

Avoiding The Wrong Things

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Date: 18 May 2025

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, tonight we are turning back to Paul's letter to Titus and we are coming to the final part of our study on this letter. So let me read again verses 8 to 11 of chapter 3.
- The saying is trustworthy and 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, but avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, divisions and quarrels about the law for they're unprofitable and worthless.
- 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. He is self-condemned.
- For six weeks, six Sunday evenings, we've been looking at this letter from Paul, one of the apostles of the early church, writing to Titus, a pastor on the island of Crete.
- Paul had been on Crete with Titus and he's now writing to him to give him instructions for the churches that have been planted there on that island.
- [1 : 0 5] Our series has been called Because We Believe and that title is emphasising two crucial things that always need to be kept in balance as we follow Jesus together.
- On the one hand, we need to be clear about what we believe and we need to be careful about why we believe it. So we think, we use the phrase, we believe because, and we think through the doctrinal content that is revealed in Scripture and that we need to know.
- So there's truths that we have to know and understand and believe. But that's only half of what God wants for us because alongside that, we also need to think about the final content of the gospel.
- There are ethical implications that must shape the way that we live. So, in other words, we've been saying all along that as Christians, we believe the gospel and because we believe, then we want our whole lives to be shaped by it.
- And that's one of the big themes in Titus, that our day-to-day lives, everything that you do this week, everything that I do this week, whether it's private, family, work, public, whatever it might be, it is to be shaped by the truth of the gospel.
- [2 : 1 8] If we believe that Jesus is Lord of everything which we believe, then we also believe that the gospel should shape everything in our lives. And so we've seen phrases like the words of verse 8, where Paul says to Titus that we should be careful to devote ourselves to good works.
- And that's reminding us of the place that good works have in the life of the Christian. And we have to be very, very careful that we understand that accurately. We do not do good works in order to be Christians.
- That's legalism, and it is not the gospel. We do not do good things in order to be Christians. We do good works because we believe.
- And so we've been looking together at chapter 3 last week and this week, and we were highlighting two very important principles that we need to remember as we seek to follow Jesus together.

We want to insist on the right things. We looked at that last week. And at the same time, we want to avoid the wrong things.

[3 : 28] And so last week we saw that we are insisting on the right things. So we insist on the problem of sin. We insist on the fullness and the magnitude of God's solution.

And we insist that the appropriate response is that our lives are then shaped by the gospel as we are devoted to doing good, to loving God and loving one another. Tonight we're going to look at the other big emphasis in these verses, the fact that we need to avoid the wrong things.

As individual Christians, as individual Christians, as a church family together, there are things that we need to avoid. And we avoid them because we believe.

And so we'll look at that together under three very simple headings. What do we need to avoid? Why do we need to avoid them? And how do we do that? So first of all, the what question.

What should we avoid? Well, in verse 9, Paul gives us a list. He says that Titus and we are to avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions and quarrels about the law.

[4 : 33] Now, the first thing is to recognize is that these were very big and real issues in Titus's life and in the experience of his congregation. So for the early church, religious questions were a huge source of controversy.

And so some of that controversy came from in-house questions. So, for example, how does this emerging Christian church relate to its Jewish heritage? And then there was more external questions of how do you live as a Christian when you're surrounded by Greco-Roman paganism and a society that has no interest in honoring God and is following a very, very different pattern of religious behavior.

These are the kind of questions that people had. And some of those questions were very, very serious. And you go to, for example, 1 Corinthians, Paul is dealing with lots of those big serious issues.

The challenges of what to eat when you have a society that is sacrificing meat to idols. Is it okay for a Christian to eat them? Questions of what happens when marriage needed to be addressed. But at the same time, many of these controversies were foolish.

And Paul is saying to Titus, avoid those kind of controversies. Genealogies were also a big deal. That's not to say that it wasn't okay to know your family tree.

[6 : 02] When we think of genealogies, we just think of like Ancestry.com and that kind of stuff. One of the things that's been emphasized here is, well, there's a two-fold aspect to it. One is that in the Greco-Roman world, you had a very, very kind of defined class structure in society.

So people were in different classes. And so the family line that you were born into made a massive difference. And these connections were hugely important. Even more so from a Jewish mindset, your ancestry was huge.

That was really their identity. They were descendants of Abraham through Jacob. And if you look at the Old Testament, there's this big emphasis on family lines. So you imagine being in Crete, which is where Titus was.

You could so easily have had two Christians sitting side by side at church. One of them has come from a wealthy, upper-class Greek family. And the other has come from a family that's got a long-standing Jewish heritage.

And it would be so easy for these two people to get embroiled in arguments as to whose family line is more important. Paul says, avoid all that. Then there's dissensions.

[7 : 15] So that's referring to strife, disagreements, basically to fighting. And when you read through the New Testament, you see that from the very earliest days of the church, these kind of disagreements arose.

A good example is in Acts chapter 6, as they sought to distribute food to people. Arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

That was an example of the kind of just disagreements, tensions that were emerging. Titus is experiencing the same thing. Paul himself encountered it again and again.

And so in a church family that's supposed to be characterized by the fruit of the Spirit, instead, you've got the kind of weeds of conflict and fighting beginning to appear.

Paul says, avoid it. And then he speaks about quarrels about the law. And that again was a huge issue for the early Christians.

[8 : 18] If you read in the Gospels, you see that one of the dominant forces in the religious life of the people at that time was the influence of religious leadership groups like the Pharisees. And they were placing a huge emphasis on obedience to strict commandments.

And these applied to who you ate with, what you did on the Sabbath, what you did with your money, and a whole pile of other do's and don'ts.

And the early Christians faced big questions as to whether these regulations still applied to them or not. And so if somebody had been converted from a Jewish background, do they still need to do all these things?

And if somebody had been converted from a non-Jewish background, then did they need to start adopting all of these things? And there was lots of tensions, questions, and quarrels about the law.

And in many places, the Christians were being put under pressure that they must start conforming to the long-standing Jewish expectations.

[9 : 20] That led to many quarrels and controversies. Paul says, avoid all of that. So all of this, you might be thinking, well, very interesting.

Or you might be thinking, this has got absolutely nothing to do with my life. Because Crete, almost 2,000 years ago, can seem like a million miles from today.

And that's especially too when we talk about things like genealogies, quarrels about the law. It seems a long, long way from our lives just now. But what I want us to see is that we actually encounter these things in our own lives.

And we actually encounter them very, very often. Because I think it would probably be helpful for us maybe to slightly paraphrase what Paul is saying here.

For us to see the broader implications and relevance of it. And we can paraphrase it in this way. Paul is saying, avoid pointless arguments. And Paul is saying, avoid obsessions about your connections.

[10 : 37] And Paul is saying, stop fighting over your opinions. And Paul is saying, do not get caught up with a man-made list of do's and don'ts.

And when we phrase it like that, we realize, actually, this happens all the time. It's so easy to get into arguments that are pointless.

That happens in every form of life. It happens in families. It happens at work. It happens at church. It happens at church far too often. That things that do not matter become massive.

And people get into huge arguments over them. It's also so easy to be obsessed with your connections. Now, we need to think about that today.

Because for us, it might not be in terms of family lineage like it was for the people of Crete way back in Titus' time. Although, here in the islands, we do love to think about who is related to who.

[11 : 45] But more widely today, if you think about, you know, connections can become so important in terms of work, in terms of education.

And particularly in the church, there's a huge danger that connections on social media become something that you really obsess over. And you often see that people will put things on social media and they're desperate to get liked or tagged or connected with people that are impressive and that will build their reputation.

It happens so easily. Now, it may not happen to you who are here. But if you go looking on social media, you will not take long to find somebody who is a Christian who is trying extremely hard to get connected with people on social media as much as they possibly can.

It's so easy to fight over our opinions. And especially, it's easy to see somebody who thinks differently from us as an enemy.

So, you can have two Christians, they can have a different opinion on something, and they very quickly start to view each other as a threat and as enemies.

[12 : 57] And instead of serving side by side and respecting each other's different viewpoints, they actually become enemies who start fighting. And that causes massive problems.

And we can easily get caught up in a list of do's and don'ts. So, the do's and don'ts of the Pharisees might seem like an ancient irrelevant to us, but we can have our own do's and don'ts.

And that can very, very often become a huge challenge. And so, and it's all very interesting that because, you know, we all have our different do's and don'ts. Maybe some of you who've maybe gone to university might find that you go and you meet Christians from a different background.

And they do things and you're thinking, they shouldn't do that. And then you do things and they're saying, no, you shouldn't do that. And we all have our lists of do's and don'ts that come into conflict with one another.

And it can happen in loads of different ways. It's happened in our own culture here. What you should wear on a Sunday to church. What you can do on a Sunday. What you can watch on TV.

[13 : 59] Whether you can be involved in something like football or the mod or whatever it may be. There's a thousand different examples of these kind of quarrels over the law, over do's and don'ts that can happen.

The thing we have to recognize is that all this stuff is stuff that we gravitate towards. So there's something about these things that pull us in and that draws us.

And in a strange way, there's something that we find attractive about disagreeing with somebody or finding an enemy or picking fault or realizing, oh yeah, they do that and we do that.

And maybe we feel like we're a bit better because we're different. We gravitate towards it. Paul doesn't say gravitate towards it. He says, avoid it.

We need to avoid it all. And then we want to see and recognize the progression of Paul's argument. Because after verse 9, he goes on to highlight the bigger issue that all of these controversies and genealogies and dissensions and quarrels are moving towards.

[15 : 13] They're all pushing people in a certain direction. And Paul is warning them against that. What is it they're causing? They're all increasing the risk of this.

Division. And here you see Paul's language gets even stronger. So he says, avoid all the things in verse 9. And then he says, as for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once, then twice, have nothing more to do with him.

And so that's a really strong, very clear instruction, very strong warning. And it's, again, one of these places where the seriousness and the danger of division is highlighted so powerfully in the New Testament.

And this is really interesting to notice because, you know, you think of this person, the person who stirs up division here. And maybe you can think of somebody who you've come across in life who is that person.

Or maybe you can just imagine somebody in a church context who would be the person who stirs up division. What almost always happens when you come across that person?

[16 : 25] When you come across a person who stirs up division, what happens? They get a following. People start to follow them and align themselves with them.

People are attracted to controversy. People take sides. People will align themselves with the individual who's stirring up tension.

Paul says, don't do it. If someone's stirring up division, keep right away from them. Because that kind of divisive behavior is warped, it's sinful, and it's actually self-condemning.

In other words, the person who stirs up division is not going to prove themselves right. They're just going to confirm that they're in the wrong. In many ways, one of the big things that we need to notice here is that verses 10 and 11 there are just another reminder that Paul never minces his words when he talks about division.

And we live in a situation where for generations, even for centuries, there has been long-standing division in the Christian church in Scotland and in our island.

[17 : 43] And I have absolutely no doubts that if Paul was to step onto our island, he would be horrified. And we need to pray that our feelings about division would be much, much more aligned with Paul's.

And I think what we want to see here is that the progression in these verses is a warning to us all. So let me just scrub that out.

That the stuff that we read about here, foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, quarrels about the law, these are maybe you think, okay, yeah, they're not great, but they're not that serious.

But the key point is that these things lead on to this thing. Foolish controversies, arguing about who's who, disagreeing on opinions, quarreling over do's and don'ts.

These are the things that lead to division. And that's why Paul is warning us. In other words, what starts off with a pointless argument can result in a terrible sin.

[18 : 53] Verse 10 starts with verse 9. A trivial start leads to a tragic end. Paul says, avoid it all.

So, why do we need to avoid these things? Let's just dig into that a little bit more. And at one level, the answer to that question is quite straightforward. These are just contrary to the patterns of behavior that God wants to see in our lives.

So, if you compare what we read at the start of chapter 3, this is the stuff that Paul wants us to do. And then verses 9 and 10, this is the stuff that he wants us to avoid. And there's just quite a simple clarity there.

There's things that God wants in our lives as we follow him. There's things that God does not want in our lives as we follow him. But what I want us to see is that I think that verses 8 and 9 actually give us another reason why it's so important to avoid these things.

The reason why it is so crucial that we avoid these things is because of the impact that it has on people. If you look at these verses, you can see that there's, I think, a deliberate parallel contrast between this phrase here, excellent and profitable there, and this phrase here, unprofitable and worthless.

[20 : 15] And so, Paul is contrasting the things that are excellent and profitable for people that we insist on with the things that are unprofitable and worthless for people that we are to avoid.

In other words, all of these warnings are given in light of the potential damage that is caused towards people. How we live as Christians matters because we believe that people matter.

That's the key word right there. And it's so important to recognize this because pointless arguments, questions about genealogies, dissensions, all that kind of stuff, it doesn't hurt God.

None of that hurts God. None of it impacts God or affects Him at all. God is supreme, eternal, infinite, unchangeable, and none of these debates, questions, fallouts, controversies do anything to change who God is, what He has done, or what His Word says.

None of it damages God. None of it impacts Him because the truth about God and the truth about the gospel recorded in Scripture is the truth.

[21 : 39] And that is unchanging, it's stable, it's secure. Our foolish arguments do not damage the truth. But the crucial thing that we've got to recognize is that pointless foolish arguments.

And that applies in two ways. These patterns of behavior that Paul speaks about damage relations within the church and that therefore impacts our discipleship.

So when we get caught up in arguing over stuff, we lose focus on the things that really matter. Our priorities get distorted. Our convictions become muddled.

And at the same time, instead of our relationship with one another, as brothers and sisters, instead of that relationship deepening and strengthening, the relationship becomes strained when we fall into all the traps that Paul is outlining for us here.

And when these things escalate, when things get out of hand, then the results are alarming. Because you have Christians who are united together through the precious blood of Jesus.

[22 : 41] Christians who are one family, adopted by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, binding us to Jesus and binding us to one another. Christians who are collectively the bride of Jesus Christ refuse to talk to each other.

And they refuse to eat together. And they refuse to worship together. And so often it's because of a tiny, pointless argument that has no bearing whatsoever on the gospel.

And it's something that can happen to us so, so easily. And it can actually happen to us as we learn more. In 1 Corinthians 8, this is to do with the example of food offered to idols.

But the point is the thing I want to highlight. That Paul is highlighting that knowledge can sometimes puff us up. Sometimes we can learn more and we can think, Oh, I know this. And why actually? Because I know this, I know that they're wrong.

And that can puff us up and start building these tensions and these arguments. And we have this desire to be proved right all the time. And yet, it's important to recognize that ultimately God is not looking for you and me to be proved right.

[24 : 03] He's actually looking for you and me to be proved loving. Because none of us are right about everything. And we're constantly, constantly learning.

But from day one in our walk as followers of Jesus, God expects us and wants us to love one another. The kind of fights and quarrels that Paul writes about in Titus 3 are all ways in which the church gets hurt.

And Paul says, avoid all that. But there's a second group of people who get hurt by the kind of behavior that's been described here. And that's people outside the church.

And I think that's hinted at the fact that Paul uses the term people there at the end of verse 8. The Greek word there is actually the word for men.

But that word is used in a general sense of humanity, of people, men and women. And one of the books I was reading about this passage was saying, look, this is telling us that there's implications for our evangelism.

[25 : 06] And I think that that's absolutely right. Silly arguments, pointless debates, unnecessary quarrels. All of it damages the evangelistic witness of the church.

And I'm so glad that Titus 3 makes this emphasis because we actually see this all the time. People get caught up in arguments and within the church and people outside look in and they think, I don't want to be part of that.

And the key point is this. Fighting inside the church hurts people outside the church. Because ultimately if we are putting somebody off the gospel, we're hurting them.

Because we're giving them a reason to stay away from Jesus. Sometimes when we get into an argument, we think, you know, it can be very easy to think, you know, who am I defeating?

Because we want to kind of win the argument. But I think it would be wiser for us to think, who am I hurting in this argument? And that will maybe help us avoid the things that Paul is speaking about here.

[26 : 15] So there's the, when we think about the why, there's the impact on the church, on our discipleship. But there's also the impact on people around us and on our evangelism. So last question, how do we avoid these things?

So I'm a bit nervous that so far this has been a bit of a negative, potentially very depressing sermon. And so I hope that we're going to end on quite a positive note.

Because the key thing I want us to see is, when Paul says, avoid these things. One of the big reasons why he tells us to avoid these things is because we actually can avoid them.

We actually can avoid them. And so how do we do that? Well, let me just pull out three things super quick from this chapter. First is that word, avoid.

Literally, that word means stand around. And so I think that's just a very, very helpful concept for us to think about.

[27 : 18] I want you to imagine that there's a group of people and they're getting into a silly argument over something that actually doesn't matter. Paul is saying, just stand around them. Avoid them.

Keep away from them. Bypass them. And I think that bypass is a good phrase. There's such a thing as a biblical bypass. So sometimes there's arguments, controversies, tensions.

And God says, just keep away from them. Go around them. Secondly, one of the things that we can remember in terms of how to avoid these things is to remember the importance of partnership in the Christian church.

And so there's a beautiful window.

And so there's a beautiful window into that in these verses. And it's reminding us that Christians are always on the same team. We're always pulling in the same direction.

[28 : 39] We're all serving the same master. And that means that if we disagree, if we fall out, then we are undermining what we really are. And Paul has this amazing phrase here that I think is just beautiful.

Greet those who love us in the faith. And it's a great reminder that, yes, you will constantly come across Christians who will think differently than you on lots of different things.

But they are those who love you in the faith. And you love them as well. And that should be the first way in which we think about them. And then thirdly, we're asking the question, how do we avoid these things?

Well, I think the big thing I want us to remember is that we avoid them by remembering what we believe. That's been our big theme this study, because we believe.

And so we want to avoid these things because we believe. So we avoid foolish controversies because we believe that the gospel is simple and clear and beautiful.

[29 : 44] Jesus has come to save sinners, and he's calling everyone to come to him and trust in him. That's what matters. Not what color the carpet is in church or whatever else it might be that we fall out over.

We avoid rivalries over genealogies or connections because we believe that we have the same father. We have the same brother. We are one family united by the Holy Spirit as brothers and sisters.

If we could take a snapshot right now of the church in India, in Iran, in Moldova, in London, in Carloway, in South Carolina, in Brazil, right now, today, it would look so different.

Same father, same father, same savior, same Holy Spirit, same church. We avoid dissensions because we believe that the gospel brings reconciliation, healing, harmony, peace.

And so even if we do disagree over things, we just still work together, support one another, and grow in grace together.

[31 : 05] We avoid quarrels about the law because actually the law is summed up by one simple command, that we are to love God and love one another. That sums up the whole law. And we avoid division because we absolutely believe that there is one church, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and savior of all.

And so that's the end of our series. And as we bring it to our conclusion, we are just being reminded that in the gospel, doctrinal content and ethical implications go hand in hand.

And what we believe must shape how we live. And it's reminding us that in the gospel, Jesus is taking all of us on this amazing journey where the Holy Spirit is transforming us, guiding us and helping us to grow.

All of that is because of the amazing grace of God. It's all because he's come to meet us and rescue us and restore us. And this week, we want every single part of our lives to be shaped by the gospel.

And we want that because we believe. And so as we finish, I've got two questions. Do you believe?

[32 : 26] That's the most important question of the whole series. Please, please think about that. But I think some of you are here are maybe thinking, well, I don't know if I believe.

I want to, but I'm not sure. Well, if that's you, then I have a second question for you. When you read, do you care about all this?

So when you read Titus or any part of the Bible, when you hear what God is saying, do you care about it? Is it something that you think about?

Is it something that matters to you? Do you care about it? And the reason that I'm asking that question is because if you do care about it, if you do care about it, I hope that you can see that the whole reason you care is because you believe.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.