

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Titus 2:1-14, “Text of Terror or Harbinger of Hope: Household Code in 2021”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/19/2021**

Friends, the Good News is not that we ought to stay in our socially prescribed roles and be good people who do good things. REPEAT.

No: God’s grace has come to us through Christ,  
who has been revealed as a king who is *not like* earthly rulers  
and invites us into freedom of life with the Holy Spirit.  
Therefore we are free from externally imposed rules and categories  
that keep us locked up in fear and motivate us by comparison  
and “matching-up” to others.

The Spirit graciously grows Christlikeness in us which  
leads to life that is different from the world around us.

Even if we know this, when we come to a text like this one in Titus  
it can stimulate our overactive consciences.

We read lists of ethical imperatives and wonder how we stack up.

We also read of masters, slaves, heads of households, and rulers and think,  
well, maybe God really intended for wealthy men to be in charge after all.

If that’s what a Bible passage inspires in us,  
is that the voice of God, or the voice of guilt?  
Are such notions from the Holy Spirit or are they hardly spiritual?

This passage and others like it throughout the New Testament  
have been used to answer that question throughout history.

These passages are known as “household codes”  
and they didn’t start with the Bible.

Even Aristotle had a household code along with other ancient writers.

It was common to express ethics pertaining to the rights of masters  
with regard to these household roles,  
and so the Apostle Paul wrote his own version  
of the household codes.

This is the version he wrote to Titus as he nurtured the church in Crete.

The choir sang of a “Lord-built house” today.

Is this the kind of house that the Lord is building today?

But to be honest, these Biblical household codes

have something of a muddied history.

They have been used to support the subjugation of women,

the institution of slavery,

the divine blessing of patriarchy,

and the acceptance of totalitarian regimes.

Why have they been used like this?

Because they assume that men are in charge of the house,

that women should be subject to their husbands

and that slaves shouldn't rock the boat,

and that authorities should be peaceably agreed with.

So...it can be a little awkward for the Christian who believe

that women are equal to men, that slavery is an abomination,

and that we should actively resist social forces

that don't serve the flourishing of God's creation.

Such passages are sometimes included in a set of biblical texts dubbed

by Phyllis Trible as “texts of terror,”

because they have been used to inflict terror

upon so many for so long.

I listened to a conversation between Pastor Jason Miller & Dr. Jessica Hughes

about these household codes, and Dr. Hughes had some helpful insights.

Are these divinely ordained categories?

Dr. Hughes helpfully starts the conversation by recognizing that

domestic violence and violence against women

(and I would add the LGBTQ community,

minorities and people in less powerful positions)

is a modern-day horror story in our country.

We've heard traumatic testimony this week from  
women who were abused as young girls in the US Gymnastics program,  
and then the FBI .... *the FBI* ... utterly failed to protect them.  
The predatory male doctor was too powerful to unseat.

So we see that the lived experience of people who aren't in  
categories of privilege is not good.

What do we do with passages that seem to say  
these categories are what God intends?

How do we hear the Good News in these passages?

Dr. Jessica Hughes describes four different approaches to reading these texts:  
[SLIDE]

1) Text means what it says. This approach says that the household code  
is a vision of God's enduring, hierarchical, well-ordered universe.  
Just take it at face value and try to organize society in a similar way.  
Male headship is a good thing, we can turn slave-master  
into employee-employer, or citizen-ruler.

Of course, abusing people is wrong, but that's not the fault of the categories.

2) Amelioration. This approach notes that these social categories  
were preexisting in Greco-Roman world. Paul didn't invent them,  
but spoke into them in ways that seek to prevent the worst abuses  
and brings some honor to people who were often ignored.

You see, in other ancient household codes, instructions were usually  
only given to the *pater familias*, and there were no restrictions placed  
on this person. Aristotle did this.

Here, Paul is speaking not only the male family head,  
but also to women and even to slaves, giving them more honor and standing  
than other household codes do.

Problem is that women and slaves can find themselves in a no-win situation  
where they are trying to be submissive (as God seemingly desires)  
but also trying to not allow themselves to be abused.

If you were a slave in the ancient world, you had no right to your own body  
during the day or during the night.

v. 12 says, “Say ‘No’ to ungodliness.”

But how someone supposed to do that when they have no rights  
and the ungodliness is being perpetrated upon them?

3) Reject these texts as too bound up in ancient social categories and sinfulness.  
Given the factors I’ve described, there is some appeal in that!

But I also hate the idea that we will pick and choose which Bible passages  
are suitable for us and which are not.

We then become the ones in charge of God’s story  
rather than allowing God’s Spirit  
to point us to Christ through the entire Bible.

4) Look deeper – perhaps the apostle Paul and the Spirit within him  
recognized the injustice of these categories,  
but also knew that these individuals were not able  
to change societal expectations.

So the encouragement to submit is not a recognition that the arrangement  
is God’s ideal, but rather a way of saying,

“This isn’t your fault. God is with you in the midst of this injustice.”

This is Dr. Hughes favored approach, and I can see the appeal of it.

However, I wouldn’t want to keep myself to just *one* of these approaches  
when wrestling Biblical texts that might cause us concern.

**With approach #1**, I accept that the whole Bible is our faithful and authoritative  
witness to who God is and what God has done.

The encouragements of this passage to be people who have integrity,  
self-control, a strong work-ethic, mutual respect, faith, and love  
paint a rich picture of household life that we can  
apply to any kind of household today.

That said, I disagree with the idea that we must serve God  
in the social categories we find in the Bible  
as though the Bible itself is our authority.

God is our authority and we see God most clearly in the person of Jesus.  
The Bible testifies about who Jesus,  
but the Bible can only provide that testimony within  
the broken and inadequate categories of the ancient world  
it arose within. Those flawed categories are baked in.

Even in the Bible itself we see that faithful living is different  
from one era to another, so we must be open to changes in our own times.

**With approach #2**, I agree that what we see here is a limited set of instructions  
from Paul to Titus that pushed against the complete authority  
of the master as the only person who could be addressed.  
We do see some movement toward an ultimate ethic of  
Christlikeness even if it is not yet full expressed.

**With approach #3**, I also *reject* these categories as being appropriate  
for God's people in our own day.

We don't need to use them or find parallels –  
we must trust the Spirit to continue to lead us into life  
in the Kingdom of God *now* rather than recapitulating  
what that looked like thousands of years ago.

Jesus said you will know a tree by its fruit.

We can look at the fruit of patriarchy and know that it is rotten at the core.

Passages that (if taken at face value)  
would point us backward toward patriarchy, then,  
do not need to be placed as central in guiding the church  
as ones that point forward.

**Finally, with approach #4**, I agree that we can look deeper into the text,  
and recognize that perhaps Paul (and the Holy Spirit at work within him)  
knew there was more to be done

here than he could possibly expect Titus to do.

Maybe this was just a first step before emphasizing that in Christ  
there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female  
but that all are one. Maybe he knew that Titus  
and these fledgling believers weren't ready  
to take on all of that just yet.

If you can join me at some level in this way of understanding the initial verses of the passage, then we can more enthusiastically celebrate the closing verses.

It begins, “For the grace of God has appeared that brings salvation to all people.”  
Grace for all people! If we had any question about whether living by these ethical standards is what makes us “okay” in God’s eyes, this bring the Good News back into focus.

It is grace that brings salvation, and grace that draws us into a new way of life.  
It’s grace that teaches us to say “no” to worldly passions.

In other words God’s unmerited grace brings us into relationships that point us toward life rather than toward death.

From v. 13 we are called into this aspect of our salvation *now* “in this present age” even as we await the salvation that will arrive *later* at the appearing of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us.

All of humanity has been redeemed to be a people who belong to Jesus, eager live in the way of freedom that God’s grace points us towards.

This entire closing passage is a message from God to all people regardless of what social category they fit in.

This was a very subversive message to the power structures of the ancient world, even if other elements can be read as supporting them.

In our own day we can see God’s intention of equality, reconciliation, and healthy relationships standing in contrast to systems of injustice, inequity, and harmful outcomes.

These are not burdens placed upon us, but gracious freedoms we get to share in.

That is good news. The Good News doesn’t leave us burdened and guilty, but assured that God stands with us and for us.

Let’s sing in response to the assurance of God’s grace