

‘ON BEING SOUND’ TITUS 1:5-16

[St Mark’s Online Services, Sunday July 4, 2021]

1. Soundness.

Soundness is not a word we use much these days. Previous generations tended to use the word more. Sometimes today you’ll still hear someone say that a person is of ‘sound mind’. But generally it’s a word that’s more likely to be used of things other than people- like a sound car engine, or a sound governance process, or the sound construction of a building.

But even though it’s a word that we don’t use much these days, it’s nevertheless a concept that remains important. It’s a word about how well something works, about how healthy something is, about being dependable.

And in the passage we’ve read today/tonight, Paul employs this word twice. In verse 9 he speaks of the church leader who is able to encourage people by sound doctrine. And then in verse 13 he talks about the need to rebuke a false teacher so that they might return to a sound faith.

And the use of this word here reflects Paul’s pre-eminent concern in this passage. And, in fact, his concern in this letter as a whole. Paul wants the church in Crete to be sound. He wants everything to work well. He wants it to be a healthy church. He wants it to be dependable. And so he sees the importance of sound leadership, sound doctrine, and church members who are sound in their faith. And Paul’s writing this letter in pursuit of that goal- it’s for the sake of soundness. And we’re going to think this morning/evening about how Paul unpacks this idea in these verses- in particular by looking at what Paul says about Christian leadership. And we’re also going to think about what it means for soundness to characterise our leaders, and our church as well.

2. Matters of Secondary Importance.

But before we get to the heart of what we find in these verses, I want to briefly comment on three matters of secondary importance. These are three things that are worth noticing, but they’re certainly not the most important things in the passage. But let me at least acknowledge these things briefly.

- the role of Titus

Number 1- the role of Titus. Whilst these verses are primarily concerned with the role of the elders in the Cretan church, we mustn't forget that they come in the context of a personal letter from Paul to Titus. And this letter has been sent to Titus so that he will serve the Christians in Crete on Paul's behalf. And the task Paul has given him is to appoint key leaders so that the church will be protected from contamination¹. And Paul especially wants to make sure that Titus knows what kind of leaders to put in place. By these appointments, Titus will be investing in the long term health of the church. We don't really have modern equivalents today of the kind of role Titus played here, but in those early days of the Christian churches the work of an apostolic representative like Titus was crucial.

- assumptions about eldership: plural and male

Number 2- Paul's assumptions about eldership. You see, Paul assumes that Titus will appoint multiple elders in the church, and that they would all be male. And these assumptions, as many of you would know, have shaped our patterns of eldership here at St Mark's. On both fronts I think Paul's assumptions here are significant. And, in both cases, the things Paul says in other passages should persuade us that his assumptions here are driven by principles and not just local or historical circumstances. I think Paul always envisaged that churches would be led by teams of male elders. This most definitely does not mean that he saw no place for the leadership or teaching of women. Again, in other passages he makes it perfectly clear that he did expect women to be involved in leadership and in teaching. But in Paul's mind that is not in tension with what he assumes in his instructions to Titus here- that he would appoint multiple, male elders.

- the terms 'elder' and 'overseer'

And number 3- the terms 'elder' and 'overseer'. What we see here is that they are used pretty interchangeably. In verses 5-6 Paul speaks of these church leaders as elders. But then at the start of verse 7 he uses the term 'overseer', even though he's talking about the same group of leaders. In Paul's writings, then, these two words are largely synonymous. They describe slightly different aspects of the same role. The leaders Titus was to appoint were people of seniority in the church who would have the task of overseeing the church's ministry.

3. Matters of First Importance.

Well, as I said, those three things are important to notice but most definitely secondary. The primary things Paul wants to make sure Titus is clear on are the role of the elders, the character they must demonstrate, and the context in which they serve.

¹ See W D Mounce *Pastoral Epistles* (Word Biblical Commentary 46), p.385

- role

Let's start with their role. There are two verses that are particularly significant on this point and they are verse 7 and verse 9.

Verse 7 tells us that the elder must manage God's household. We should note from the outset that this is not the same as managing a business or managing an event. God's church is a household- a family. And so the elder is not to be like a CEO, but like a father. He is to manage the household of God in the way a good father manages the home. He is an overseer- watching over the affairs of the household and the people of the household. He has a real authority given by God, but it's an authority to be used in humble service. He doesn't have to do everything himself, but he has to make sure everything that needs to be done is done. He oversees. He manages.

And then also verse 9. His chief responsibility is to hold firmly to the truth of God so that he can encourage people by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. So he will manage God's household not just by making decisions and giving directions, but by teaching God's word. He will feed people a healthy diet of sound doctrine so that they will be healthy. And he will be ready to contradict error and call out falsehood so that God's people will be protected from spiritual danger. These days a lot of people don't like hearing their leaders be negative about certain ideas or be critical of other leaders. But when it comes to sound doctrine, we should expect our leaders to have a negative as well as a positive teaching ministry. Both are essential- because the role of the elder is to oversee and manage the family of God, chiefly by teaching the truth.

- character

But secondly, we need to think about the character of the elders. And undoubtedly this is where the emphasis in these verses lies. When Titus appoints elders in the church the main thing he needs to look for is the godliness of these men's lives. And this itself is hugely instructive for us. In the world today when people look for leaders, this generally isn't their first thought. When people seek leaders for government, or in business, or at school or Uni, or in sporting teams, the society we live in values things like experience, qualifications or training, personality, charisma. And even when the world around us talks about things like the need for integrity in our leaders, they're still not talking about the same kinds of things Paul says to Titus here. When it comes to our political leaders for example, almost no-one cares about their drinking habits, or how hospitable they are, or how obedient their children might be. But these are the things that Paul tells Titus to look out for.

Twice in these verses he uses the word blameless- verse 6 and verse 7. This is not a word that means 'perfect in every way'. But it refers to someone who has an

outstanding reputation- someone who can't be blamed for any well-known and significant sins. Someone who is known for their godliness.

Some of the sins mentioned in verse 7 have in common the use power or authority in a corrupt or selfish way. Paul is saying that there is no place for that amongst the leaders of God's church. The sins of verse 7 are also marked by a lack of self-control.

So it's no surprise that in verse 8 self-control is mentioned specifically as one of the virtues Titus should look for, alongside hospitality, the love of what is good, uprightness, holiness, and discipline.

But perhaps what's most striking in these verses is what Paul says in verse 6 about the elder's family. Titus is to appoint men who, where married, are faithful to their wives, and, where they have children², have children who trust Christ and honour their parents. The logic here³ is that the elder's ability to manage God's household will have been proven by how he manages his own. And I personally find this logic very sobering indeed. Paul believes that if you want to know whether a man is fit for eldership in the church, then the best thing you could do is spend a couple of weeks in his home. Paul is saying that loving leadership in the home is the best way to train to be an overseer, and it's also the best way to test someone's suitability. And this is why here in our own church, when each year we review the ministry of each of our overseers we don't just comment on what we can see of each other's service at church, but we also ask each man's wife to share how they are going at home.

If I were to summarise what Paul teaches here I would say he sets a very high bar for eldership in the church. And as one of the overseers in our church, the standard outlined here rests heavily upon my shoulders. And yet, in one of the books I was reading this week, the writer said things about these verses that really took me by surprise. This particular commentator described this passage as setting 'extremely moderate standards'⁴. He suggested that the 'vices denounced may seem too obviously non-Christian to require mention'⁵, as if he'd never met a Christian who struggled with his temper, or struggled with drunkenness! And he even went on to say that 'honest, upright, clean living, social men are all that is demanded'⁶. I have to admit I found his commentary very strange- even naïve, and foolish. Paul is asking Titus not just to search for clean-living, and honest, and social men. Rather he's looking for men who have been tested and who've been found blameless. He's looking for men who

² I acknowledge that here Paul seems to assume the elder will be married and a father. So why not draw attention to this alongside the other assumptions mentioned in Point 2 of this sermon (ie. the assumption of both plural and make eldership)? The difference, I believe, is that Paul's assumptions here in regard to plurality and gender are consistent with principles he argues for explicitly in other places, whereas I can't think of anywhere that Paul explicitly says that elders need to be married or need to have children.

³ See also 1 Timothy 3:5.

⁴ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Tyndale NT Commentaries), p.185.

⁵ Guthrie, p.186.

⁶ Guthrie, p.186.

will set an exemplary model in the church of what it means to walk in the way of Christ. Paul insists that those who lead the church must be people whose character is held in the highest regard by those they lead. When it comes to leaders, character matters above all.

- context

And then, thirdly, the context in which the elders exercise their ministry. This is why verses 10-16 are so important in this chapter. Because in that final paragraph Paul is spelling out why the character and teaching of the church elders is so important. And what it boils down to is that not everyone believes the gospel. And in fact, there are people in the world, maybe even in the church, who will teach things that are different to the gospel and who will, from time to time, lead people away from Jesus.

In Titus' time, in Crete, there were especially those who belonged to a faction Paul called the 'circumcision group'- people who believed that certain Jewish rites and practices, like circumcision, were still an essential part of worshipping God, even in the new covenant. Paul, of course, believed nothing of the sort. And he really worried about the risk these false teachers posed to the Christians in Crete. And what's more, Paul also knew that their motives were corrupt and selfish- they were trying to make money out of people- verse 11. And they were ultimately just like all the unbelieving Cretans they lived amongst- verse 12. You can see, can't you, how different such teachers were to the sorts of men Titus needed to find to be overseers in the church. For those who truly follow Christ, truth leads to godliness. But in the case of these people, lies led to terrible ungodliness.

And Titus' job, and the job of those he appointed as elders, was to rebuke⁷ those who spread deception, and to silence them by teaching⁸ the truth. Paul's hope, of course, was that even these false teachers would be won over by truthful instruction, so that even they would once again be sound in the faith- verse 13. But until that time, these corrupt, detestable, disobedient people posed a threat to the Good Shepherd's flock. And the reality of that threat underlines just how important the godly character and the godly teaching of the elders would be.

And the same is true today. Godly elders in every church exercise their ministry in a context where the true faith of God's people is endangered. There will always be false teachers and unsound doctrine. There will always be lies and deception. There will always be the thinking and values of the world to contend with as well. And that's a key reason why the people of God need great leaders- leaders who will be for them like a lighthouse on the headland as they seek safe harbour. The people of God need

⁷ The word used in verse 13 is the same word in the original as that translated in verse 9 as 'refute'.

⁸ The 'didasko' verb is used in verse 11 just as it was in verse 9 (translated there as 'message' and 'doctrine').

leaders who speak the light of God's truth whenever they open their mouths. And they will need leaders who consistently show the light of Christ by the way that they live.

4. Soundness at St Mark's.

And so, what do these verses mean for our church? Let me conclude by reflecting with you for a few minutes on what soundness might look like at St Mark's. And I certainly hope that's something you really care about. I hope you pray for our church regularly. And I hope that when you pray for God's household here in Northbridge you pray for the health of our church. I hope you pray for soundness. Because soundness is what God wants for our church too. And our prayers for soundness are prayers he loves to answer.

But what does it look like it? Three things as we finish this morning/evening.

- sound doctrine

To begin with, sound doctrine. This is how Paul puts it in verse 9. And Paul uses the word doctrine to refer to the things we're taught, the things we believe- our Biblical convictions grounded in the gospel. And these verses remind us how crucial to the health of the church sound doctrine is. But I would suggest that there are a lot of Christians these days who under-estimate the importance of this. Some may even say that they don't concern themselves with doctrine and prefer just to focus on following Jesus in their day to day lives. Well I hope Titus 1 has convinced you that that's a false dichotomy. And more than that, I hope Titus 1 has convinced you that it's actually impossible. Because truth leads to godliness. Following Jesus in our day to day lives is fruit that can only grow from the tree planted in the gospel- the tree planted in sound doctrine. Doctrine is not just important in theological colleges. And it's not just important in church staff meetings or overseers meetings. Sound doctrine matters for every member of our church. Every day. If you are insufficiently grounded in sound doctrine to recognise a falsehood when you hear it, you are in spiritual danger. And if you are insufficiently grounded in sound doctrine your godliness will not grow, and instead you'll just be like the rest of the people who live in this city. All of us need sound doctrine. And all of us need leaders who will hold firmly to sound doctrine and encourage us with it.

- sound faith

But then, secondly, we also need soundness of faith. This is the language Paul uses in verse 13. And in that verse he's talking about people who've rebelled against Christ and who need to be rebuked so that they'll come back to a sound faith. But of course, that's what God wants for all of us. He doesn't just want us to think soundly but to live soundly.

And we see these things side by side right through this letter. You can't have one without the other. Sound doctrine leads to sound faith is another way of saying that the truth leads to godliness. So when we pray for the health of our church we must pray not just that we will be nurtured and protected by sound teaching and right convictions, but also that our church will be filled by people living out their faith in purity, in self-control, in uprightness, in holiness, in discipline. In this way we will not just teach the truth of Christ to each other with our words, but we will show the truth of Christ to one another by the way we live.

- sound leadership

And, so, thirdly and finally today/tonight, we need sound leadership. This is the clear focus of the verses we've read this morning/evening and so this is where our focus should be today/tonight as well. We need sound leaders. And as Paul has reminded us here, sound leaders will be people of sound doctrine, and sound faith. They will be people who hold firmly to the truth, and who live exemplary lives- for the blessing of our church, for the strengthening of our witness, and for the glory of God.

Of course, in the first place these verses are for our leaders- especially for our pastors and overseers. But to the extent that these verses set a pattern for all Christian leadership, they also apply very directly to any leaders in our church who have a role in teaching people- whether children, young people, or adults. And I would suggest that this is the kind of passage to which the leaders of our church ought to return, again and again- with a humble heart and with earnest prayer. Does my life match up to the picture Paul paints here? Am I making progress in this kind of godliness? Am I falling into any of these sins? Am I at home, when no-one but my family can see me, everything I seek to be as I minister at church as well? These are the kinds of questions we should regularly be asking ourselves. And they are the kind of questions we should regularly be asking each other too. This is the kind of Spirit-led reflection we should open ourselves up to often. Here is a kind of inventory that can be used to test ourselves for soundness.

But of course, there is also clear application here for those who desire to be leaders in our church, and for those of us responsible to appoint them. We're reminded by this passage that the way the world thinks about leadership is very different to how God thinks. So we're not necessarily looking for leaders who have racked up a certain amount of experience. We're not just looking for people who can say they've done a certain kind of training. We're certainly not just looking for people with Type-A personalities, or the kind of charisma that makes people want to be around them. First and foremost we're looking for people of character- people who have the kind of character we'd want others to emulate. And we're looking for people who care deeply about sound doctrine. We're looking for people who can manage God's household by teaching, encouraging, and rebuking faithfully.

But I also want to make it clear that this passage is relevant not just to our leaders, but to every one of us. Because I would hope that every person at our church would pray for our leaders. And when you do, these are the things for which you should most earnestly pray. Pray for leaders to be sound in doctrine. Pray they'd hold firmly to the truth as they teach. Pray they'd have courage to correct and rebuke. But above all, pray for growth in godly character. Pray the Spirit would help them to repent of sin, and to see where they need to change, and to keep surrendering themselves entirely to the will of Christ.

And when you do pray for our church's leaders, I hope you'll also pray that God would raise up the leaders this church needs in the future as well. This is something I personally pray for our church every week. We won't always have the leaders and pastors we have now. So I pray that in the years to come God would mercifully provide for St Mark's as he has provided up till now. I pray that he will give us not just enough leaders, but more importantly these kinds of leaders in days to come. And I want to encourage you to join me in that prayer too.

And can I also say that when you pray for the leaders of our church I hope you will do so with immense thankfulness. I know I do. Because our church is, in my judgement, uncommonly and extraordinarily blessed with many leaders who embody Titus 1. And of all the blessings our church knows, this would have to be near the top of the list. I'm not saying our leaders are all perfect and don't have room to grow. God knows we're all works in progress. God knows I am! But when you think about those who God has graciously give to oversee us, and to manage our household of faith, I trust you join me in thanking God most earnestly that he's given us men and women to lead us who do treasure sound doctrine, who do hold to it firmly, and who really do humbly seek to live like Jesus.

But of course, the application of these verses to every one of us goes beyond our prayers, doesn't it? Because God couldn't have been clearer with us about what sound leadership looks like. So when you speak to the leaders of our church, encourage them in these things. When you see God's good work in them, don't just tell God you're thankful but tell them too- they often value that kind of encouragement more than you can know. And, if you see that they fall short of this high standard the Lord has set, then I urge you to bravely speak to them and to show them the fault you see. And if you need to, speak to me or one of our other overseers if you think there is something that needs to be addressed by other leaders. I really do mean this. If you see a problem I want you to call it out. Because with a high standard we also need very high accountability. And my continued hope and prayer for our church is that the lives of our leaders will be marked by great transparency, and by a sincere willingness to be rebuked and corrected. And in that way too there is a role for everyone to play in ensuring that our church is sound because our leaders are sound.

In fact, the stakes are too high for us to approach leadership in any other way. God has chosen in a very significant way to tie the soundness of our church to the soundness of its leaders. He has chosen, in some senses at least, to tie the soundness of your faith, and mine, to the soundness of the leadership that is exercised amongst us. And this is why the things we've talked about today/tonight matter so much.

May the Lord hear our prayers and make us a sound church by causing sound leadership to flourish amongst us.

Paul says:

'An elder must be blameless.'

'He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.'