Christian Leadership: Instruct with Sound Doctrine, Rebuke False Teachers

Described, opposed, condemned – and offered a way back

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, August 2, 2020
PASSAGES	Titus 1:10-16; Titus 1:9; Colossians 2:20-23; Isaiah 29:13; Mark 7:7-8; Acts 2:11
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:02:24 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Sound doctrine produces sound faith. So Paul tells Titus to appoint leaders who can instruct in healthy teaching and silence the false teachers spreading myths and man-made rules on Crete. His description of them is scathing. But right in the middle he quotes one of their own poets in a way that dares them to repent – because the gospel is powerful enough to save liars, evil beasts and lazy gluttons, and that includes us.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Healthy teaching produces healthy faith. Getting doctrine right can, quite literally, give someone their life back.
- There is always someone offering something deeper than orthodoxy. There is nothing deeper than the cross.
- The false teachers were insubordinate, empty talkers and deliberate deceivers, dividing families and teaching for money.
- “Rebuke them sharply” means cut it out like a cancer – so that healing can come and they may be sound in the faith.

- Spiritual disciplines help quiet us before God, but man-made rules cannot make anyone holy. Only the Spirit does that.
- A defiled mind and conscience lose the ability to tell what is pure, and that is how leaders come to abuse and exploit.
- We may describe wickedness truthfully, but we are not free to give up on anyone.

▶ 1:03:35

After some banter with Matt – "big dog" and "up dog" – and an invitation to the outdoor prayer night, sweat and all, Geno told a story from his young days as a teacher at his church.

"Your teaching saved my life"

▶ 1:04:02

At the end of an appointment with a specialist, the doctor told him, "Your teachings have saved my life." Geno was taken aback. The doctor had been raised in a strict, ritualistic, rule-keeping version of Christianity, close to living under the law of Moses, and had become frozen in his faith. Geno and his pastor were preaching the grace of God: that we have been ransomed and redeemed freely in Christ, a gift to be received. The doctor had been sneaking their cassette tapes into his house.

▶ 1:06:19

That is why getting it right matters. "Sound doctrine produces a sound faith." Paul saw false teaching multiplying across Crete, pulling people from sincere faith into error, so he told Titus to appoint elders able "to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). That is the work of church leadership. Geno would take the next passage in four movements: the false teachers described, opposed, condemned – and ultimately offered redemption.

▶ 1:08:16

Why does it need doing? Because there is always someone with a better idea, a deeper faith, an understanding that goes beyond orthodoxy. "Honestly, there's nothing deeper than the cross," Geno said, "where the love of God met the need of humanity and resolved it in the death of Jesus."

The text

▶ 1:09:17

> "For there are many who are 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. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.'"
>
> TITUS 1:10–12 ↗

> "This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth."
>
> TITUS 1:13–14 ↗

> "To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work."
>
> TITUS 1:15–16 ↗

Described

▶ 1:11:41

"Many" – the problem was widespread. Insubordinate: rebels who will not submit to Scripture or apostolic authority. Empty talkers: one writer called them "smooth dissemblers," using many words to say little and impressed with their own talk. Deceivers: not merely misguided, but knowing the truth and deliberately leading people away from it.

▶ 1:12:43

And "of the circumcision party." Cretans were among the crowd at Pentecost (Acts 2:11), and those converted likely went home and worshiped Jesus the only way they knew, as a branch of the law of Moses. Jewish teachers probably added myths and endless genealogies, so by the time Paul and Titus arrived the church was going sideways.

Opposed

▶ 1:13:50

"They must be silenced" – muzzled, the wind taken out of their sails – because they were upsetting whole families. Geno took that to mean division: people caught up in fanciful stories, arguing with each other, damaging homes and splitting the church. And you could tell they were off because they taught for money. "The gospel should never be held hostage to money."

▶ 1:15:17

"Rebuke them sharply" uses a word found elsewhere for cutting off, as with a knife – cutting out a cancer. Bring a swift end to it. But the goal is redemptive: "that they may be sound in the faith." Cut out the cancer so the body can heal. Paul still believed they could become teachers of the truth if they repented.

▶ 1:16:20

"The commands of people" is a famous phrase. Isaiah used it of those who added their own ideas to God's word (Isaiah 29:13); Jesus took it up against the traditions of men (Mark 7:7–8); and Paul wrote:

> "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."
>
> COLOSSIANS 2:20–23 ↗

▶ 1:18:33

Geno was careful here. He believes in the classic spiritual disciplines – fasting, study, long silence. Their value is in quieting and centering us so we can focus on God, hear him and turn from our ways. "The discipline itself does not make us spiritual or holy or clean. The Spirit of God is the only one that can." What Isaiah, Jesus and Paul condemn is adding to the word: this is good, but if you do more, out here, you will be even better. No: not the commands of men, only the word of God.

Condemned

▶ 1:19:41

"To the pure, all things are pure" – a clean conscience can meet things that would make others stumble. But to the defiled, nothing is pure; even good things are twisted in a defiled mind. When mind and conscience are defiled, "the ability to determine what is truly pure is lost" – elsewhere called a seared conscience. People become beastlike: murderers, traffickers, cartel bosses, regimes that kill their own people, corrupt officers and officials who embezzle. They no longer mind hurting others.

▶ 1:22:22

And in the church: false teachers who claim to be near God while the effect of their lives is oppression. "How about church leaders who abuse children? That's all too common in our day." Leaders who embezzle hard-won gifts, or turn a blind eye to those who do. And not only in one stream of the church – "these abuses are everywhere." Paul's word "detestable" could be rendered "execrable," loathsome.

▶ 1:23:43

"Unfit" is an unusual word, used elsewhere of coins. Coins were made of valuable metal, so a coin shaved around the edges no longer weighed what it should; you had to weigh it and add to it. It was unfit for the purpose it was minted for. So these teachers had made themselves "useless to God and dangerous to their hearers."

"Cretans are always liars"

▶ 1:25:26

Then the line in the middle. The prophet was Epimenides, hailed as a major Cretan thinker some five or six hundred years before Paul. "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons" – and Paul adds, "This testimony is true." Isn't that an ethnic slur? Some background helps: Plato and others wrote of Cretans as deceitful and lazy, and the Greek verb meaning "to lie," *krētizō*, literally means to act like a Cretan. Paul did not invent the reputation.

▶ 1:27:15

But notice what Paul does. If the false teachers object, they are calling their own great prophet a liar, which casts suspicion on all of them. If they accept it, they confess they are liars. "Paul in a brilliant way has impaled these guys on the horns of a dilemma" – call your man a liar, or wear it like a cheap suit.

Redeemed

▶ 1:28:45

Why? Because of verse 13: "that they may be sound in the faith." Paul is opening a window for the false teachers to come away from their myths, genealogies and incipient Gnosticism into sound teaching. One commentator thinks Paul is winking at them: Is this what you are? Are you going to stay there? And there is a simple reason: Titus was to appoint elders in every town. Where would they come from? From the Cretans – perhaps even from these teachers, if they repented.

▶ 1:30:51

"Liars, evil beasts, gluttons" could describe some of us – maybe not today. But the gospel of Jesus and the freedom that comes with repentance can save them, and us. "Nobody is too far." Geno admitted the idea was not original to him, but he loved it: in the middle of his harshest criticism Paul holds out an olive branch. That sounds like Jesus, who tells us the truth about ourselves and then says there is a way out – turn to me, and I will clean you up and make you useful.

▶ 1:32:42

So may Jesus give us wisdom and courage to reach out to those we see as wicked, reprobate and beyond healing. "We can be critical. We can be truthful in our description of wickedness. But we can't give up on anybody." Healthy doctrine leads to healthy faith, and the gospel is powerful enough to save even these. Geno prayed that the church's leaders would hold firmly to the gospel "as a proclamation, not as a suggestion to be added to a list of good suggestions," and that everyone would bear witness to it often in conversation.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Titus 1:9
- Titus 1:10–12
- Titus 1:13–14
- Titus 1:15–16
- Acts 2:11
- Isaiah 29:13
- Mark 7:7–8
- Colossians 2:20–23

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Geno's doctor friend was set free by hearing the grace of God. Where have you seen healthy teaching produce healthy faith – or unhealthy teaching do harm?
2. What "deeper" ideas compete for attention with the cross in our day?
3. How do you tell the difference between a spiritual discipline that helps you meet God and a man-made rule that claims to make you holy?
4. Paul's goal in sharp rebuke was "that they may be sound in the faith." How should that shape the way we confront error or wrongdoing?
5. Who have you quietly given up on, and what would it look like to leave a window of grace open for them this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt is Hope Chapel's senior pastor. As a young man he served as one of the teachers at his church alongside his pastor, and they preached the grace of God in Christ. In the summer of 2020 he was working through Paul's letter to Titus with the congregation.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXnsL5ZIA4c&t=3744s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.