

Sober Lives
Titus 2:1-15

To say that this passage was politically incorrect would be quite an understatement. What's all this about wives being obedient to their husbands? And do verses 9-10 mean Paul was in favor of slavery? Why didn't he directly condemn such a horrible institution? And why would he urge slaves not to steal and not even to answer back to those who had treated them so unjustly? What could a passage like this possibly mean for us today?

Well, we might be tempted to say that Paul's teaching was dependent on the cultural context. We might want to say that we don't have to pay attention to those parts of this teaching that don't fit our modern society – we've outgrown all that patriarchy stuff. But that sort of thinking is more than a little dangerous, isn't it? That would mean that if the culture changes, for example if it becomes acceptable for two men or two women to get married, then what is acceptable for Christians should also change. Should we really allow the non-Christian culture to determine for Christians what we should believe and do? If we do that, should we be surprised when those whom we consider to be unrepentant sinners claim to be eligible for office in the Church?

So, how can we explain a passage like this? We might be tempted to think that changing the culture just wasn't Paul's top priority. We might argue that since he was principally interested in people coming to know Christ, he didn't want to get drawn off track by dealing with cultural issues like women's liberation or the abolition of slavery.

But such a strategy doesn't fit what we know about Paul either. After all, this was the guy who kept charging into synagogues, insisting that because of the work of Jesus Christ the Old Testament ceremonial law didn't need to be followed anymore. By making such claims, Paul wasn't afraid to take an axe to the very root of the culture of the Jews at the time, and he certainly wasn't afraid to make some enemies in the process. And what did Paul tell the Romans in our responsive reading – “Do not conform outwardly to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind.” Would Paul ever think Christians should surrender to an ungodly culture?

So, if we can't dismiss what Paul is saying, and if we can't just somehow imagine that this doesn't apply to us anymore, how can we apply this passage to our daily lives and to our own culture? Well, instead of bringing our own concerns about women's issues and slavery and trying to impose them on the text, perhaps we should begin by trying to understand the main point Paul is trying to make here. At three points in today's passage, Paul says that he has laid down these different behavioral rules so that the personal behavior of the Cretan Christians would not cause a scandal to the gospel in some way. Paul doesn't want them to live in a way that would cause non-Christians to blaspheme God's word. On the contrary, he wants Christians' behavior to adorn the gospel, to do credit to it, or make it attractive. In verse 8, Paul particularly urges Titus not to give the enemies of the gospel any room to criticize anything that Titus does. In short, Paul is telling Christians that how we act is as important as what we say,

and that our evil deeds can easily undermine our evangelistic efforts, turning people away from the Christ we claim to follow.

Now, that might lead us to believe that we Christians should try to just blend in with the culture. We might think that in order to avoid giving any offense to non-Christians, we should live in such a way that non-Christians would approve, so that they would then find little reason not to follow the Christ Whom we worship.

But that doesn't really fit what Paul has been saying in this letter. Remember, back in 1:12, Paul has harshly criticized Cretan culture for celebrating dishonesty and for being overly devoted to good food. Paul has said that Cretan culture actually encourages people to behave like selfish beasts.

Okay, so, how does he call the Cretan Christians to behave? Does he tell them to go to all the dinner parties and let the good times roll? Does he tell them that it's okay to tell a little white lie as long as it doesn't involve something really important? On the contrary, it seems that Paul is telling the Cretan Christians to be downright counter-cultural. Instead of telling them to eat, drink and be merry, he calls all of them to be sober – to be prudent, thoughtful, self-controlled, sensible. The same Greek word lies behind “temperate” in verse 2, “teach to be sober” in verse 4, “discrete” in verse 5, “sober minded” in verse 6, and “soberly” in verse 12.

This ideal of a sober sensibility goes along with what he says to the older men in verse 2 – that they should be marked by dignity and self-control. It fits with his admonitions to older women in verse 3, that they shouldn't accuse others falsely or be given to much wine. Titus himself is to set a good example of such sober living, being dignified and incorruptible.

Now, this sort of behavior couldn't have been farther from ancient Cretan culture as Paul has described it. It also couldn't be farther from modern American culture. The American ideal is no longer age and wisdom but youth and excitement. Oh, there may have been a time years ago when people who were dignified and thoughtful were respected, but today they are more often accused of being stuck up or stuffy. Those who try to practice self-control are simply dismissed as being uptight or repressed.

No, Paul certainly doesn't seem to be urging the Cretan Christians to drift along with the culture in order to earn the respect of non-Christians. But if that's the case, how does he want them to avoid bringing scandal upon the gospel? By having their lives match up with their words – by living lives of integrity.

Paul says this directly to Titus in verses 7 and 8. He is to teach with uncorruptness, or integrity. He is to make himself a pattern, to set an example with his actions that should match his words – that's the way that no one will be able to condemn what he says.

But the call to integrity isn't just for Titus, or for other preachers. It's for all Christians, whether they lived in Ancient Crete or in modern America. Older men aren't just supposed to talk about Christ's love and patience – they are to demonstrate these qualities in their own lives. Older women aren't just supposed to teach others about holiness – they are to seek to be holy themselves.

And that, it seems, is why even slaves weren't supposed to steal from their masters – because God's Word says stealing is wrong. No matter how unjust an institution slavery might have been, if a slave was a Christian and he was caught stealing, his actions would contradict his profession of faith, and would thus bring scandal upon the gospel.

But is that also the reason that slaves were called to obey their masters? Is that why Paul says wives should obey their husbands? Well, that's part of the reason, for, like it or not, such radical obedience is taught in God's Word. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians and in his first letter to Timothy, Paul makes it clear that husbands should have a leadership role in marriage, and that men should assume leadership roles in the Church. If someone claims to be a Christian but rejects what the Bible says about these things, it could easily cause a non-Christian to doubt the value of the rest of God's Word, right? In fact, can we doubt that rejecting or re-interpreting what Scripture says about marriage and gender roles has led to many of the denominational difficulties we are experiencing today?

Now, don't get me wrong. The Christian faith has been responsible for the greatest liberation among women in the history of the world. The very first chapter of the Bible says that God created both male and female in His own image. Jesus always treated women with the greatest of respect, which was often a surprise to those around Him – think of how he readily He conversed with the Samaritan woman at the well. When Jesus was first risen from the dead, He chose to reveal Himself not to His chosen disciples, but to the women who came to the tomb. To Jesus, women were in no way second-class citizens.

And yet at the same time, Jesus chose 12 men to be His disciples, and later His apostles, entrusting them with the leadership of the Church. We may not fully understand why this is so, and Paul makes it clear in verse 4 that it is really better for older women to teach this concept to younger women, but it certainly seems as though the Bible holds the view that although male and female are of equal value and importance, they are not the same. Instead, men and women complete each other, and thus have different roles to play in all of their relationships.

But there's another reason why Paul chooses to highlight the need for women to obey their husbands, and it seems to go along with his even more shocking direction to slaves that they should be obedient to their masters and show good faith to them. Why would Paul say things like that?

He tells us why in verses 11-14, and it has to do with our salvation coming through the grace of God. Look, our pride may cause us to resist the very idea of obeying anyone, but if we really understand that all of us are no more and no less than sinners saved by grace, we can't go on imagining that we are any better than anyone else. In fact, if we really understand how little we deserve God's grace and favor, we wouldn't wonder that any of us were called to live lives of obedience to others.

And that's mainly because of how God calls us to express our gratitude for our salvation – through obedience to Him. Verse 12 says that all Christians are called to turn away from worldly lusts or passions. How much money or freedom or comfort we have in this life just

shouldn't matter that much to us, because God has already given all Christians an incalculably greater gift – the gift of Christ Himself.

Paul meditates on this gift in verse 14, which helps to put so many of our modern cultural concerns into their proper context. Christ gave Himself up for us, so why should we balk at modeling His life by giving ourselves in selfless service to others? Christ died that we might be redeemed or set free from iniquity – why should it matter to us that we are bound by any temporary social relationship? Christ has made all who trust in Him a people for His own possession, so why should we care to whom we belong in this world? And if Christ has done all these things for us, why shouldn't we long to do the good works of love and patience and holiness and obedience that He calls us to do, whether they make sense to us or not?

But there is another reason that we shouldn't fret over our relative lack of freedom in this life – our true reward is coming when Christ returns for us. In verse 13, we are comforted with the blessed hope of the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. On that day, all chains will be broken, and all abuses of power will be destroyed. On that day, all relationships will be made what they ought to be.

But as we wait for that great day to come, we are called to live as though Christ and His ultimate reward are the most important things to us today. So, if we go on complaining and stewing about our imperfect situation today, whether it be a marriage that isn't fulfilling or an employer who is a jerk, we will be giving the lie to our professed hope and belief in the coming of Christ. And our rotten attitudes will make those non-Christians around us wonder if anything we believe is actually true. If we don't act much like Jesus, why should anyone listen to what we say about Jesus?

So, is Paul saying that slavery is a good thing? Of course not. Is Paul saying that husbands have license to abuse their wives? Don't be silly. But what he is saying is that all of us Christians are called to live the life of Christ in the midst of an imperfect culture, lives of humility and holiness that stand in stark contrast to the greed and the hedonism of the world, lives that are consistent with the faith we profess. And he is reminding us that however unpleasant life may be in this world, we have a higher hope in a better world that is to come.