



BECOMING ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS: FOCUS

Titus 3:8-11

July 5, 2009

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

Introduction

I assume everyone has heard of Joe the Plumber. But you may not have heard of John Ploughman. John Ploughman was for the great nineteenth-century British preacher, Charles Spurgeon, what Joe the Plumber was for John McCain in the 2008 presidential election: an ordinary guy who offers extra-ordinary advice to ordinary people in ordinary language.

Now while Joe the Plumber offers advice on the economy and the national debt, Charles Spurgeon's John Ploughman offers advice to the church of Jesus Christ on the importance of focus: "Never stop a plough to catch a mouse," ole' John would say. "Think of a man and a boy and four horses all standing still for the sake of a mouse!" Think of having a great work in hand, and then leaving it to squabble over some petty little nothing. That's as nonsensical as burning down your house to get rid of a few cockroaches!¹

It's interesting that ole' John's minister was of the opinion that churches were often the worst offenders in this regard. "John, if you were on the committees of some of our societies you would see this mouse-hunting done to perfection. Not only committees, but whole bodies of Christian people, go mouse-hunting," the minister said to dear John Ploughman. With a little gentle nudge from John, the minister went on to elaborate:

A society of good Christian people will split into pieces over a petty quarrel, or mere matter of opinion, while all around them the masses are perishing for want of the gospel. A miserable little mouse, which no cat would ever hunt, takes them off from their Lord's work. Again, intelligent men will spend months of time and heaps of money in inventing and publishing mere speculations, while the great field of the world lies unploughed. They seem to care nothing how many may perish so long as they can ride their hobbies. In other matters a little common sense is allowed to rule, but in the weightiest matters foolishness is sadly conspicuous. As for you and me, John, let us kill a mouse when it nibble our bread, but let us not spend our lives over it. What can be done by a mousetrap or a cat should not occupy all our thoughts.

Obviously ole' John Ploughman and his minister knew a few things about the subject of this week's passage: the importance of focus. And how important focus is for the church! For it's all too easy for the church to get off message and distracted from her mission by a thousand other trifles. Or, in John's words, it's very easy for the church to be busy mouse-hunting when we've got whole fields to plow!

Last week we saw the importance of readiness. This week we will see the importance of focus. Next week we will complete this series with a message on devotion. So the logic of these three passages is this: ready, aim, and fire. Be ready for every good work – ready; focus on the

¹ This and other citations taken from Charles Spurgeon, *The Complete John Ploughman*, p. 214-16.

right priorities which will encourage good works – aim; and devote yourself to the actual doing of good works – fire.

Focus is the focus of this passage. And what we have in these verses is a call to focus. Focus is one of the primary responsibilities of the leadership of the church. Remember Paul in these verses is addressing Titus, the leader of the churches in Crete. But focus is a task for every believer who cares about living a life of zeal for good works. None of us can shirk the call to be focused if we want to live a life that has impact for the gospel. Focus is a critical practice, a critical discipline, for any church that cares about being zealous for good works and effectively advancing the gospel.

But how do we maintain focus? There are three disciplines that enable focus. One positive, two negative, because, as is often the case when it comes to focus, what we avoid is often as important as what we do. The three disciplines in this passage are: first, hammer on the great truths of the gospel (3:8); second, steer clear of quarrels that add nothing and go nowhere (3:9); and, third, deal with those who stir up division (3:10-11).

Discipline #1 – Hammer On The Great Truths Of The Gospel (3:8)

This first discipline is this: *hammer on the great truths of the gospel*. And it comes from the first verse of our passage. “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” (3:8).

Here at the beginning of this verse Paul refers to a trustworthy saying, one of five trustworthy sayings in the Pastoral Epistles, and it points us back to the preceding context where we find the trustworthy saying defined. The trustworthy saying is found in verses 4-7, where (as we saw last week) Paul rehearses the great truths of the gospel:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Now Paul says this is a trustworthy, reliable, rock-solid truth: our salvation is all of grace. But he also says to Titus that he is “to insist on these things,” or to hammer away on these truths. Not in order to be tedious, but to encourage those who have actually come to know this God of grace to not let their knowledge be idle but active. Titus is to insist on these things “so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works” (v. 8). That’s how stimulating zeal for good works happens: by maintaining singular focus on the great gospel truths of Scripture and by hammering away on these truths until they are driven deep into the soul of every man and woman and child. Which in turn is the way we adorn the doctrine of God our Savior (2:10). For good works, as our passage says, are not only “excellent” in their own right, but “profitable for people,” inviting to outsiders.

The great gospel truths of 3:4-7 are like a nail. Our responsibility as a church, then, is to hammer constantly on these great gospel truths. This is the starting point and the most important thing in staying focused: insisting on the great truths of the gospel. Because like a presidential candidate on the campaign trail, it is all too easy for the church to get off message. It is all too easy to get distracted. So, too, for each one of us: we too should on a daily basis be

doing our own hammering, driving these truths deep into our own souls. Is it your daily practice to drive the gospel nail an inch or two deeper into your soul?

What this looks like in practice is making Christ ever and always central in all that we do and say. Proclaim him—that’s how Paul defined his mission and ministry and message (Col. 1:27). I love Spurgeon on this point: “Brethren, first and above all things, keep to plain evangelical doctrines; whatever else you do or do not preach, be sure incessantly to bring forth the soul-saving truth of Christ and him crucified.”² This, brothers and sisters, is precisely what the Apostle Paul calls for in our passage: *stay focused by hammering away on the great truths of the gospel, on Christ and him crucified.*

Discipline #2 – Steer Clear of Quarrels That Add Nothing and Go Nowhere (3:9)

The first discipline reminds us what we must devote ourselves to, what we must insist on, what we must preach and teach and speak to one another. The second discipline, however, has to do with what we must avoid. For the second discipline has to do with those things that are remarkably effective at distracting a church from her message and mission: quarrels and controversies.

As we saw earlier in the letter in 1:10-16, there evidently were some influential leaders in the churches in Crete teaching things they shouldn’t be teaching and acting in ways they shouldn’t be acting. They were from a Jewish background and putting great stock in legal matters related to the Jewish law.

But these things, as Paul points out, were only breeding controversy and stirring up quarrels. So Paul’s instruction to Titus is crystal-clear: “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law” (3:9a). And if Titus should, so too should we. This, then, is the second discipline for maintaining focus: *steer clear of quarrels that add nothing and go nowhere.*

But why should we steer clear of foolish controversies? Because, Paul says, “they are unprofitable and worthless” (3:9b). They don’t contribute to our understanding or practice of the gospel, but distract from it. They add nothing and go nowhere. They don’t stimulate zeal for good works, but sap it. In addition, foolish controversies can become quite harmful to churches. Listen to what Paul says to Timothy:

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. ¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. ¹⁶ But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, ¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene (2 Timothy 2:14-17).

So Paul says both to Titus and Timothy and us that we are to avoid them, literally, to walk around them, to steer clear of them. We are to treat foolish controversies like quick sand because once you step into it, you’ll have a very difficult, if not impossible, time getting out of it—and it will absorb all your energy and attention. Therefore, we are to avoid them.

Please don’t misunderstand me at this point. Not all controversy is foolish. Nor is all debate pointless. Sometimes controversy is necessary and even beneficial for the church. In the Epistle to Jude, for example, we are told “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the

² Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, p. 78.

saints” (v. 3). Or think of Paul’s letters, everyone one of which is contending for some truth and engaged in refuting some form of error or heresy. The same could certainly be said of Jesus himself. Did you realize that there would be no church if the church did not engage in controversy to preserve and protect the doctrine of the church? And did you realize that there would be no New Testament if believers were to avoid any and all controversy, since much of the New Testament is written precisely to deal with and defend particular points of doctrine and practice?

No, we are not called in this passage or any other, for that matter, to avoid any and all controversy. However, we are called to avoid *foolish* controversy. But how do you distinguish between controversy that serves the church and controversy that distracts the church? How can you tell the difference between fruitful controversy, on the one hand, and foolish controversy, on the other? Here are a few principles that will help you know when it’s a foolish rather than a fruitful controversy.

First, you know it’s a foolish controversy when you find yourself quarreling over a minor doctrinal point as though it were major truth of the faith. This is perhaps the most common temptation, since we all have our own doctrinal hobby-horses we like to ride. For some of us it’s easy to make a mountain of controversy out of a mole hill of doctrine. And we want to persuade others that this particular issue—*our* issue—really is of first importance for the church.

Second, you know it’s a foolish controversy when you engage in debate or dispute in the wrong way or with the wrong methods: when we find ourselves attacking someone else’s character or questioning their Christian commitment because they happen to disagree with us. In other words, a worthwhile debate can become a foolish controversy when we act like fools!

Third, you know it’s a foolish controversy when you’re in the debate for the wrong reasons or with the wrong goals in mind. If it’s a critical issue and you care about the health of the church, then the controversy can often be constructive and fruitful. But if your primary concern is to win an argument, score points on someone else, or show your skillfulness in debate, then you are likely engaged in a foolish controversy.

Alternatively, fruitful controversy is controversy that is entered into with the right aims and intentions, in the right way, and over the right kinds of issues—genuinely important issues, issues that the history of the church has shown to be important, issues that Christians down through the ages have agreed are important. When all these things are in place, then it can be fruitful controversy for the sake of the gospel and the purity and preservation of the church’s witness in the world.

Again, let us turn to Spurgeon for advice on this point.

Do not make minor doctrines main points. Do not paint the details of the background of the gospel picture with the same heavy brush as the great objects in the foreground of it. For instance, the great problems of sublapsarianism and supralapsarianism, the trenchant debates concerning eternal filiation, the earnest dispute concerning the double procession, and the pre or post millenarian schemes, however important some may deem them, are practically of very little concern to that godly widow woman, with seven children to support by her needle, who wants far more to hear of the loving-kindness of the God of providence than of these mysteries profound; if you preach to her on the faithfulness of God to his people, she will be cheered and helped in the battle

of life; but difficult questions will perplex her or send her to sleep. She is, however, the type of hundred of those who most require your care.³

For the sake of all the widows and other humble, godly servants of the Lord Jesus Christ who long only to be well fed upon the rich truths of the word of God and to hear of the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior, let us resolve, then, to *steer clear of quarrels that add nothing and go nowhere, that neither illuminate nor edify, but only distract and demoralize.*

Discipline #3 – Deal With Those Who Stir Up Division (3:10-11)

So these are the first two disciplines required for maintaining focus. But here's the challenge. Even if we as a church hammer on the great truths of the gospel and steer clear of quarrels that add nothing and go nowhere, we might still struggle with maintaining focus. Even if we do our part, there may yet be some in the church who are unwilling to do their part. There are those in every church who distract the church from her ministry and mission by stirring up division.

So the third and final discipline we need in order to maintain focus is this: *we must deal with those who stir up division.* This is what Paul calls Titus to do in the last two verses of this passage: "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" (3:10-11).

Who is a person that stirs up division? A person who stirs up division is a person whose primary interest is *power*. They want power in and thus influence over the church. But they seek to exert influence not with the tools of the word and the Spirit and the gospel, but with three tools Paul refers to back in the first chapter: insubordination, empty talk and deception (1:10). They are insubordinate to the word of God and the leadership of the church; that's the starting point. But they will try to garner people to their cause with words, words, words—what Paul simply refers to as empty talk. And thus they are skilled in the art of deception. The end result is an attempt to accumulate power through the manipulation of relationships for personal gain. That's the profile of a person who stirs up division. And people like this, friends, kill churches. They split leadership and undermine authority and ultimately distract the church from her mission.

How do you deal with those who stir up division? You respond to them with discipline. That's what Paul describes in these verses: a three-stage process of church discipline. The first and second stage involve issuing the person with an informal or semi-formal warning, clarifying that what the person is doing is divisive and admonishing them to turn away from it. At this point in the process, the goal is restoration, and the purpose of these two warnings is to accomplish that end. Furthermore, the process is to be pursued by those involved with gentleness and grace and patience (see 2 Tim. 2:22-25). But if the person is unwilling to renounce his ways, then it forces the hand of those in leadership to advise the church to avoid or shun the person or "have nothing more to do with him" (3:10). And when it comes time for us as a church to do that, we can do so with broken-hearted resolve knowing that the person has already done it to themselves. This is the point of verse 11: take the final step of avoidance

³ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, p. 78.

or shunning or disassociating with the person, “knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”

Now it is important to note two things. First, the process Paul outlines here is very similar to and perhaps even patterned after the process Jesus describes in Matthew 18 for dealing with sin:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The second thing you should know is that we as a leadership are committed to following this instruction. We will do it prayerfully and humbly and broken-heartedly, but we will do it. We will be a church that practices church discipline because the very integrity of our message and vitality of our mission depends upon it. We will never become that City on a Hill without exercising church discipline.

Conclusion

“Never stop a plough to catch a mouse.” That’s John Ploughman’s good and godly advice to us. And it matches these words we have from God’s word: we need focus. We need gospel focus as a church. Focus is a critical discipline for the church because there’s nothing like ‘doing church’ to distract the church from her message and mission. And staying focused requires hammering home the great truths of the gospel, in season and out of season; it requires steering clear of quarrels that add nothing and go nowhere; and it means we must, on occasion, deal with those who stir up division and thus distract the church from her mission.

Let’s conclude where we began: with one final word from John Ploughman’s minister, who rightly says for the benefit of us all:

Let us give our chief attention to the chief things—the glory of God, the winning of souls for Jesus, and our own salvation. There are fools enough in the world, and there can be no need that Christian men should swell the number. Go on with your ploughing, John, and I will go on with my preaching, and in due season we shall reap if we faint not.”

So may it be for us as well: let us continue on with our preaching and teaching and life together as a church, giving our chief attention to the chief things, staying focused on the great truths of the gospel and turning aside from everything that would hinder or distract us from our great mission!

Amen.