

Clowns Amusing the Goats



Gary Wilkerson January 16, 2017

When Paul wrote his epistle to Titus, he left behind powerful instructions for us regarding Christ's Great Commission to preach the gospel. He had just left the island of Crete, where he and Titus ministered together. Paul encountered persecution on Crete, and when he departed to evangelize in other cities, he left behind Titus and some other leaders. Now those young men also wanted to leave. Like Paul, they found Crete a hard place to minister.

Their dilemma parallels ours today. Anyone who's lived in the U.S. for the past fifteen years has seen a vast decline in religious faith. In less than two decades' time America's transformation has been dramatic: We're no longer a Christian society that has moved to secularism. We're now a secular society moving rapidly toward paganism.

This is very much what the Christians faced in Crete. The city was wicked, overrun with sensuality, and the young leaders' hearts told them to leave. But Paul instructed them to stay, explaining to them that it was for good reasons: "This is why I left you in Crete" (Titus 1:5).

These young men were being trained by Paul. They had gone to Crete to raise up a church, appoint elders and establish a Christian presence—all of which they accomplished, but only with great difficulty. Paul acknowledged their hardship, writing, "One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true" (1:12-13). When Paul left, he must have known his young mentees would suffer persecution. Why would he leave them in a culture so dark and evil?

Christ has left us in a twisted, fallen world for a purpose.

If our only mission in life is to have an intimate relationship with Jesus, we might as well go to heaven now. We could immediately start having intimacy with him forever. But Jesus left us in the world with another purpose in mind. What is that purpose?

God always has a remnant people in a darkened culture. Even in the worst of times, he continually raises up a testimony of light amid darkness. As Jesus says, we are to be salt, an agent that preserves life in a decaying environment. "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (Matthew 5:13).

Friend, we're the people God has appointed to be lights in a darkened place and time. You may not want to live in a sin-filled culture like America's or to raise your kids in a society that rages more and more against God. But Jesus has a design for your life in this time and place. It has to do with more than a thriving career or providing a comfortable life for your family. The reason you're here right now—the reason you exist—is for *his glory*! We are here to be his testimony, to make a difference, to be his living epistles to a world thirsting desperately for love.

Yet there's a major problem in the church today regarding our mission. Much of American culture—including the exalted pursuit of happiness—has seeped into the church's culture. We worship and behave as if God exists for us rather than the other way around. We think our obedience to his Word is about gaining his favor and blessings

rather than a relationship of love. That's idolatry, plain and simple; it puts material gain and fleshly satisfaction before a holy, loving God.

The same thing happened with the church in Crete. Paul said the Christians there were "insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach" (*Titus 1:10-11*). In Crete, the church had become just as flesh-driven as the larger culture.

Paul had to confront these false doctrines, which catered to people's flesh rather than show a way to godliness. He reminded Titus, "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (*3:3-7*).

Make no mistake, the Christians of Crete had been converted to a living faith. But they remained immersed in a flesh-driven culture that emphasized physical appetites instead of the things of God. Here was Paul's straightforward instruction to Titus: "Rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith" (*1:13*).

It breaks my heart to consider all the Christians who attend church whose lives aren't being transformed by the gospel.

If we believe something beautiful like the Good News of Christ but don't practice it, we're no better than the Pharisees Jesus criticized. Those highly religious people raced to make converts but never challenged them to conform their lives to God's Word. Jesus confronted these hypocritical church leaders, saying, "You travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (*Matthew 23:15*).

Do you ever wonder why the church doesn't operate in power today? Why do we have such a weak testimony in a world desperate to hear Good News? And why does the church often seem more like the world than different from it? It's because we've accepted a gospel of mixture, one driven by fleshly goals rather than godly ones. What I see happening drives me to my knees, praying, "Jesus, turn us around. Touch us, change us, mold us. Make us pure, different and holy. Set us apart for your glorious purposes."

In 1974, more than a generation ago, my father, David Wilkerson, wrote a prophetic book titled *The Vision*. He was given a revelation of things that at first seemed outlandish even to him, but over the years almost all of what he foresaw came to pass. I think of two specific predictions he made that no one believed could ever happen: First, pornography would be piped into homes. And second, America would experience another economic depression. These events happened decades apart, but God was faithful to warn of the coming of both.

I was a teenager at the time Dad released *The Vision*. I remember two other revelations from it that I dismissed as too incredible to ever take place. In recent months, I've seen both come to pass. I mention them now because I see them as warning signs to a church in rapid decline.

The first prediction was that witchcraft and Satan worship would take place in churches. Not long ago, I watched a video of an Easter pageant staged in a prominent church. It included seductively dressed dancers twirling sensually at the foot of the cross to demonstrate what Satan's hordes did at Christ's crucifixion. I was horrified at this scene taking place below Jesus' feet as he hung on the cross watching it all himself. I realize that what I watched wasn't actually Satan worship, but it gave great weight and emphasis to something shameful. It revealed that ministry's inability to distinguish between titillating entertainment and pure worship.

How can we preach a gospel of light when darkness is presented as the gospel? We're not the first generation to see this. C.H. Spurgeon, the famous 19-century preacher, saw the same temptation creeping into churches of his time. He wrote:

"The Devil has seldom done a cleverer thing than hinting to the church that part of their mission is to provide entertainment for the people with a view of winning them.... The church has gradually toned down her testimony,

then winked at and excused the frivolities of the day. Then she tolerated them...now she has adopted them under the plea of reaching the masses.

"My first contention is that providing amusement for the people is nowhere spoken of in the Scriptures as a function of the church. If it is a Christian work, why did Christ not speak of it? 'Go ye, therefore, into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.' Yes, that is clear enough; so would it have been if he had added 'and provide amusement for those who do not relish the gospel'... I do not hear him say to his disciples, 'Run after these people that are leaving. Peter, tell them we will have some different style of service tomorrow; something short and attractive with very little preaching....'

"Lastly, the mission of amusement fails to affect the desired end.... Let the careless and the scoffer who thank God because the church met them halfway stand up, speak and testify.... Let him stand up—but there are none to answer. The mission of amusement produces no converts."

Spurgeon's sermon includes a phrase that gave me the title for this message: "The time will come when instead of shepherds feeding sheep, they will have clowns entertaining the goats."

Friend, Paul didn't leave Titus and his brothers behind in Crete to entertain the people. And Jesus didn't leave us on this darkened earth to amuse. We are here for a godly purpose: to hear from God, and to live and speak his holy word to cut through the culture with conviction and power.

Paul says we have three things to do while we remain in Crete.

Here is the first: "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine" (Titus 1:9). The word "sound" here signifies something immovable, inarguable, rock-solid. God designed doctrine for us to reliably base our lives on it. This means it can't be frivolous or merely exciting to our ears. That kind of doctrine is here one day and blown away by the winds of fleshly whim tomorrow. For some in the church, this may mean putting down the latest Christian best-seller and picking up God's Word, which he provided for our everlasting benefit.

Second, we're to live a holy testimony. "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" (3:8). And third, we're to share the gospel in word and deed: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people" (2:11).

I ask you: As God's living lights in a darkening culture—as his salt meant to preserve life—are we practicing these things? Or have we lost our holy flavor? Have we reduced his Word to advice on better living, or do we still believe it has the power of resurrection life? If we really believe Christ's gospel is Good News—that he died for sinners—we'll tell others about it without apology. And they'll know its power by the testimony we live. Amen.

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