

Establishing Godly Behaviour

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[0 : 0 0] Can culture be wrong? Can anyone presume to judge the values, customs or lifestyle of another social or ethnic group?

To even ask the question is to invite trouble, isn't it? Western societies have made criticism of culture a cardinal sin. Our culture, we declare, is to have no culture.

Or putting it more positively, our culture is to accept every culture. We congratulate ourselves on having produced a truly multicultural society, where people of every creed and custom rub along together.

We love seeing Australians of different backgrounds sharing a joke, or helping each other out in times of need. We love shows like MasterChef, which display the goodwill of different Australians toward each other, and which palpably symbolise our multiculturalism in an ethnic smorgasbord of contestants, foods and recipes.

But treating all cultures as equal hasn't always worked out so smoothly, has it? As our multicultural experiment has gone on, we've had to face some awkward questions about cultural realities, such as polygamy, female circumcision, head coverings for women, anti-Semitism, demands from certain groups for special laws, or exemptions from laws.

[1 : 3 0] The more culturally diverse we have become, the more obvious it is that not every part of every culture is equally attractive. And though we might find it hard to say, it looks like some parts of cultures, some parts of some cultures, can actually be unhealthy and destructive.

Well, this might sound like a very modern problem, but it's just the same kind of problem faced by Christians in the early church.

You see, they too were attempting to form a single society from culturally diverse groups. They too had to struggle with the strain of cultures that could be hostile to each other. And as we read through the New Testament, we see different responses to different parts of Jewish and pagan culture.

Some parts are affirmed, others rejected, and some treated as neutral. In Paul's letter to Titus, however, we see one of the New Testament's strongest critiques of a culture.

Paul believes that the culture of Crete is fundamentally sick. Last week we saw in chapter 1, verse 13, how he quotes the Cretan poet Epimenides, who declared that Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.

[2 : 4 8] This, of course, is a kind of generalisation that would land you in front of the Victorian Civil Administrative Tribunal on a charge of racial vilification. It's not actually racist, of course.

As Peter pointed out in his sermon last week, if Paul thought every Cretan were equally bad, there would be no respectable people for Titus to appoint into leadership. In addition to this, we know that Paul thinks all humans are naturally corrupt without the Gospel.

As he writes in chapter 3, verse 3, In other words, the Cretan problem is simply a specific example of the general human predicament.

The more people and civilisations try to do without God, the more they find it hard to hold on to common virtues and disciplines. One culture throws itself into the pursuit of sexual pleasure and finds marriage and family relations harder and harder to maintain, while another makes an idol of money and achievement and is plagued by exploitation and corruption.

Another worships beauty and youth and finds itself ruled by fools. Another replaces God with possessions and is soon up to its eyeballs in debt and poverty. Another elevates self-fulfilment above all things and consigns itself to a lonely old age.

[4 : 15] And so on. In Crete, the problem seems to be that there is a wholesale abandonment of social responsibility and a basic lack of self-discipline.

We can see this in Paul's mention of laziness and gluttony from last week's passage, but also in the advice that we find in this morning's text. Crete is a place where people need to be told to do what should be obvious.

Old men need to be encouraged to be dignified. Older women need to be told not to get drunk. Young women need to be reminded to love their husbands and children.

Young men need to be told to control themselves. And slaves need to be encouraged to respect their masters. Crete, in other words, is a fundamentally dysfunctional society. And Paul thinks that this is very serious because it undermines the gospel.

The longer the church at Crete follows its culture, the less it is able to think clearly about what is true and false, or to resist false teaching. That's why he follows up the quote from Epimenides about Cretans being lazy lies by telling Titus to rebuke them sharply so that they may become sound in the faith.

[5 : 30] It's also why a few verses later he says that people who live this way profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

The Cretans' character, which comes from their culture, is impeding their faith. So what is Paul's answer to this problem?

Well, the first thing that needs to happen is that Titus needs to exhort them to change. In chapter 2, verse 1, Paul says that Titus needs to work hard at teaching what is consistent with sound doctrine.

Note, not just sound doctrine, but what is consistent with sound doctrine. It isn't enough for Titus to simply keep on proclaiming the truth about Jesus in an abstract way, like a systematic theologian.

If the people of Crete aren't challenged to change the way they live, that truth will do them no good at all. Changed thinking and changed lives need to go together.

[6 : 31] The second thing that needs to happen is that people actually need to put that teaching into practice and let it shape their lives and relationships.

Paul seems to believe that a great deal of good can be done in a church through the ministry of just ordinary people. It isn't just specially appointed ministers or elders or deacons that God works through.

No, the gospel can be vindicated and promoted. Church cultures can be transformed through ordinary people trying hard to put their faith into practice in very straightforward ways.

Let's work through the list that Paul gives and try to make some points of application along the way. The first group Paul mentions in verse 2 are the older men in the congregation, not the official elders in this case, or those with specially designated teaching roles.

Paul wants them to be temperate, that is to cultivate and display the wisdom and clear-headedness that age and experience brings.

[7 : 47] He wants them to act in a way that is serious or dignified. In every society, ancient or modern, these are the natural leaders. And they set the tone of a community simply by how they act and carry themselves.

Paul wants them to take themselves seriously and their standing seriously. The other aspects of the instruction to older men fall in line with this same pattern. They should set an example by being prudent.

This is the same word translated as self-controlled in the following verses and is obviously a basic element in every Christian's character. They should set an example of it by being sound or healthy in their faith.

Again, we see that even though these men are not necessarily teachers, their seriousness about their faith matters because of who they are. And they should set an example of it by displaying love and endurance or patience.

In other words, they should resist the temptation to be backward-looking, grumpy old men. They are to understand their importance to God's people and live accordingly. The way they act towards others, the grace with which they face hardship, all these will have an impact on the church at large.

[9 : 00] Now, how do these things apply to us at Holy Trinity Doncaster? As I read these verses, it seems to me that we at Holy Trinity have many fine examples of just what Paul is looking for here.

Australian culture probably doesn't encourage men to grow older gracefully, but a lifetime of Jesus obviously does. And our church is the richer for it. Thank you for your example, older men.

The example of your lives and character helps all the rest of us. Please be encouraged to persist. The next group that has special significance for Paul in verse 3 is the older women.

They too have a natural role of leadership amongst God's people, and they too should marshal themselves accordingly. The word translated as reverent here has the sense of behaviour befitting a sacred place.

It might even mean having the demeanour of a priestess. Older women too, in other words, are to take themselves seriously and to avoid the temptations of age and situation.

[10 : 10] As those with extra time on their hands, they could easily fill that time, engage in gossip or drinking. Paul says they must not. Instead, they must teach what is good.

Now this deserves a special note. The modern caricature of Paul is that he is anti-women and anti-women's ministry. But actually, the only social group to which Paul gives a general instruction to teach is older women.

Their role is essential in discipling younger women. Paul doesn't want Titus himself to teach younger women. The dangers there were great then as they are today. But he does want the older women to be active in applying the gospel and their wisdom and experience to those in the next generation.

This is essential if the younger women are to resist the corrupting influence of their culture and live in accordance with sound doctrine. Now how do we fare at Holy Trinity in these matters?

Well, in one regard, very well, I think. The older generation of women at our church offer many outstanding examples of reverent and godly lives. In fact, when Jenny and I arrived here 11 years ago, this was one of the features of the church that stood out most clearly to us.

[11 : 26] But are older women mentoring and training the younger generation? When I was serving on the encumbency committee last year, I was approached on several occasions by mothers with young families who wanted to register the need for this kind of cross-generational encouragement.

They could see that older women at Holy Trinity had wisdom to pass on, but there didn't seem to be any way for it to be passed on. I don't know why this is.

Maybe it's because our generational groups don't work hard enough at getting to know each other. Or maybe older women don't feel confident to offer their experience unless they're given some official position within the church.

Perhaps young women are too busy or act at least outwardly as if they don't need help. But whatever the cause, I think this is an area where we need to do better. Older women, you have great things to offer.

Please be prayerful and consider how you can communicate your wisdom to your younger sisters. Young women, of course, have their own social responsibilities by which they promote the faith.

[12 : 29] Their way of living out the gospel is, as Paul says in verses 4-5, to love their husbands and children, to display kindness, sexual purity and good management skills in running their homes, and to submit to their husbands.

In each of these cases, the opposite was a real possibility. Historians have observed complaints from this period about a new level of decadence and abdication. The new Roman woman, as one writer describes her, was notorious for her self-indulgence, her immodest dress, her promiscuity and her lack of interest in children.

The second-century poet, Juvenal, says that among the wealthy classes, childbirth hardly ever occurs. Abortionists have such skills and so many potions and can bring about the death of children in the womb.

But Christian women have an opportunity to do much better than this. And indeed, they must, if they are to avoid bringing shame on the word of God. Now, how do we apply these things to ourselves?

This, of course, is one of those bits of the Bible which seems radically at odds with our own culture's view of women. The notion that a woman should focus on home life, that she should compromise her career for children, and worst of all, that she should submit to her husband, these are all ideas that the intellectual and governing classes of our society have declared wrong-headed and immoral.

[13 : 55] So do they still apply to us? Or are they relics of an ancient worldview that needs to be improved upon? Here I have three brief observations and a general conclusion.

My first observation is that this is not the sum total of what Paul has to say about the role of women. In other places, for example, such as 1 Corinthians 7, he commends the single life for both men and women on the basis that it gives Christians more time to serve God.

We know from the book of Acts and the final chapter of Romans that the church contained many women in many different roles, different social positions and professions. There's Lydia the cloth merchant, Priscilla the tentmaker, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis, all of whom are described as hard workers for the Lord.

I think this should warn us against making Titus 2 a one-size-fits-all template for every woman or every family. Another observation to bear in mind here, and this is a difficult one, is that it isn't always clear in this passage whether Paul is talking about how society should work or simply how we should live given the responsibilities society has given us.

For example, when Paul tells slaves how to behave in the next few verses, we shouldn't take this to mean that he has any interest in defending the institution of slavery. Rather, what he's concerned about is how Christians should be good slaves where that institution exists.

- [15 : 27] So it might be argued similarly that Paul's commands partly assume the social responsibilities given to women in that society. However, and this is my third observation, there are passages in the New Testament where Paul does talk about the nature of marriage itself.

And there he affirms at least part of what we read here in Titus 2. The primary passage I have in mind here is Ephesians 5, verses 22-33, where Paul explains that the relationship between a husband and wife is a created sign of Christ's relationship with the church.

And that this should be expressed in wives submitting to their husbands, and conversely, husbands sacrificing their own lives and interests for the sake of their wives.

So what can we conclude about this? Well, looking at the overall pattern of the New Testament's teaching, it seems clear that what we have are principles that can be expressed in different ways.

We shouldn't read this passage in isolation and conclude that Paul never wants women to work outside the home, or that husbands can delegate all household responsibilities to their wives. Yet at the same time, there is a principle of authority and submission between husband and wife that needs to be seen as universal for all times and places.

- [16 : 53] And we need to think hard about what this principle says to our culture and to our own relationships. Let's move on then to the next group that Paul talks about, namely, the young men.

Surprisingly, this is the group about which Paul has the least to say. In verse 6, Paul simply tells Titus that they should be exhorted to be self-controlled before immediately moving on to talk about Titus' own example.

Now, why is this? Given their social position, this group would have been the most important for the future of the church. They were its future teachers, leaders, and elders.

Why should they get such short shrift? Well, one possible explanation is that Titus himself will be working closely with this group. And so the most important thing for them is not that he tells them how to live, but that he shows them.

Thus, in verse 7, Paul tells Titus that he is to offer himself as a model or type in everything. He has to be conscientious in doing good and in everything he says.

- [18 : 03] He has to make sure that his teaching displays integrity and that it is presented in an appropriately serious way. In short, Titus has to bear the burden of teaching and example in a unique way.

As the leader of the church, the church's reputation will be established or lost according to the way Titus acts and speaks. If he fails to practice what he preaches, then the church and its future leadership will in all likelihood fail.

If he discharges his duty, however, then the church's opponents will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us, says Paul in verse 8.

Now, our application of this point, I think, is clear. We need to pray for our leaders. We need to pray for Andrew Reid and Andrew Price and for all the others who lead us here at Holy Trinity, that they will be kept pure in their teaching and in their characters.

leaders. And wherever we ourselves have responsibilities, we need to act with the same level of integrity. The eyes of the future leaders of this church are on the leaders it has now.

[19 : 13] We have to do everything we can to help our leaders bear that responsibility and to pass on the tradition we've been given. With that, we go from the most influential to what might be regarded as the least.

the slaves. Now what we should notice here, and this is again surprising, is that it's to these people, those who have no rights and no redress and no hope of escape, that Paul offers the most positive reason for Christian living.

In the other cases, the good character and conduct of Christians has been generally presented negatively to avoid a bad reputation for the church. so that the word of God may not be discredited in verse 5, so that opponents will have nothing evil to say of us in verse 8.

But in verse 10, Paul says that the fidelity of slaves is an ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour. The word ornament here is the same that might be used to describe the adorning of a bride for her husband on her wedding day, or the decoration of an important building with precious stone, or a tree which is adorned with fruit.

Now why does Paul single out slaves like this, and speak so positively about the outcome of their conduct? Well, I think what we see here is an expression of a principle that we see more broadly in the New Testament.

[20 : 49] The greater the wrong suffered by a Christian, the more grace can shine through. If you love your brothers and sisters, or those who love you, says Jesus in Matthew 5 verses 45 and 46, what reward do you have?

Do not even the tax collectors do the same? In the same chapter, he says that we are most like our Father in heaven when we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

And that principle is clearly at work here, isn't it? No matter what we make of the other social relationships described in this passage, the slave has it worst because slavery itself is built on a basic conflict of interests.

The master wins because the slave loses. The master has all the rights and the slave has none. And this fundamental insult to human liberty makes rebellion natural.

The slave wants to get something back, either by showing veiled disrespect, or by secretly stealing, or by being lazy as possible. Yet it is just in this context that the transforming power of the gospel can be most displayed.

[22 : 03] When Christian slaves obey, not just out of fear, but out of a desire to honor and be like Jesus, then oppression is met with supernatural grace. God, in his wisdom, can make the least powerful his greatest testimony.

And so here is our application for this last point, too. Not many of us are likely to experience slavery in our lifetimes. But all of us will experience injustice and find ourselves mistreated at some point.

And sometimes that mistreatment or injustice will go on for years and have lasting effects. The Bible is clear that it is in these situations that our opportunities for adorning the gospel are the greatest.

The dark backdrop of human sin makes the grace of Christ in our lives shine all the greater. So these are the things that are consistent with sound teaching.

Remembering that our lives and character matter. Fulfilling the responsibilities and opportunities that are given to us in our lives. Working hard to honor the gospel with good conduct.

[23 : 16] Resisting the downward pull of our culture. None of these things is the gospel themselves. None of them is a substitute for the gospel. that they clear away the gospel, that they clear away obstacles for the saving message to go out.

They make a straight path for the Lord to enter the life of our friends and community. They act like a megaphone for the truth of Jesus. Living God, we pray that you will help us to live out these things that we've learned today.

Help us to remember that our lives and character matter and that you have given us responsibilities and opportunities in our everyday lives and situations. Please help us to work hard to honor the gospel with good conduct.

Please help us to stand out against our culture and to serve you instead. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.