But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Christian, yours is a life of warfare, of furious swordplay with evil angelic beings. The sweat and dirt of battle can be found caked onto the brow of every faithful Christian, who must wage war against his own sin daily and without pause.

But Christian, you must not fight for fighting's sake. Look back one moment at the first verses of this chapter, at some of the "these things" which Paul wants Titus to urge upon the Cretans:

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.<sup>3</sup>

In the spiritual realm, we topple high towers by a battering ram. But, in our daily affairs, we are meek as lambs. We do not fume against the government, no matter its decisions; and we are courteous to all.

The medieval Crusades were a shame in themselves, and contrary to the teachings of Scripture—but their shame was heightened when the so-called Christian rabble gathered at Constantinople overthrew that Christian city. It was bad enough to take up swords against the Muslim in the name of Christianity; it was worse to take up swords against the Christian in the name of Christianity.

Yet, I am sad to say it, Christians are still warring with Christians today. I am not speaking of our battle for the truth against false believers and their false beliefs. That is not what our text condemns. Notice, Paul commands Titus to "avoid" useless discussions and then avoid the useless discussers, if they do not repent. Christians who wish to stand hand in hand with heretics and unbelievers in the garb of belief, who want to join with them around the campfire and sing, can be sure that Paul did not light that campfire.

The thing forbidden by Paul in our passage is a contentiousness in one so-called Christian against true Christians. In Crete there were a number of persons, many of them Jewish, who proudly proclaimed a distorted form of Christianity. They loved Jewish myths and genealogies; probably they took some obscurity from the Old Testament and built a belief

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<sup>3</sup> Vv. 1-2 (ESV).

system on it. Then, when others could not see how they managed to pull their rabbit of a doctrine out of the biblical hat, they fought and quarreled with them.

They gave themselves, as Paul suggests, to “controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law.”

Because these persons are in the church, we should not imagine they will come out and say, “The Bible is rubbish.” The devil does employ that tactic in other contexts, like on the college campus, where it is likely to find better success. But in the church, the devil knows he must not kick over the beehive to get the honey. He prefers to take some minor or obscure part of Scripture and build grand gothic structures upon them.

Here is a Jehovah’s Witness who comes into the hospital room of a faithful Christian, and begins to stir up controversy. “The Bible,” he says, “clearly forbids blood transfusions. It is very wrong of you to get one.”

The faithful Christian replies, “Oh, where does the Bible say that? I am very interested to know, if I have missed it in my reading, for I do want to do the will of God.”

The Witness opens up his Bible and shows him Genesis 9:4: “But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.”

“Well, that is an interesting passage,” says the faithful Christian, “but it says nothing of blood transfusions. Perhaps that is why no other Christian group has ever, to my knowledge, taken it to mean that.”

He will not convince the Witness of course, for the Jehovah’s Witnesses have dug their heels into this and a few other vague passages, at the cost no doubt of much trouble and many lives. This doctrine against blood transfusions is a central tenet of Witness belief—it has eaten up the attention and time of thousands, and for no reason at all. It is a false belief built on an important but very secondary point of Scripture. And the devil delights to see the Bible used to fight against the Bible; a minor point made to rule over all the major points; he is happy to see so-called Christians straining out the gnat so they can more easily swallow the camel.

You who believe, you must not give yourself to anything of this sort. Let us dig deeply into the Scriptures, yes; but never think you will dig so deep as to uncover something that no one else has ever or could ever see. I remember reading one website by a hyperdispensationalist author that began, “One would think after 2000 years of church history, someone would have gotten this right. But oh well, let me explain it to you.”

When Christians, or those who carry that name, go about touting their unusual views, built on scant biblical evidence, and use their notions to bonk others on the head, then the world says, "See, you Christians are useless for any good; you spend all your time investigating odd points of doctrine, but don't care about each other or any others." And they are right, to a point. See the end of verse 9: "they," these kinds of disputes, "are unprofitable and worthless." To the degree that Christians participate in these vain feuds, they aren't any good to anyone.

But that is not characteristic of true Christianity. This much is clear because of how we are taught, by the Bible itself, to deal with these useless discussions: verse 9, "avoid" these discussions, and verses 10-11, "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned."

The problem is not a problem with Christianity; it is a problem with certain self-proclaimed Christians. And the problem is not a mental one. We have all held false beliefs about passages in the Bible, and our Father has been patient with us, leading us on to greater and greater knowledge of the truth. A true Christian who gets swept up in some odd doctrine is not to be shunned outright. Our passage encourages a second and a third chance for those who err: "after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him."

The problem lies in the heart, more than in the mind. See how this kind of person is described at the start of verse 10: he or she is "a person who stirs up division." And again, we must bear in mind at the end of 11 "that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned."

Paul has in mind those Jewish false teachers, or those who follow them, but he goes beyond what they teach to the kind of person they are. There is a kind of person who "stirs up division," and who keeps on stirring up division, even when warned and warned. This kind of person is warped and goes on sinning, and their contentiousness testifies against them having a true love for the Lord.

My brothers and sisters here, perhaps the fastest way to ruin our witness, to malign in the eyes of all the watching world our great gospel, is to foster infighting. Let us make it our attitude, that we would one hundred times over prefer to be wronged, to have our goods stolen, to have our names slandered, to have our sensibilities offended, then to defend ourselves against other Christians in a pugnacious way. The Corinthians took their disputes to court before unbelievers, and so made Christianity look petty.

We have learned to turn the other cheek when the world slaps us; we must learn to turn that cheek when our brother or sister slaps us, to let

love cover a multitude of sins, to have always an attitude eager for reconciliation, and to be ready to forgive. If you are looking for a reason to be offended in this church, you will find it; if you go around with a chip on your shoulder, someone is bound to knock it off; if you walk about on Sunday mornings with your sword drawn, ready to defend your honor against anyone who dares affront it, then you will very soon be hacking off ears.

But Jesus told Peter to put his sword away, and he tells you the same. Divisions will occur, and we have the resources to deal with them in all humility, to see offenses righted, to forgive and be forgiven. But divisive persons will not be tolerated beyond the second warning. Church discipline is for the person who quarrels without repentance, because we refuse to say to the world, "Yes, this is the kind of a person who is truly a Christian. This is Christianity." No, Christianity is not that kind of warfare. That kind of fighting is useless; it helps no one.

## Useful

So then, we have seen the useless sort of Christian, and what we must not be as believers. But that is only half the story. For Paul's emphasis in this conclusion is not mainly on the useless, but on the useful. Christianity, true Christianity, produces useful people.

See verse 8. "The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people."

Five times in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus we find this phrase, "The saying is trustworthy." The saying here is what has come before in chapter 3, namely, that Christians should be considerate to unbelievers (verses 1 and 2), and that they should be so because they once were unbelievers and God was considerate to them (verses 3 through 7).

Here are the plain points of the gospel; and here is a clear application of them, that we should be good people. You can trust this sort of teaching. We are not speaking of unusual ideas about numbers, hidden Bible codes, or the Mosaic Law. Paul says to Titus what he says to Timothy:

[C]harge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Tim. 1:3-5.

I can recall many, many conversations with a Christian who was completely devoted to conspiracy theories. In fact, I cannot remember one interaction with this brother that did not include his claims that the government was tampering with the water, and so on. And I remember thinking at some point: “So what if the government is doing all of these things that you think? You will go on and on and on digging up mysteries on suspect evidence, and even if you do happen upon one or two true theories, it will have cost you all your time, all your efforts, all your thinking.”

There is little room for Jesus and his love in a mind filled up with strange but exciting teachings—and that is our great concern. If you could be devoted to a thousand causes and had the strength of a million men, then go ahead, study every odd notion you like. But if you are like the rest of us, it is a waste of time and energy that could be so much better used.

Hence Paul in verse 8: “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.” This is no salvation by good works—those who must do good are those who already “have believed in God.” But having believed in God and been justified by that faith, they must now take their energies and pour them into a useful channel, one that is “excellent and profitable for people.”

And that useful path is the path of good works. True Christianity always leads in this direction.

The final few verses of Titus offer an example of this. See, beginning in verse 12:

When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. Do your best to speed Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way; see that they lack nothing. And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.<sup>5</sup>

If you recall, we are not sure where Paul is writing from. But here we find that he is planning to go to Nicopolis, and spend the winter there. Several cities were named Nicopolis in the ancient world, but it seems almost certain he is speaking of the Nicopolis on the western coast of Greece, where the Roman emperor Augustus camped while he was fighting Mark Anthony—hence the place was named Nicopolis, meaning “City of Victory.”

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<sup>5</sup> Vv. 12-14.

Paul tells Titus that he is sending someone to Crete to replace him, either Artemas or Tychicus, and since we know Tychicus was sent to Ephesus, we may guess that Artemas came to Crete.<sup>6</sup> That is really all we know of Artemas.

But the focus does not fall on him in this concluding passage, but on Zenas the lawyer (likely an expert in Roman law) and Apollos (that famous Jewish evangelist we read about in Acts 18). It seems Paul's letter was sent by the hand of these two men; now here they were, in Crete, apparently far from their homes, and entirely dependent for their wellbeing on the Cretan Christians.

When envoys of an earthly kingdom travel—say, a United States diplomat—the government ensures that their needs are met. Compulsory taxes pay for their lodging and their meals.

But when envoys of Christ's kingdom travel, their stipends are much, much better. They have for their needs the surplus of every Christian. You may remember that Jesus' disciples early on were told to travel town to town, preaching the gospel, but not to pack their bags. Instead, they were to stay with whoever was worthy in a place, and to enjoy that worthy person's hospitality.

In Crete we find a similar practice; because Christians are by nature generous and eager to help, because they devote themselves to these good works, the messengers of Christ can devote themselves to their task, without worrying about their earthly necessities.

Think of the ways this plays itself out in our own experience. Here we have several young couples sent to USI, to that modern Crete, to make disciples there. But if they are busy about the Lord's work on campus, who will support them? What will they eat, what will they drink, what will they wear for clothing? These are pressing needs.

And Jesus says to you what he said to his disciples about the hungry crowds: "You give them something to eat."

And you have! I have not known many churches closely, so I have little to compare you with; but I thank God that you are a generous and hospitable people. No, you do not throw your money away on causes you are unsure of, and that is not bad. Paul wants the Cretan Christians to learn to meet "pressing needs," so there is some criteria for our giving.

But when there is a true need in this body, it is met. Who can get sick here, without being offered a meal? Who can go on a short-term missions trip, without finding financial support? Which of our

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<sup>6</sup> See 2 Tim. 4:12.

missionaries ask us for help without our helping? When has any messenger of Christ come to town, any international missionary, in need of a place to stay, and not found one among you?

Time and again a new attender has come here and wondered at the genuine care you have for each other—and I take that wonder to mean they have not seen the same care in the world.

And why are you such useful people? Because you are Christians! This is simple Christianity, truly practiced.

You have “learned,” as Paul puts it, to devote yourself to good works, in order to meet pressing needs. And as something to be learned, this generosity grows in us over time; yet I thank God for what degree of it he has granted us even now.

One of the saddest songs in Scripture is God’s song for his beloved in the early chapters of Isaiah.<sup>7</sup> He had planted and cared for Israel, his vineyard, but she had produced only worthless grapes. Brothers, you are not that kind of vineyard; sisters, you are adorned, not with the haughty anklets and amulets of the daughters of Israel, but with good works.

You are not, as our text puts it, “unfruitful.”

## Conclusion

And that is why the final verse of this letter to Titus could equally have been written to you as to the Cretan Christians. “All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith.” Where there is true faith, true Christianity, there is love. There is a usefulness, a fruitfulness.

We are not stargazers who have no time for the needs of earthlings. We are not men and women preoccupied with odd and distant theories, so that our hands are idle. No—we are Christians, and Christians do good works.

We have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who has forever existed as God. Age upon age he sat beyond the stars in regal splendor, untouched by our infirmities, competent in every field of knowledge, comprehending mysteries. But in time, for us men and our salvation, he touched our leprous world. He became a man, and “he went about doing good.”<sup>8</sup>

He died that he might absorb our guilt, impute to us his righteousness, and impart to us a zeal for good works. He is our example.

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<sup>7</sup> Ch. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 10:38.

Is he generous? Then let us be generous. Was he kind to the poor? Then we will be kind to the poor. His eye is on the sparrow and on the suffering child, his heart is for the oppressed, for the widow and the orphan, his arm is for their defense.

If Cretans could be taken up and washed off and formed into useful Christians, though undeserving of the kindness; if we could be plucked as brands from the fire, and fashioned into vessels for honorable use, though unworthy of the grace; then what sort of generous and hospitable, useful and active people should we be.

We read the last line of Titus, "Grace be with you all," and we say, "Grace is with us, has been with us." And that grace teaches us to be zealous for good works.

Or to put it another way, it teaches us to be Christians.