

Silencing the Wolves

Titus 1:10-16

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on February 19, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ This month we began a sermon series in the book of Titus that we're calling *Good Doctrine, Good Deeds*. One of the main themes in this letter is the close relationship between what you believe and how you behave. **In other words, out of good doctrine flows good deeds while out of bad doctrine flows bad deeds.**
 - This morning's text is a clear example of the latter. Last week, we saw the emphasis in chapter 1:5-9 on true elders who hold to sound doctrine and have the reputation of being above reproach. But this morning, in vv10-16, we see a contrast in false teachers who hold bad doctrine and have reputations that are even worse.

- ❖ If you tried to create a list of the strongest opponents of biblical truth today – a top ten list of enemies of God's truth – outspoken critics and atheists like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, or the late Christopher Hitchens would probably come to mind. Or you might think of teachers or leaders of other competing world religions or new age teachings.
 - The one thing in common is that all of these opponents are outsiders. Outsiders of biblical faith. Outsiders of the Church. **Yet what we see in studying church history is that the strongest and greatest opponents of biblical truth have actually come from within.** From inside the Church.

- ❖ In the 2nd century, the idea that the Bible, the books of the Old and New Testament, were all divinely inspired by God and contain timeless, unchanging truth was being challenged and reassessed. And guess who was leading the charge? Not an outside skeptic but a bishop in the early church named **Marcion**.
 - In the 4th century, there was a popular teaching gaining ground that affirmed Jesus to be a good teacher – a great man! – but denied the idea that he was divine or equal to God. Sounds like what many outside the Church would say about Jesus today, but this was said by a prominent priest in the church of Alexandria named **Arius**.
 - And in the 5th century, the doctrine of original sin – the idea that we are all sinners not just by deed but by nature, that we were all born sinners – was strongly repudiated and rejected. Not by secular humanists but by a British monk named **Pelagius**.

- ❖ My point is that the same kind of charges and criticism often leveled against the Christian faith in our day has actually been around for centuries, and the chief proponents of these views have actually come from within our tribe, within the flock.
 - The common analogy in the NT is to compare false teachers to wolves, in particular, **wolves in sheep's clothing** (Mt. 7:15). In **Acts 20**, the Apostle Paul is saying farewell to the Ephesian elders, and in his final words, he charges them to be good pastors who care for the flock of God.
 - He goes on to say, ***"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*** (vv29-30)"

- ❖ These wolves will come – not from the atheists, not from the secular elite, not from society at large – but from “*among your own selves*”. There will be wolves in sheep’s clothing. They look like us and talk like us, but they’re speaking twisted things to draw us away from Jesus.
- ❖ *So what do we do? How do we handle these wolves?* If you were to ask Paul, he would say: **Appoint godly, qualified shepherds to feed and protect the flock.**
 - Find some godly men who, according to v9, hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so they can give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. And as a flock, your job is to joyfully submit to their leadership, to not resist their efforts to feed you as sheep and to protect you from wolves. Instead, encourage them, pray for them, and even join in the fight.
 - Now according to this morning’s text, to fight wolves two things need to happen: 1) Wolves need to be exposed, and 2) Wolves need to be silenced.

Wolves Need to Be Exposed

- ❖ The first thing to do is to identify them, but that’s not easy if they’re wearing sheep’s clothing. In Titus’ case, he was dealing with wolves who, according to v16, profess to know God. They profess to be Christians, to be sheep, and their widespread influence in the churches of Crete suggests they were probably in positions of leadership. It’s possible they were leaders and teachers in the church.
 - **Likewise, we can expect to find wolves in our day standing behind pulpits, sitting in church councils, having their names on church marquees.** Just because a man is in a position of leadership, just because he has a following, doesn’t mean you can assume he’s a good shepherd and not a wolf in disguise. You can’t identify wolves by just looking at their title and position, their influence and popularity. You have to look deeper. **You have to examine their lives and their doctrine – how they actually live and what they actually teach.**

Examine their Teaching

- ❖ Let’s first examine their teaching, since we’re looking for false teachers. Look at v10. Though there was a shortage of godly, qualified elders in the church, Paul says, “*For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party.*”
 - So we need to identify “*the circumcision party*” to understand their teaching, but before we go there, let’s briefly consider their attitude as teachers.
- ❖ Paul describes them as “*insubordinate*”, meaning they don’t like authority. They don’t like anyone or anything telling them how they ought to live. So instead of cherishing the trustworthy word as taught (v9) and submitting to its authority, they saw it as burdensome and restrictive. So instead of holding firm to the word, they let go of it.

- ❖ By calling them “*empty talkers*”, Paul means they don’t teach anything that edifies. The word in the original is a combination of “useless” plus “words”, meaning they teach useless words that don’t promote spiritual health in their hearers. In fact, their words actually lead people astray. They are “*deceivers*”.
 - And then at the end of v11, he says they teach what they ought not to teach being motivated by “*shameful gain*”. **So if you’re looking for wolves, look for teachers who snub authority, who offer useless and deceptive words, and do it all for dishonorable gain.**

- ❖ Now unfortunately, Paul doesn’t spell out the content of their teaching, but he does give a clue when he describes them as “*those of the circumcision party*”. Now there are other passages in the NT, where that phrase refers to a group of strict Jewish Christians in the early church who taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:12). That was a heresy that Paul adamantly opposed.
 - But in Titus’ case, there is no emphasis on the practice of circumcision itself, which was the hot button issue for those opponents. Instead, we read in v14 that these teachers were obsessed with “*Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.*” Later in chapter 3:9, he further describes them as those who get into “*foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law.*”

- ❖ Now in examining their teaching, notice how it lacks two things. **Their teaching lacks authority, and it lacks transformative power.** They were an insubordinate bunch that chaffed at authority, so **it’s no surprise that their own teaching lacks authority being based on myths instead of on the revealed truth of God in Scripture.**
 - These Jewish myths, connected with an obsession for genealogies, were probably concocted stories about biblical heroes spun out from the various genealogies found in the OT.

- ❖ And with their low view of Scripture and its authority, that explains why they focused more attention on human commands – or as Paul puts it in v14 “*the commands of people*” – instead of listening to and teaching the commands of God.
 - All the other NT uses of that phrase “*commands of people*” are connected with the **practice of asceticism**, the severe discipline of the body for religious motives. They were probably teaching the same things that we find in **1 Timothy 4:1-3** where false teachers were forbidding marriage and certain foods to preserve their ritual purity.

- ❖ That is why I say their teaching not only lacks authority but also transformative power. **Their teaching only addresses external, ritual purity but fails to provide internal, moral purity. It addresses the body but fails to transform the soul.**
 - Paul explains this in v15. “*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.*” He’s referring here to two kinds of purity: ritual purity & moral purity.

- What he is saying, in essence, is that to the [morally] pure, all things are [ritually] pure. But to the [morally] defiled and unbelieving, nothing is [ritually] pure.

- ❖ **Paul’s opponents were so obsessed with ritual purity because, in their paradigm, you had to be ritually pure to approach God, to be close to him.** What they failed to understand is that their constant struggle and failure to remain ritually pure under the old covenant was meant to drive them away from any confidence in the flesh (in your ability to remain pure) and towards greater confidence in God’s grace, namely his promise to send a Messiah who would somehow make you truly pure from the inside out, once and for all.

- ❖ And when the Messiah finally appeared in the person of Jesus, he taught his disciples, **“There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”** (Mk. 7:15)
 - In other words, a person is defiled before God not because of what you touch or ingest or by partaking in anything external to you BUT because of the defilement that is already in your heart (your sinfulness). But if you could just be purified of your sinfulness, then all things would be [ritually] pure for you.

- ❖ And the good news is that Jesus came to do just that. Paul says, in **Titus 2:14**, our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, **“gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”**
 - By giving himself up in death for us (for those who trust in him alone), Jesus purified us from the inside out; thus making **“all things”** pure for his people to partake in, whether it be marriage or food or any other good gift from God.

- ❖ **But the false teachers don’t share in this joy and freedom because they’re not trusting in Christ alone as the one who can purify them.** That’s why Paul calls them **“unbelieving”**. Even though they profess to know Jesus, their faith, their confidence, is in their own flesh, their own asceticism, their own ability to make themselves pure.
 - **They were teaching a “Jesus-and” gospel.** To be pure before God, you need to trust in Jesus AND keep certain human precepts and teachings (Col. 2:22). Believe in Jesus AND stay away from certain foods, for example. So, granted, they weren't trying to subtract from the gospel, but they were trying to add to it, to supplement it.

- ❖ But as Alistar Begg says, **“A Christ supplemented is a Christ supplanted.”** By adding something to Jesus, they end up denying Jesus. They weren’t denying his necessity for salvation, but they were denying his sufficiency. And that amounts to denying him altogether. **That what Paul means in v16 when he says they profess to know God but they deny him by their works.**
 - By not trusting in Christ alone, by still relying on their works, their minds and consciences remained unclean and defiled, and everything they devoted themselves to remained tainted by their sinfulness. To these wolves, nothing is pure.

Examine their Lives

- ❖ So if you examine their lives, you'll eventually see their true nature. Even if you don't feel knowledgeable enough to judge a person's theology, even if you're a new Christian and you don't know much about the Bible, you can still identify a wolf by examining their lives.
- ❖ When you examine a good shepherd, it's apparent that he is above reproach. He is a man of integrity. He's not a hypocrite. He's the same in public as he is in private.
 - But not so with wolves. **There is a distinguishable difference between what they say about themselves and what they actually are.** They profess to know God but their works (their behavior) suggests otherwise.
- ❖ Turn to **Matthew 7:15**. When Jesus warned his disciples about false prophets who come in sheep's clothing, he explained what to look for. *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."*
 - **You will recognize them by their fruits.** In other words, you will recognize teachers of bad doctrine by the bad deeds that will naturally grow out of them.
- ❖ So in this case, for Paul's opponents, what were they like? *What kind of fruit did they bear?* Well in **v12**, he doesn't hold back punches but speaks a tough word of rebuke. *"One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true."* Ouch.
 - The author of that quote is a 6th-century BC Cretan teacher named **Epimenides**. In the ancient world, the isle of Crete was well known for its decadence and immorality.
- ❖ **Polybius**, the ancient Greek historian, is quoted as saying, *"So much in fact do sordid love of gain and lust for wealth prevail among them, that the Cretans are the only people in the world in whose eyes no gain is disgraceful."* **Cicero**, the Roman philosopher, described them this way, *"Moral principles are so divergent that the Cretans ... consider highway robbery honorable."*
- ❖ Needless to say, the reputation of people from Crete was not good. And all Paul is doing is agreeing with that general assessment, which comes from one of their own. And generally speaking, Epimenides is right. In fact, the Greek verb for to lie or to cheat is *kretizo*. Where do you think it came from? The word for lying was coined after them!
 - And they did act like beasts. Epimenides joked that the absence of wild animals on the island was compensated by its very inhabitants. Paul is not making this up.

- ❖ So I wouldn't read v12 as some sort of ethnic slur on his part. I can guarantee he's not buying wholesale into ethnic stereotypes. Remember, he is the one who unashamedly preached the gospel as the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, even lazy, gluttonous Cretans (Rom. 1:16). And the fact that he is directing Titus to appoint elders from among their congregations presupposes that he doesn't think that quote applies to all of them.
 - Instead, Paul is applying that quote directly to his opponents, who demonstrate their true nature by how they live. So even if the falseness of their teaching is subtle or hard to detect by the untrained ear, you can still recognize them by their fruits.

How Do We Identify Wolves Today?

- ❖ *But how do we identify wolves today?* Sometimes it's easy. In our day and age, where truth has become so subjective and relativized, many wolves no longer feel a need to cloak themselves in sheep's clothing. They're allowed to freely roam among the flock, and sometimes they're even given the shepherd's staff!
 - When I was living in the Pacific Northwest, I read an article about a certain Episcopal priest from Seattle. The headline read, "*I am both Muslim and Christian.*" The story was about how she had been practicing the Islamic faith over the past year while still ministering in her church. She was drawn to Islam after being profoundly moved by the way they prayed and now claims to be both 100% Christian and 100% Muslim.
 - What's even more disturbing is that her local bishop is quoted as saying that he considers the interfaith possibilities that might come out of this to be "exciting".
- ❖ Like I said, sometimes it's easy to identify wolves, but usually that's not the case. We usually have to take much care and patience to get to really know these leaders and teachers. **Take the time to observe their personal conduct, their family life, their treatment of others.**
 - Ask yourself: *Does their behavior match what they profess to believe? They might profess to know God, but do their actions deny him or exalt him? Do they snub authority or submit to it? Are they motivated by shameful gain or selfless generosity?* If you give it time, their true nature will be exposed. "*A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.*"
- ❖ And when you examine their teaching there are a lot of questions you can ask, but let me suggest that you focus on just this one. **Does the thrust of their teaching direct you to put all you hope in Jesus alone to be pure and holy before God OR are they preaching a Jesus-and gospel?**
 - "Real Christians trust Jesus *and* don't drink, smoke, chew, or date girls that do."
 "Real Christians trust Jesus *and* vote Republican ... *and* homeschool your kids ... *and* have a one-hour devotional everyday ... *and* only read these particular authors or only listen to these particular preachers." Whatever it is – whether it's actually a good thing or not – if they're using it to supplement Jesus, they end up supplanting Jesus.
 - If their teaching in any way encourages you to put confidence in the flesh (in your own ability and achievements), then you're likely dealing with a wolf.

Wolves Need to Be Silenced

- ❖ *So what do we do when we find a wolf in the flock?* You silence them. Look at **v11**. “*They must be silenced since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.*” The word to silence means to stop the mouth, to muzzle. So when Paul wrote “*they must be silenced*”, he literally meant “*they must be silenced*”.
- ❖ But our tendency nowadays, especially in Chinese culture, is to avoid confrontation. Just leave them be and trust the sheep to be smart enough to see right through them. Instead of silencing them, we just ignore them and hope no one pays attention.
 - But Paul, in his example and exhortation, is far more confrontational. He says to actually silence them, to muzzle their speech. In **v13**, he says to rebuke them sharply. In chapter **3:10** he goes further and says, “*As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.*”
- ❖ **The sad thing in our day is that, in most congregations across North America, Paul would be considered too combative, too belligerent.** He would probably be the one silenced for creating division, for being so bold as to try to confront another teacher. “*He’s muzzling free speech! He’s violating my civil rights!*”
 - No, my friends, this is not an attempt to muzzle free speech. **This is not censorship. This is Christian love in action.** This is what good shepherds and faithful flocks do when you love God and love his Church.

Do it For the Good of the Flock

- ❖ Notice in **v11**, Paul says to silence them “*since they are upsetting whole families*”. “Whole families/households” could actually be interpreted to mean whole churches, since churches were considered households of God and since they actually met in homes in those days.
 - So their teaching was upsetting whole flocks of God’s people, that is, they were upsetting their faith. They were causing the sheep to fall, to stumble.
- ❖ *How so?* Think about it. If these wolves were teaching a *Jesus-and* gospel, and if the sheep were buying it and putting their confidence in Jesus *and* in their own flesh, in their own ability to keep themselves pure before God, then that will lead them down one of two roads. They’ll either be filled with **spiritual pride** OR devastated by **spiritual despair**.
 - **On one hand, a *Jesus-and* gospel naturally promotes competition and unhealthy comparisons among the flock.** If I’m encouraged to put confidence in the flesh, then I’ll feel purer and closer to God when I am able to keep those human commands – whatever it is I’ve added to Jesus. And I will tend to associate with other Christians who are as pure as me (according to my standards), and I’ll likely look down on those who I consider less pure. That’s the kind of pride that a *Jesus-and* gospel encourages.
 - **But let’s say, try as I may, I just can’t keep these expectations. I’ll probably fall into despair.** I’ll despair my salvation, God’s love for me, my acceptance in the community, etc. If I consistently fail to keep my *Jesus-and* faith, then I’ll always see myself as defiled in God’s eyes.

- ❖ Just imagine if someone started teaching in your small group things that were false and harmful. They were teaching *Jesus-and* causing some of your members to be tempted by pride and others to be filled with despair. In that situation, love for your friends would demand that you speak up and silence such teaching.
 - When Jesus' sheep are being harmed by wolves – as was the case for the churches in Crete – **love demands that Christians do whatever they can to stop it.**

Do it For the Good of the Wolves

- ❖ But at the same time, we should also be thinking about the good of the wolves. In **v13**, Paul says to “*rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.*” So he leaves a glimmer of hope for these wolves. **Perhaps by silencing them and exposing the error of their ways, they might become sound (healthy, orthodox) in the faith.**
 - This reminds me of what Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 2:24-26**. Turn with me there. Timothy was dealing with wolves who were stirring up “*foolish, ignorant controversies*”, so Paul tells him, “*And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*” Paul's holding out the same hope in Titus.
- ❖ **Friends, this means it would actually be unloving to let a wolf continue in his falsehood.** It would be unloving to just ignore him and leave him be. Because that would mean leaving him in the snare of the devil. That would offer no opportunity for the individual to come to realize that they're in bondage to error.
 - So we correct our opponents with gentleness. We rebuke and silence them in hope that God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth. That's the loving thing to do.

How Do We Silence Wolves Today?

- ❖ *So how should we silence wolves in our day?* Let me first say what we *shouldn't* do. We shouldn't be so scared of wolves to the point that we stop our ears, run away, and tell our flock to do the same.
 - “Silencing the wolves” *does not* mean you never engage them in dialogue or healthy debate. No, we should do what we can to correct them with gentleness and pray hard that God grants them repentance.
 - **What we mean by “silence them” is that we should never allow a wolf to remain or to obtain a position of teaching influence in the flock.** We should never give a wolf a platform, a soapbox, a pulpit. We should silence them.
- ❖ And the most effective strategy is still Paul's recommend strategy: **Appoint godly, qualified shepherd-teachers (elders) to watch over you, to feed and protect you as sheep.** And trust their leadership over the teaching ministries of the church.

- They are responsible to guard the doctrine of this church and to be well informed about what is being taught and who is doing the teaching in all the various classes, fellowships, and small groups.

- ❖ **I encourage all our leaders to make sure that there is open communication between you and the elders and pastors** regarding what is being taught and who is doing the teaching in your particular fellowship or small group or class. That's not micromanaging. That's due diligence coming from shepherds who takes their job of defending you seriously.
 - **And I encourage all of us to pray earnestly to our Chief Shepherd to graciously give us more godly, qualified under-shepherds** – to raise up more elders from among us – for the good of his Church and the praise of his glory.