

How (Not) to be a Fruitful Christian

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[0 : 0 0] Our Father, we thank you that as we sang a moment ago, we can find perfection's limits,! But your word knows no bounds. It is eternal, it is true, heaven and earth will pass away, but your word will never pass away. And so, our Father, we pray for your Holy Spirit's help to clear our minds and hearts of distraction, of other thoughts, so that we might focus our attention this evening on your unchanging word, eternal truth, that you, the God who never lies, have spoken and revealed to us. Lead us, we pray, to the Lord Jesus Christ, your Son and our Savior, for we ask in his name. Amen.

Amen. Well, as Shurus mentioned in prayer a minute ago, I thought that because we're finishing our letter, Paul's letter to Titus tonight, I do a little bit of research and see how the gospel is doing on Crete today. Are the truths that Titus was to preach and teach was the work he was to do, is that still bearing fruit on that island. And I was delighted to discover that it is.

Not in every town, as Paul wrote to Titus, but in the capital, Heraklion, there's an evangelical church, which is Greek-speaking, so continuing to reach Cretans on the island of Crete.

There's also an international Christian fellowship that meets in a couple of the bigger towns as well on the island, mainly in English-speaking, but they also work in other languages as well.

And we were delighted, won't we, to pray for our brothers and sisters there on that island tonight. There is a church of St. Titus. Sadly, I don't think Titus would be welcome there, or perhaps that he would want to worship there today. But what a joy it is to know that 2,000 years later, there are still churches on the island of Crete where Titus would be welcome, where the gospel that he preached, the good order that he set up, and the godliness that he taught are still bearing fruit.

[2 : 2 5] But as encouraging as it is to know that Titus's work is still going on in Crete, what about in our church? What about in our lives? As we come to the end of this letter tonight and look at Paul's final words to Titus and the church, I want us to reflect and take in the big lessons of this letter, which I think is Paul's intention.

And as we do that, to consider, am I a fruitful Christian? Am I a fruitful Christian? That's what Paul leaves us asking. See it there in verse 14, where he says, let our people learn to devote themselves to good works so as to help cases of urgent need and not be unfruitful. The passage is broken up in our translation by that heading there, final instructions and greetings. It's not very helpful, is it? In fact, it's a little bit unhelpful, because it disguises, I think, the way that this passage actually works. Because what should be between verse 11 and 12 is actually a mirror. A mirror. Can you see verses 9 to 11 and 12 to 14 are mirror images of each other?

In verse 9 to 11, there's a who and a what to steer clear of. Do you see that? Avoid foolish controversies and so on. As for a divisive person, after two warnings have nothing more to do with them.

A who and a what. And then see in verses 12 to 14, there's a who and a what to hold close to. Do your best to come to me, says Paul.

And a what? Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works. And I think the message at the end of this letter is that depending on which who and what you choose, says our passage, your Christian life and witness will either be unprofitable and worthless, verse 9, or not unfruitful, or in other words, positively fruitful, verse 14.

[4 : 46] And so as we come to the end of this letter and reflect on our own fruitfulness as Christians, we're going to look first at who we get close to, and then what we get into, and then one final point to wrap up the series. So firstly then, as you strive for Christian fruitfulness, be careful who you get close to, says Paul.

Jesus was clear in his own teaching that not everyone who looks like a sheep is a sheep, that sometimes wolves dress up in disguise.

In fact, that picture, if you remember, that we began with last time, Jesus speaking about the trees and the fruit, is actually speaking about a person like that. Beware of false prophets, said the Lord, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Shift the metaphor, you will recognize them by their fruits. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruits, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruits. And Paul is saying to Titus that he's therefore to be in the fruit-checking business on the church on Crete, so that he and the church will know who not to get close to.

Have a look at verse 10. 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.

[6 : 21] He is self-condemned. Now, we've seen recently that same three-step pattern of church discipline, which Jesus taught in Matthew 18, and which Paul is clearly passing on here to Titus as a way of handling false leaders in the church.

The often careful, gracious discipline in church life takes many, many more than three warnings. But the really striking thing here, I think, is that even a ravenous wolf, even a false teacher, is given not one but two opportunities to repent before being shown the door.

If we think that that is harsh and heavy shepherding, just think how painful it is and what patience it takes for a shepherd to see a wolf prowling around the flock and not pull the trigger on first sight.

Warnings are gracious things. Warnings are offers of help. Warnings hold out hope for change. That's how we're all to take the warnings of God's word and of his church.

But specifically here, Paul is talking about a divisive or a schismatic person, somebody who's trying to upset the church and cause disunity in the body of Christ, which is much more serious than our day-to-day falling short as Christians.

[8 : 00] Now, we know the divisions being stirred up on Crete are doctrinal ones. Christians, so the Jesus Plus movement, remember the circumcision party, and their obsession with God's rule book, which they say has to be followed by Christians in a very particular way.

And certainly that is somebody that we will want to steer clear of, who insists that you can't be a proper Christian, a real Christian, unless you do X, Y, and Z things, whether that be going to the one church that has everything right, or speaking in tongues, or following a very specific program, perhaps the so-called spiritual health that goes above and beyond what is taught in the Bible.

But the thing that all divisive people in the church have in common is trying to win people over to their cause or agenda. That might be doctrinal.

It might be personal. It might be political. It might be to do with their preferences in church life. Of course, unity doesn't mean uniformity.

We must be clear about that, mustn't we? It's a wonderful thing that we're all different in the church. In fact, that's such a mark, isn't it, of God's grace, that he's gathered us from so many different walks of life, personalities, interests, views.

[9 : 30] And yet we come together as one in Jesus. So sometimes there will be things that we don't agree on, and that's fine. As long as, brothers and sisters, we agree that the gospel is bigger than our differences, and that Christ overshadows those other things.

A divisive person, though, is someone who says, this other thing is bigger than the gospel.

This other thing is a dividing line for Christians in this church. And 10 out of 10 times, who benefits from that division?

The one who stirred it up. As Paul has said in chapter 1, verse 11, they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

What gain, we might ask? Perhaps it was financial, perhaps a sense of importance, popularity being listened to, getting their way, feeding their ego, by making the church all about them and their issues, and so tearing apart Christ's bride for their own shameful gain.

[10 : 51] As Paul implies, that often happens not in public, but behind closed doors, in homes, quiet conversations, quietly sowing discontent and distrust to win people over to their cause.

And, brothers and sisters, clearly that cannot lead to a fruitful Christian life, because whatever the issue is, whatever the point of contention is, it is always putting something before the Lord Jesus, before the gospel, which is the only soil out of which Christian fruitfulness, godliness, and good works will ever grow.

And so, brothers and sisters, don't do that. Don't do that. Be warned from God's word that that is selfish and wrong, and it is serious.

If you find that you do have a grievance, a disagreement that's that important, you have elders to speak to. Don't start your own faction of discontented people and have grumbling parties together.

Don't do that. Strive for an even stronger unity in the church that allows for our difference in and under Christ. Remember what it is that holds us together.

[12 : 10] Don't compromise that. And, brothers and sisters, if you become aware of divisions being stirred up, don't go along with it.

As soon as you sense somebody is turning you against others in the church, putting things before you that would divide you from others in the church, love them enough to ask them to stop.

Stop. And warn them if you think you can. Speak to an elder if you feel that you need to. But whatever you do, don't let it go any further. Don't think the worst of that person.

Let's not do that. Only time and repeated warnings will tell if indeed they are warped and sinful. But if it carries on, friends, despite the warnings, Paul says, eventually, eventually, we should want nothing more to do with a person like that.

Not out of cruelty, but to guard our true allegiance, which is, verse 12, to Paul and his gospel. Steer clear of wolves, says Paul, but stick close to me and my team of gospel workers.

[13 : 33] See that? When I send Artemis or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I've decided to spend the winter there. Do your best to speed Zenos the lawyer and Apollos on their way?

See that they lack nothing. And we don't need a biography of all these guys, but it seems that Paul's going to send either Artemis or Tychicus to free up Titus on Crete so that he can spend some time with Paul.

Probably that was Artemis, because we know from another of Paul's letters that Tychicus was sent to relieve Timothy in Ephesus. We don't know anything about Zenos the lawyer, but Apollos, as we do know, he crops up in the narrative in Acts.

Remember, the gifted teacher who needed just one or two things ironed out. Seemingly, he's now working with Paul as well, and he and Zenos have probably delivered the letter to Titus, and so Paul's asking Titus to see that, in turn, their own needs are met.

The point is, overall, there are some people that Paul wants Titus to distance himself from, and there are other people who Paul very much wants Titus to lean into, work with, and trust, not least Paul himself.

[14 : 56] We're not told why particularly Paul wanted Titus to come, but the instruction come to me, it's not a small request. It was a really long journey for Paul to make it in Nicopolis, about 300 miles, much of it over sea, dangerous waters, but when Paul says, do your best, we're not to think he's saying, you know, if you can squeeze in a little bit of time, he's saying, make it a priority, come to me.

It's hard for us to appreciate, I think, the importance of that in an age of video calls and emails. We could get our phone out now, couldn't we, and speak to somebody halfway around the world and not even need to get out of our seats.

Whereas Titus would have had next to no contact with Paul on Crete. In fact, as far as we know, this letter is it. So it's no small thing that Paul wants Titus around for a bit to reconnect, no doubt, to talk about the gospel, to speak about Titus' heart, how he's been coping with the difficulties on Crete to discuss the gospel challenges and opportunities opening up elsewhere.

We don't have the whole story, but we do find out later that Titus ended up not going back to Crete, but going on to Dalmatia, meaning that presumably he did do his best and he did get to see Paul, which shows us, brothers and sisters, where Titus' allegiance lay, which is what Paul's allegiance lay, very much with the apostle Paul and his gospel.

Now, that might all seem a little bit kind of circuitous for us, because, well, we can't go and visit the apostle Paul and spend some time with him. One day we will, if we're in the Lord Jesus, but not now.

[16 : 55] And so what are we to do with this? Well, as with Titus, so for us, we are to stick close to Paul and his team. One way we do that today is by what we're doing right now, by studying Paul's letters as a church.

We want to learn Paul's gospel and how we live that out. I hope we've seen on our way through even a short pastoral epistle like Titus that the gospel that Paul taught is a million miles away from a human or a personal agenda.

It is all about God's grace to us through Jesus Christ, which we receive by faith and not our own works. It's truth from a God who does not lie.

So when Paul says, stick with me, really he's saying, stick with the gospel and be committed to its outworking in your life and your church.

another way that we stick with Paul today I think is by sticking with those who faithfully teach Paul's gospel rather than those who promote their own agenda for shameful gain.

[18 : 11] Now we might wonder why that needs to be said in a church like this. Of course, you're a self-selecting bunch and you're all here listening to Paul's gospel being taught. And yet, and yet, in our age of connectivity, actually we have far more access to false teaching than in any other age.

It's far too easy, isn't it, to open up YouTube or Spotify or TikTok and stumble across self-appointed teachers who sideline or twist or contradict the gospel to build a platform and gain a following.

Now it can be hard on first listen to tell the difference but one of the giveaways is that you can't get close to those people. Those people are not asking for a visit from you like Paul.

Often they're happy hiding behind a screen or in a mega church. You can't see the fruit of their lives because they won't let you. And so friends, listen to preachers and teachers you know and trust who tell you the gospel plain and simple, who keep the main thing the main thing.

Don't get tired of that. Don't latch on to something new and different. Listen to teachers whose fruit you can see and see that it is good.

[19 : 40] How not to be a fruitful Christian? Get close to people who put themselves and their agenda before Jesus. Being a fruitful Christian means sticking with the gospel and people who keep Jesus front and center.

Friends, that's our first point. Be careful who you get close to. That's the who. Now, the what. Secondly then, says Paul, being a fruitful Christian means being careful what you get into.

Now, we won't labor the content of the teaching on Crete. We've been there before, haven't we? It's Jesus or it's Jesus plus. We've got that. The thing that comes through though in verse 9 and 14 is how full or empty those teachings are of spiritual worth.

Have a look at verse 9, says Paul, but avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law. Why? For they are unprofitable and worthless.

Now, if you glance up just a bit to verse 8, you'll see that's exactly the opposite way Paul describes the gospel and its products. Excellent and profitable.

[21 : 03] If a business turns a profit, it means they've made more than they have spent. Right? It's a net gain. They've created value. Well, Paul is saying that the real gospel turns a profit.

It creates value. Yes, it costs us. The gospel sends us out to work for Christ, good works. But, it is of far more worth than anything that we might give up or cost or spend for it.

It produces godliness and good works, something worthwhile, profitable. But, if a business is unprofitable, well, it means that they are spending more than they are making.

It's a net loss. And so, this other stuff, says Paul, speculation, going down theological rabbit holes, twisting verses to try and get something out of them that just isn't there, filling in the blanks with our own homemade theories, is unprofitable and worthless.

It's not just that it's wrong, which it is. It doesn't produce anything of any value. It's spiritual investment down the drain, says Paul.

[22 : 20] If you want to be a proper Christian, don't get into that. Now, that's interesting, isn't it? Because that's not often how it seems to us.

Have you ever listened to somebody teach and thought, I don't really understand what they're saying, and I can't really see where it's coming from, but blimey, it's deep.

You thought that? Now, I'm sure that some teaching that goes over our heads is both sound and deep. The danger is when we equate being unintelligible with spiritual depth, as if saying things that ordinary Christians can't understand or see in Scripture is a mark of a maturity that most of us will never reach.

Brothers and sisters, the preacher's job, the teacher's job, is to leave you thinking that what he said was blindingly obvious, because that's plainly what the Bible says that's open in front of me.

If you didn't understand the sermon, and you can't see where the preacher's getting it from, it's not deep. He's failed as a preacher. What value has that teaching produced?

[23 : 37] If you're left scratching your head, how is it going to produce in you godliness and good works? In what way has it been fruitful? Well, it's not, says Paul.

Don't bother with that stuff. Speculation, controversy, hobby horses. In fact, avoid it doesn't do any good. Don't be surprised if you're not growing as a Christian under teaching like that.

Rather, verse 14, let our people learn to devote themselves to good works so as to help cases of urgent need and not be unfruitful. Verse 14 is a warning to us, isn't it, that it is possible.

It is possible to be an unfruitful Christian, to be in Jesus and yet have a faith that's not growing and being productive, contributing to others.

Well, brothers and sisters, if you need to hear this tonight, don't let that be you. Don't be the unfruitful Christian. Well, how? Well, by contrast then, Paul's gospel isn't ineffective, it is fruitful.

[24 : 53] If you want to be a fruitful Christian, then this is where the action is. It's in the simple gospel contained in this letter. The wonderful thing about this, I hope you found this, I hope you would tell me if you hadn't found this, is that you don't need a seminary degree to understand the gospel that is taught in this letter on the page in front of you.

Friends, Paul is saying, lean into your Bible, into Paul's teaching. Not everything is equally obvious in the Bible, but in God's goodness, the plain things are the main things.

And Paul says that ultimate, plain, main thing, the gospel, is genuinely life-changing, profitable, valuable, excellent.

Some of us were at a wedding last weekend for Brendan and Becca. The whole day was really, really special. But a real standout highlight of the day, not just for me, I think, but for lots of people who were there, was hearing Brendan's brother speak, who isn't a Christian, and who up until recently was openly hostile to Christianity, say in his speech that he couldn't put a value on the impact that Brendan becoming a Christian had had on his whole family.

Without Brendan's faith, he said, we wouldn't have the relationship that we do. And talking with him afterwards, he couldn't stop saying how much his view of Christianity had changed in the last couple of years as a direct result of the transformation that he had seen in his own brother's life.

[26 : 44] Tell me this gospel isn't profitable. Tell me that it isn't valuable, worthwhile, fruitful. No one in that room could deny it, Christian or non-Christian, because it produces demonstrable change in the lives of those who believe it.

And it's not just a one-off, is it? It's not just Brendan. I looked around that room and counted at least seven other Christians who've become a Christian had that change in their life over the last few years.

And lots of others who've undergone that change in many years past and who have actually been mentors to those newer Christians.

Isn't that a reason, the best reason, to ditch whatever isn't the gospel? when Paul's saying take care what you get into, he's not saying, you know there's some helpful stuff out there, but it's quite dangerous, so don't really go there.

Or it's quite attractive, but try to resist. He's saying, that stuff is empty and pointless. It's trash. Just don't even bother with it. Don't even look twice at it.

[27 : 59] Brothers and sisters, progress in the gospel, fruitfulness in the Christian life, does not mean finding new or clever or holy-sounding things to say. It means relying daily on the sound doctrine we're plainly taught in Scripture and living out of it ever more fully with each passing day.

And let me encourage you that that is something that every believer can do. Fruitfulness is not something for special, super-holy class of Christians. It is for me and you.

It is for all Christians. So friends, be careful what you get into because it really matters for how you live your life. If you want to be a fruitful Christian, apply the gospel in your day-to-day and devote yourselves to good works.

It's that simple. Get into anything else and you will be unfruitful and unchanged. Be careful who you get close to.

Be careful what you get into. And as we finish Titus and reflect on those things, I want us to finish by asking the question that Paul leaves the church on Crete with.

[29 : 17] Are we a healthy gospel church? It's easy to miss, but one commentary I read in the week pointed out that hidden in verses 14 and 15 is a final warning that not all the Cretans who call themselves Christians are truly Christians.

Just see this in verse 15. Who does Paul ask Titus to pass on his greeting to? All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith.

Because as we've learned throughout the letter, there are those in the church who don't love the Apostle Paul and are not in the faith once for all delivered to the saints. It's a super thought-provoking way to end a letter, isn't it?

Would Titus pass Paul's greeting onto us, onto you, to me, do we, do you love what Paul has taught us in the faith?

The godliness and sound teaching that's to mark out church leaders. The self-control that's to mark us as men and women, young and old, in our families, in the church.

[30 : 31] The good works that are to mark us out as Christians in the world. Above all, do we love the gospel out of which those good fruits grow?

You know, one of the wonderful things about this letter is that Paul has pressed the gospel, hasn't he, into our very different circumstances. We've seen the different callings and opportunities that we each have in our lives to live out the gospel in our day-to-day.

But as we all sing in a moment, there is but one gospel on which we all stand if we call ourselves a Christian. And so, as we conclude the letter, let me ask, do we, do you love this gospel?

It's a gospel which God, our Savior, promised before the beginning of time and revealed in the fullness of time through the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ, and the preaching of Paul and others who saw him.

It's a gospel of grace which saves us not by our works that we have done, but by the perfect work of Jesus being credited to us. It's a gospel which makes us new by the rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit whom he's poured out richly upon us.

[31 : 47] It's a gospel that trains us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the here and now. It's a gospel, brothers and sisters, that redeems us from lawlessness, to purify us as a people for Christ who are zealous for good works.

It's a gospel that gives us a sure hope of eternal life with the glorious return of Jesus our Savior. In short, it is a gospel that we can both put our trust in and live by.

And when we do that, says Paul, life will never, ever be the same again because we will become fruitful, growing in godliness, growing in good works. Friends, do you love that gospel?

Do you love the one that that gospel is about, the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior? If you're a Christian, I trust that you do.

And Paul would urge us then to abide deeply in him. A branch can only bear fruit when it is connected with the vine, said Jesus.

[33 : 05] And so we need to be living in him to bear real and lasting fruit. Friends, as we finish drinking this gospel every day as we close Titus, don't put it back on the shelf, but get it back out.

Read it. Study it. Drink it in. Live in it. And live out of it in your day to day. If we try our very, very best to live a good life, you know, I know, we will soon fail.

Get tired of it. Give up. God, we can only truly change when we are relying on Christ for the grace that we need to live in his way.

Friends, let us devote ourselves to that. If you're not yet sure whether you love Jesus and his message, what Paul would say, I think, if you want to see how good, how true, how trustworthy a message it is, look at the goodness of the life that it grows in Christians and churches that hold fast to it.

Look at the changed lives around you and follow them upstream to the source. Titus is clear that there is no one, no one in here or out there who cannot have the new life that Jesus gives to those who take hold of him by faith.

[34 : 30] If the gospel was good for Crete, it is good for anyone, anywhere. Friends, see the lives around you pointing to him, follow where they lead and take hold of that life which is held out to you freely through the gospel of Jesus tonight.

I take it a healthy gospel church is one then where that can happen, where people do see that life and can follow it and take hold of the Lord Jesus.

And I praise God that it does happen here at Bon Accord, not perfectly, but clearly and truly. Men and women, young and old, have come in and tasted and seen that God is good and turned to him and taken hold of eternal life for themselves.

not because of righteous works that we or they have done, but by God's amazing grace to us all through our Savior Jesus such that we might have life in all its fullness.

May that ever be true of our church, of our faith, and of our witness. And let's pray for that together now.

[35 : 52] Let's pray. Our Father, how we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for the gospel of your Son.

Lord, how we thank you for the freeness and the fullness of it that he has provided for us a perfect salvation that we receive not by working for it, but simply by trusting him and receiving it from you.

Father, we pray as a church family that we would love that gospel, not just in our heads, but in our hearts and also in our hands. Father, help us, we pray, to be devoted to it.

Help us, we pray, to live out of it as we've been taught, Lord, in this letter together. Father, we pray that as we finish this letter, that it wouldn't join only the stack of notes by our bedside table, but Lord, that its lessons would join the lessons that we have learnt in living the Christian life.

Lord, help us to teach one another these truths, to help one another as you have helped us. And Father, how we pray that you would help us to be that witness for others, that you make us to be, by your gospel, changed people, fruitful people.

[37 : 19] Father, we pray for those we know and love, friends, family, people we work with, people at school, at uni, Lord, however we know them, that they would see your work in our lives, would follow it upstream, and would know Jesus Christ for themselves.

all this we pray and ask in his name. Amen.