

Teaching Christian Character
Titus 2:1-15

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there are certain characteristics that ethnic groups are known for. People are described as being as cheap as a Dutchman or a Scotsman, or as stubborn as an Irishman, or arrogant as a Frenchman, as hotheaded as an Arab, or as apologetic and tolerant as a Canadian.

And as we continue to look at how the development of our Christian character is an important part of how we live out Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all nationalities –

We need to recognize that at some point the development of our Christian character is going to come up against our national characteristics and challenge them.

And friends; cooperating with the Holy Spirit's sanctification of our national characteristics is a slightly more difficult aspect of our discipleship to go through compared to dealing with our individual character issues.

Because these characteristics are not just our own, they are part of our society.

They are something that we all share together, something that we do together, it reflects a common personality that we have, it stems from our values and beliefs... and we likely see it as very normal and just the way things are.

So it's far more difficult to replace being thrifty and cheap, stubborn, hot-headed or tolerant, or whatever our national character traits are with sanctified Christian characteristics instead.

But it needs to be done in order that we are fulfilling Jesus' further command to teach disciples to obey ALL that He commanded. (Matt 28:20)

And brothers and sisters in Christ the Apostle Paul faced this exact same challenge with the Church that he started on the island of Crete, whose inhabitants had a reputation for being lazy, dishonest, gluttons.

As Paul acknowledges at the beginning of his letter to Pastor Titus when he writes *“One of Crete’s own prophets has said it: “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.” This saying is true.”* (1:12-13)

And to make matters worse false teachers were *“disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain.”* (1:11)

So, Pastor Titus was challenged to disciple the Cretan believers past their national characteristics of lying, laziness, gluttony and brutishness and enhance the reputation of the Gospel and the Church in the Mediterranean, by facilitating such a dramatic change among the Cretans.

And not only would it give the gospel credibility on the world stage, but the reputation of the gospel and the Church was already at risk on the island of Crete because it was disrupting their social order – and if you think about it, something has to be pretty bad to disrupt the social order of a nation that is known for lying and being lazy!

So Paul instructs Titus in 2:1 that he *“must speak what is appropriate to sound teaching”* in order to keep people from speaking ill of the gospel and to make it attractive. (vs 5, 10)

Paul then specifies that it is Christian character which is *“appropriate to teach”* because this will help solidify a Cretan household and prevent social disruption, and bear witness to the transforming power of the gospel on the sordid national characteristics of the Cretans.

So – in order to help us understand what must be taught to the various age groups of individuals in this passage we need to know a just little bit more about the Cretan household.

First we need to grasp how the household was the basic building block of ancient society.

Each household consisted of a family, hopefully with many children – and extended family grandparents, aunts, etc... along with those who were servants or slaves of varying levels.

Now in our society today we have gov't agencies which take care of many social needs like education, health care, civil peace officers, social workers, justice of the peace, and so on...

But in ancient society it was the man who was in charge of the household was held responsible for many of those kinds of social and civic functions, and he was also responsible for the conduct of the members of his household as they interacted with others households in public.

Additionally each household had some sort of manufacturing and business aspect to it as well – which was how a household provided for itself and grew or lost its wealth.

And marriage was not first and foremost a romantic sort of arrangement, but was basis on which a legitimate household could be set-up, or how an existing household would grow as young women would marry into another household and live there and participate in household life.

So everyone had a defined role and a part to play within a household, and if people performed the tasks and duties of their roles well, then a household would thrive...

If they did not, then households would not function properly and become miserable places to live, and eventually fall apart, leaving its members destitute – and remember there was no welfare back then.

Are you starting to get a sense of the idea of the ancient household and the foundational social role it played? Good...

So you understand why the charge against false teaching connected to Christianity disrupting entire households is no small matter – even for a bunch of people as lazy, gluttonous and brutish as the Cretans.

And Paul wanted people to see that the gospel of Jesus and those who follow it find something in the gospel that enables them to embrace these household tasks and roles with

diligence and enthusiasm for the betterment of all – and not as an excuse for rebellion.

So Paul commands Titus that each member of the household be taught how their character ought to be forged so they can serve their household and bear good witness to the Gospel.

The older men, among whom would be the head of the household, need to be taught to be temperate, worthy of the respect their position and their years demanded, to be self-controlled and solid in the faith, in love and in endurance.

One who holds a leadership position serves it well when their character is easy to respect because they are self-controlled – consistent in their oversight and rulings, not arbitrary or showing favoritism.

Additionally as believers they needed to lead their household confidently in the faith and in set an example in showing Christian love and endure in doing this, going against the national characteristics of lying, laziness and gluttony.

Next are the older women in the household – the matriarch, and other wives of older men, maybe some unmarried sisters, grandmothers and so on... who have no doubt lived long enough and been married long enough to see the failings and flaws in the men who led the household and have experienced some suffering because of them.

But instead of nagging or throwing those failings back at their men in retaliation, they are to be reverent - appropriate - in the way they live, not slanders... Nor are they to numb the frustration they may feel by turning to wine.

Instead, they will know probably better than anyone else what it takes to make sure a household runs well – having been on the receiving end of times when it didn't run well and they can pass on and teach good advice in this regard.

They are well positioned to teach the younger women who are marrying into a household and help them feel welcomed into the household and show them how to function in their new roles as wife and mother.

Friends, it would not have been easy to be a young woman, who would leave her own household to join another one through a marriage that was often arranged for the benefit of the houses and not in consideration of romance.

So there would very much be the temptation to find that romantic attraction elsewhere, to resent their role and their husband and children...

Thus Titus is to encourage the older women to help the younger women avoid this, to stay pure and chaste and keep themselves occupied with the household business.

Next the young men are addressed with the main point of being self-controlled. As they are eager to move ahead in life, to move into leadership of their own – they need to avoid rash judgement and the ignorance of youth – they need to be self-controlled and restrained.

Or perhaps they are tempted with too much time on their hands because they have not yet taken on a more responsible

role and are not using that time to prepare themselves for when it comes.

So Titus is to be an example of good deeds to them, and let them see that his teaching has integrity, seriousness or sobriety about it that can't be accused of prompting them to shirk their training for future responsibility.

And finally the servants and the slaves of the household are addressed.

Slaves were those who had become indebted and had been indentured to pay off the debt which they owed, or they sought the social security of a household as a slave as opposed to living on the streets.

Some had learned a trade and joined a household as a servant in that capacity, but did not have the rights of a family member, and this category likely included those who had been captured and sold as general laborers...

So its easy to understand how servants and slaves would give only the bare minimum of what was required of them – as theirs was a forced service.

And how they could make like difficult for their master and retaliate by cheating and stealing and undermining them. Of course if they were caught the consequences would be severe... but the risk was worth it.

So how incredible the transforming power of the gospel must be then - for Paul to extend this teaching to include servants and slaves... and to expect that it would change their heart so that they would actually embrace their situation and see it as an opportunity to serve!

That they would actual care about what their masters thought, not talking back or stealing from them and showing they could be fully trusted...

It's amazing how sound teaching based upon the message of the gospel and has the power to forge Christian character

which can even embrace and endure the worst kinds of circumstances with cheerfulness and grace – it's hard to criticize something which can produce that.

Now, how can Paul's instruction to Titus in the Cretan Church be of help to us as we work to forge our Christian character?

Well perhaps we can start off by examining our own character and identifying what sort of national characteristics we might have that need to be sanctified?

What sort of reputation do our own people have; stubborn, hot-headed, lazy, arrogant, gossips, resentful, indiscriminate?

Do we see any of those characteristics showing up in us?

As a Canadian I know that it is part of my national character to be tolerant and accepting to a fault, so that I'm naturally suspicious about the whole idea of distinguishing between sound doctrine and false doctrine, who's to say what's correct and not correct right?

That part of my character has to be changed friends...

As noble and polite as it is to be tolerant of differing viewpoints and opinions... learning to obey ALL that Jesus taught includes shaping my character by His sound teaching which says; *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6)

And as a Canadian I know that individualism and personal freedom and self-fulfillment is a big part of my cultural character, so it goes against my grain to hear that Paul expects the gospel to change people so that they serve cheerfully in roles and situations in life which have nothing to do with pursuing those values, and are even contrary to those values.

But that part of my character has to be changed friends...

As important as the individual might be... as meaningful and enjoyable and fulfilling as personal freedom and self-fulfillment is... learning to obey ALL that Jesus taught includes shaping my character on His solid teaching about: *"whoever*

wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:35)

And we can also look to see if we have solid teaching that will shape how our character interacts with the challenging social situations that we will find ourselves in from time to time.

So, solid teaching starts with understanding that Paul's letter to Titus is not instructing us to organize our families or society in a similar manner.

As Reformed Christians we believe that God's cultural mandate to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28 allows for and encourages cultural creativity and diversity – which includes how we structure and arrange our families and society.

There are a variety of options by which we can obediently respond to God's norming Word for family and society... and Canadian society has been developed around individual freedom, happiness and self-fulfillment.

Now is this the best way to create a society? Are there specific roles men and women should take? Well that's open to biblical debate... but regardless of what society is based on, and the roles men and women play it is undeniably affected by sin and human sinfulness.

And the way in which sin warps and twists our individualistic society is very evident in how easily and quickly we give up on, and try to change our social institutions that do not move us quickly enough towards our own self-fulfillment.

Now rather than citing statistics or examples of this – let me just ask you to reflect on why perhaps you feel frustrated with your work, unfulfilled in your career??

Or why do you have the expectations that you do for your husband or wife or for your children? Why are you working hard and sacrificing to get into a good school and get a degree? Why did you vote the way you voted in the last provincial and federal election?

The truth is we'd all be hard pressed not to find some level of expectation about self-fulfillment in our reasoning.

And just as in Paul's time there is a lot of so-called "christian" teaching that uncritically encourages us to expect this self-fulfillment without having it be sanctified first.

So what will we do when – not if - but when **we do not** experience the degree of self-fulfillment we expected to find from the institutions and endeavors in our society?

Become cynical and bitter and resentful, looking for any opportunity to stick it to the man? Take the edge off the disappointment with alcohol or prescription drugs?

Frame it as a great injustice and set off to try and change the system, change society? Or maybe we become self-centered and seek easier more direct routes of self-fulfillment?

You see brothers and sisters, ironically – even though Paul's instructions about Christian character are meant for a society based on households which was far less individualistic than

what we are.... it appears that we are in greater need of these instructions than they were.

Friends, Paul gives us the solid teaching we need to hear in vs. 11-12. Listen and believe... *“For the grace of God has appears that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say NO to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age.”*

Brother and sisters when our aspirations for self-fulfillment are somehow unmet in our work, in our families, in our marriages, in our education, in our gov’t and we are tempted to give up on them, to allow that disappointment to change our character – we must remember that God’s grace gives us the power to say NO.

No we are not going to quit, no we are not going to become bitter and cynical, no we are not going to go on a crusade, No we are not going to react as so many others in our society do...

Because the solid teaching of scripture reveals that we are waiting for the blessed hope – the appearing of our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ (vs. 14)

And He has given his life for us in order to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify us for himself so that we are eager to do what is good. (vs. 14)

So that if we are older men and women we can all be temperate, self-controlled and worthy of respect, sound in faith, love and endurance and teach the younger generation with the Christian wisdom we’ve learned – showing them what it means to be a Godly man and a Godly woman...

If we are young men and women we will let ourselves be encouraged by this wisdom of the older generations so that we learn how to truly love husbands, wives and children... So that we can be characterized by integrity, seriousness and have character built on sound teaching that won’t disappoint us or let us down later on in life...

So that regardless of where we work, or why we have to work where we do... we will be the kinds of employees that care about doing a good job, not cheating our employers and showing ourselves to be fully trust-worthy.

And most especially brothers and sister – we do so when we are situations which are obviously not contributing to our self-fulfillment - but are necessary for the good of others and in order for society in general to continue to function well.

Brothers and sisters – it is my prayer, that the Holy Spirit would use this message as solid teaching, by which your character is further changed in this regard today...

So that... as Paul writes to Titus, it will also be true for us, that *“those who oppose us may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us...”* (vs 8) and so that *“in every way we will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.”* (vs 10)

Amen.