

## Gentle Humility Titus 2:11-3:11

Boy, Paul really knows how to challenge us, doesn't he? Last week, we saw how he upends much of our modern understanding about the way men and women relate to each other. Today, he calls all Christians to embrace a radical humility that is expressed in every facet of our lives.

He begins with our political relationships, calling all Christians to be subject to the principalities and powers, to the lawful rulers and authorities. Now, that is admittedly more complicated for us modern Americans than it was for Paul. Because he was a citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul didn't have any real political power – he just had to do whatever Caesar said. In contrast, we Americans are responsible for choosing the people who make the laws, so we have to take an interest in the candidates who run for office and we have to examine what they do once they are placed in positions of power. Sometimes we are called to run for office ourselves, and to take up the burden of public service. But in between elections Paul's command applies to us just as much as it did to him: we must obey the laws and those who put those laws into effect, whether we think those laws are good ideas, whether we respect those politicians or not.

Our humility must also express itself in the way that we treat our fellow citizens. It should go without saying that a Christian should never speak evil of others, reviling people or slandering them. Of course Christians shouldn't get into brawls with either words or fists – we should not be contentious. Instead we should show kindness and courtesy to everyone.

This is especially true of how we should treat our fellow Christians. Verses 9 through 11 have some harsh words for those who would disturb the peace of the Church for no good reason. It seems that some of the Cretan Christians, perhaps some of the false teachers Paul condemned back in chapter 1, were getting sidetracked, arguing about something that had to do with the sorts of things that the Pharisees tended to be concerned with – genealogies or observing certain rules. But whatever they were arguing about, Paul says it was unprofitable and vain – it was useless. It didn't have anything to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In fact, Paul says that these sorts of pointless disagreements are so damaging to the Church that those who engage in them should be rejected. No, this should not be done quickly or casually. Those who cause divisions in the Church by arguing about unimportant things should first be admonished, confronted about their sin and urged to repent. And this process of admonition should be attempted not once but twice. Such a patient process, such an earnest attempt to restore a Christian brother or sister to full fellowship is itself an example of the sort of gentleness and courtesy, the sort of humility that Paul says is so important for Christians.

In fact, we could say that the biggest problem with these divisive people is that they themselves are not modeling the humility that Paul says is essential for a Christian. For is it possible to argue to the point of dividing the body of Christ without being guilty of the sin of pride? Without pride is it possible to keep on insisting that you are right even after the rest of the

Church has admonished you, urging you to let it alone? Even today, there are those who insist on the superiority of their own understanding, who hold to their own interpretation of Scripture in spite of what has always been believed everywhere by all Christians throughout history – can we doubt that they are at least somewhat motivated by pride?

But why is pride such a terrible sin – so terrible that Paul says in verse 11 that it subverts or warps people? Why does the one who practices such stubborn arrogance basically condemn himself?

In part, it's because of what Paul tells us at the end of chapter 2, as he is urging Christians to live sober lives, lives of thoughtful self-control – it's because of the work of Christ. In verse 14, he reminds the Cretan Christians that Jesus had in fact given Himself up for all those who trust in Him. And why did He do this? So that we might be redeemed from our sin, so that we might be purified and set apart as the people of God. It doesn't make any sense for Christians to go on living in the sin of pride because Christ has died to free us from all sin.

But chapter 2 verse 14 gives us another reason to embrace lives of humility – in order to save us, Christ gave Himself up for us. In other words, Jesus endured the greatest act of humiliation, suffering the shame and agony of the cross so that we might belong to Him. Surely, those who are His peculiar people, those who are set apart for His glory are called to follow the humble, self-sacrificial example of Christ. Surely, pride has no place among the followers of the Crucified One.

In chapter 3, Paul also appeals to our salvation as the reason we should reject pride, but he approaches it from a different angle. Instead of looking at the great price Christ paid for us, and instead of meditating on the humble example Christ has set for us, Paul looks at the unhappy state of the human condition, the reason that Christ's sacrifice was necessary. Given the sinners all of us human beings are, none of us have any room for pride.

Look at chapter 3 verse 3: “We ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.” This isn't just a description of a couple of Christians who lived some 2000 years ago, guys named Paul and Titus. This is what real people have always been like in all places and all times. This is the reason that we human beings keep doing stupid and brutal things to one another, from the unkind words we use as individuals to the countless wars and atrocities we engage in when we get organized into large enough groups.

The fact is that, from birth, all human beings are foolish and disobedient. From our very first moments on earth we don't know God and we don't acknowledge Him as God. After all, we have to be taught to love and worship God, but we don't have to be taught to insist on our own way – every two-year old knows how to do that. And when we do learn what God wants us to do, our natural inclination is to reject His law and instead to live by our own rules. In our pride, we imagine ourselves to be strong and independent, but in reality we are just willful fools.

And our separation from God naturally leads us to treat other people in vicious ways. All too often we turn in on ourselves, living only to do what we want, satisfying our own desires and seeking our own pleasures. Because we consider ourselves to be more important than anyone

else, we envy others if they seem to be happier than we are, and we covet what they have. Because we put ourselves first, we naturally turn on anyone who gets in our way. Our lives become filled with hate for others.

Now, maybe you never saw yourself this way. Maybe you were raised in a Christian home and were simply not allowed to be as bad as you wanted to be. Maybe your parents trained you to repress some of your natural inclinations to selfishness, or at least to express those evil thoughts and feelings in more socially acceptable ways. In short, maybe you have always imagined yourself to be a pretty good person. If so, look again at verse 3 – in your pride, you have been deceived.

And how do we know that, regardless of our veneer of culture, all people are sinners at heart? Because of what verse 5 tells us, because of the cross of Christ. Look, if we were basically pretty good people, if we could have saved ourselves by our own works of righteousness, why did Jesus have to die such a horrible death? The fact of the cross proves that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, just as the cross graphically illustrates the fate that all human beings really deserve. No, at the foot of the cross, there is no longer any room for pride.

But the good news is that the cross also shows us there is no reason for pride. For in the cross we also see the kindness and the love of God bestowed on undeserving sinners like us. At the cross, God freely chose to give His best so that we might be restored to a right relationship with Him. In the face of such divine kindness, how can we possibly justify being unkind to others? How can we fail to love others if God has loved us in such an extravagant way?

Yes, in the cross we see the mercy and the grace of God, bestowed not on the self-sufficient and the righteous, but on the helpless and wicked. How can anyone saved by grace possibly imagine that he is better than anyone else? On the contrary, how can he fail to show such grace and mercy to others?

This call to gracious humility makes even more sense when we recall how we ourselves came to have a saving knowledge of the Christ of the cross. As Paul points out in verse 5, we did not clean ourselves up in order to come into the presence of the Lord. No, it is God Who has washed all those who trust in Christ clean of our sins by regenerating us. It is God Who gave us new life. It is God Who gave us a new birth in Christ. Just as Christ opened the eyes of so many who were blind and opened the ears of so many who were deaf, it is God Who makes our dead hearts alive, allowing us to see and hear the truth of the gospel and to respond in faith. It is God Who pours His Holy Spirit into the hearts of all believers, remaking us more and more each day into the image of Christ, allowing us to follow Him more consistently by loving others in the humble, self-sacrificial way in which He loved us.

No, it's no wonder that Paul reacts so strongly to so-called Christians who arrogantly insist on their own way, who are willing to divide the body of Christ by insisting on the truth of their own unimportant ideas. How could such a person possibly be considered a true follower of the Christ of the cross?

And it's also no wonder that Paul urges the Cretan Christians to continue to display the character of Christ. For if we really have been bought with the precious blood of Christ, and if we really have been washed from our sins and made new by the power of the Holy Spirit Who dwells within us, wouldn't it stand to reason that our lives would be marked by the sorts of good works that Paul talks about in verse 8? Wouldn't it make sense for us to live lives of obedience to those in authority, lives that express gentleness and courtesy toward everyone, lives of true humility?

And so we can see that living a gentle and humble life isn't just important to avoid bringing a scandal on the gospel, as chapter 2 tells us. Doing such good works of obedience and compassion is also good and profitable for us as well. For the bottom line is that the God Who loves us enough to die for us is certainly not going to ask us to do anything that would harm us or others. Following God's law of love is the best thing any of us could do for ourselves or those around us.

No, none of this will be easy – I suppose if it were, Titus wouldn't have had to teach his people to do any of these things. But living lives of gentle humility, following the example of Christ is one of the very best ways we can express our love and our gratitude to the One Who has saved us by His mercy.