

Clearing the Stereotype:
You Christians Are Too Political
Titus 3:1-8

Big Idea: Let us be known as models and messengers of grace.

Related Scriptures: Matthew 5:13-16; John 13:35; 18:33-36; 1 Corinthians 5:12-13; Ephesians 5:11; Colossians 4:5-6; 1 Timothy 2:1-2

Introduction:

1. Brandon used to go to church. But not anymore. Brandon is now an avowed agnostic. He lives in Arizona. He's become disillusioned with Christ and the church. He's not so sure about the whole Jesus thing anymore. He ► explains:

... twenty years ago, when I was looking at evangelical Christianity from the inside, it seemed like a movement bursting with energy to spread the good news to people. ► Looking at it from the outside today, this message seems to have been lost in exchange for an aggressive political strategy that demonizes segments of society. ► I believe that American Christians have become tools of the Republican election machine—at the expense of their own image and message.¹

By the way, Brandon is not an embittered Democrat. He's an active member of the Republican Party.

2. Brandon ► is not the only one who has become disillusioned with the church and lost his faith. Another person who feels he doesn't belong in church reflects on his own experience. He ► says, "A lot of times the church would take a conservative Republican stance, and anyone who did not fit into that mold was judged as not as good a Christian as everyone else."²
3. And ► I'm afraid there is a similar tension at Moon Valley Bible Church, too. Within the last several weeks, a number of long-time members of our own church family have told me that they have felt like outsiders and, to some extent, have felt marginalized or "less than" because they are not as politically conservative as some folks seem to be around here.

It breaks my heart to think that people might feel like they don't belong because of politics. Because we're not about politics.

¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 166.

² Ibid.

It probably doesn't help that someone in our midst has apparently floated the idea that President Obama might be the Antichrist.

I've even heard the question raised at Moon Valley: "Is it possible to be a Christian *and* be a Democrat?" That this would be a question at all points up the reality that evangelical Christians are generally associated with the Republican Party. So close is the perceived association that it is often assumed that, if you are a true Christian, you are probably a Republican and you probably hold a certain set of conservative political perspectives.

Evidence of this association came up in an interview between ► Katie Couric and Billy Graham. Couric was asking Graham about mixing Evangelical Christian doctrine and politics.

Of politics, Graham ► said, "I stay as far away as I can. . . I think that if I would talk on a political subject . . . it would divide the audience on that issue. That's not my issue. My issue is Christ."

Couric ► said, "I read, though, that you're a Democrat. Is that true?"

Graham ► said, "Yes. I am."

Couric ► said, "Do you think people would be surprised to learn that? Because generally, in this day and age, Evangelical Christians are closely associated with the Republican Party."³

This ► exchange between Couric and Graham points up two things. People do associate Evangelical Christians with the Republican Party. And yes, Democrats can be Christians. I'm pretty sure Billy Graham believes in Jesus. And, by the way, both Republicans and Democrats are represented in our church *and* on our pastoral staff. And personally, I don't give a rip about who is what.

In fact, I see no necessary connection between political affiliation and Christianity. None whatsoever. Democrats can take the Bible just as seriously as Republicans.

Republicans may grab their Bibles and say, "But what about abortion and the sanctity of marriage?"

And the Democrats grab their Bibles and say, "But what about poverty and social justice?"

And the argument ensues. It's not so tidy.

³ June 23, 2005 interview available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8326362/>, accessed 18 February 2009.

4. My purpose this morning is not to side with Democrats or Republicans. My purpose is to think with you about the relationship between Christianity and politics.

The questions I'm wondering about are these: As Christians who represent Christ on earth, what does God want us to be known for above all else? What reputation does God want us to have in the community? We know from the Bible that God wants us to seek and save the lost. So what reputation will put us in the very best position to seek and save the lost?

For some time now, we've been talking about a six-headed stereotype of the American Christian. One of the heads is that we Christians are too political. Recent studies have shown what we're known for. A majority of unbelievers in America think that "Christians are primarily motivated by a political agenda and promote right-wing politics."⁴ Like it or not, that's our reputation. Fully three-fourths of all young unbelievers think that Christians are just "too involved in politics."⁵

Is this perception helping us? Is this perception going to help you reach your seven?⁶ And what, if anything, should we do about it?

Tackling politics in a single sermon is difficult and maybe impossible to do well. But I'm going to try.

I find that the Bible is largely silent about many specifics of political involvement, and so, as Christians, I believe we have broad freedoms. But these freedoms are to be constrained by certain principles, some of which are represented in the biblical text we'll be studying today.

The text is ► Titus 3:1-8. From this text, I glean one big idea, and the idea is an answer to the question: What does God want us to be known for? Here's ► the big idea: Let us be known as models and messengers of grace. Above all else, two things should stand out: being *models* of grace and *messengers* of grace.

So my sermon is going to come in two big chunks. First, we're going to talk about being models or examples or doers of grace, particularly when it comes to politics. And then, we're going to talk about being messengers or agents or witnesses of grace.

Let's work our way through the text and we'll flesh out this idea.

- I. In ► Verses 1 and 2, Paul says some things to Titus that relate to being models of grace. He says,

⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons, 153.

⁵ Kinnaman and Lyons, 155.

⁶ Lately, we've been talking about asking God to use each of us to move seven people a little closer to Christ this year.

^{NAU} **Titus 3:1** Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, ² to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.

- A. The command from Paul to Titus is ► “remind them,” which raises the question, who is it that needs to be reminded? The preceding context shows that they are believers who need to be reminded. Specifically, they are the believers in the church on the Mediterranean island of Crete in which Titus is a leader. In Chapter 2 they are identified as Christ-followers, male and female, young and old, slave and free.
- B. That they need to be reminded indicates that the believers had been told these things before, and that these things are important enough to reiterate. The verb, “remind” is in the present tense and could be properly translated, “keep on reminding.”
- C. And the reminder is about the believers’ relationship ► to rulers and authorities. That’s the government. So this is about civic responsibility. This is about what a godly citizen looks like. It’s about political involvement.

Paul ► reels off seven characteristics of a godly citizen. These seven characteristics provide a pretty good guide to how we can model grace in the public arena. They answer the question: How can we be known as models of grace? Let’s go through them quickly; then we’ll stand back and see what we have.

1. A citizen who models grace is ► to be subject to rulers and authorities. That means we are to be ► respectfully submissive to governmental authorities. It involves both attitudes and actions that respectfully grant honor to those in governmental authority. It doesn’t mean we have to agree with them. It doesn’t mean we have to like them. But, as Christians, we are called to treat those in authority with honor and respect.
2. A citizen who models grace is also ► to be obedient to rulers and authorities. That means we ought to be ► law-abiding citizens. For example, we shouldn’t exceed the speed limit when we’re driving. We shouldn’t download music and movies from the internet illegally. We should declare as income on our taxes the cash we received that the government doesn’t know about.
3. A citizen who models grace is also ► to be ready for every good deed. That means we ought to be prepared and be looking for opportunities to ► be generous—to generously support our community and our government.
4. A citizen who models grace is also ► to malign no one. To malign means, “to speak in a disrespectful way that demeans, denigrates, [or] maligns”.⁷ A gracious citizen maligns *no one*. The Greek word for “no one” means no one.

⁷ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “βλασφημέω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

5. A citizen who models grace is also to be ► peaceable. That word means, “not disposed to fight or quarrel.”⁸ It means, “not contentious.”⁹
 6. A citizen who models grace is also to be ► gentle. That means, “not insisting on every right or letter of law or custom.”¹⁰ It is to be “yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant.”¹¹
 7. A citizen who models grace is also ► to show every consideration for all people. This describes “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.”¹² It’s a clear demonstration of “gentleness, ► humility, courtesy, considerateness, [and] meekness.”¹³ And notice the inclusiveness of it: “for all men.”
- D. I look ► back at the list, and I wonder. How do you think our unbelieving culture views the current political activism of Christians in general? Does it fit this biblical profile of a citizen who models grace? Would unbelievers describe us with words like “respectful,” “law-abiding,” “generous,” “maligning no one,” “peaceable,” “gentle” and “humble?”
- E. Here are the words of seven different prominent “Christian” conservatives describing how they think we must behave in the political arena toward those who seem to oppose traditional family values. I’m quoting.¹⁴ “We have not yet begun to fight.”¹⁵ America—with its traditional family values—is “our country” so “let’s take it back.”¹⁶ We “must be willing to fight. . . . We must resist them at every turn.”¹⁷ The enemies of the family have left us with only two options “either meekly acquiesce to a wide range of revolutionary cultural demands, or stand up and fight.”¹⁸ We must boldly stand up and take back America from the enemies.¹⁹ We must “blast the enemy from its

⁸ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. “ἄμαχος,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

⁹ The Abridged Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon, s.v. “ἄμαχος.”

¹⁰ BDAG, s.v. “ἐπιεικής.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² BDAG, s.v. “πραΰτης.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ I’m indebted to Steven R. Tracy for pulling these quotes together in his article, “The Culture Wars over ‘Family Values’: Have We Forgotten Social Justice?,” not yet published at the time he passed it on to me.

¹⁵ D. James Kennedy, “Forward: We Have Not Yet Begun to Fight,” in *The Salt and Light Solution: A Guide to Reclaiming America for Christ* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Coral Ridge Ministries, 1999), vii-ix.

¹⁶ Dick Army, “Let’s Take It Back,” in *The Salt and Light Solution*, 8-9. Army is a former congressman who served as the House Majority Leader from 1985 to 2003.

¹⁷ Sean Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty Over Liberalism* (New York: Regan, 2002), 294-295.

¹⁸ Dobson, *Marriage under Fire: Why We Must Win This Battle* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 66.

¹⁹ Sears and Osten, *The ACLU Vs. America*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 189-193.

positions.”²⁰ We must launch a counter offensive against the enemy and “engage this perverse enemy in every area of society.”²¹

I ask you. Do these words fit the biblical profile of a citizen who models grace?

I could be bi-partisan about this and list examples of liberals describing President Bush in the most derogatory, demeaning, and disrespectful language imaginable. It’s no better.

And I’m no paragon of political virtue myself. I’m quite sure I’ve said things that don’t sound anything like a citizen who models grace.

- F. This is not about agreeing or disagreeing on any particular political issue. It’s not about truth or falsehood. It’s not about being a Democrat or a Republican. It’s about *how* we hold or express any political viewpoint. It’s about being respectful, generous, peaceable, gentle, and humble toward all, maligning no one, not even our fiercest opponents. We Christians are to be models of grace in the public arena.

God help us!

- II. Not only are we to be known as models of grace, but we are ► also to be known as messengers of grace. That is our primary assignment on earth: to seek and save the lost with the message of the grace available through Jesus Christ. The Lord has sent us as messengers. Not vigilantes.

Let me show you how I get this from our text. It will take a few minutes for me to get to this point, so hang with me. In follow-up to the list of gracious characteristics in Verses 1 and 2, Paul says something that may seem odd at first. He says in ► Verse 3,

^{NAU} **Titus 3:3** For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

- A. The little word, ► “for” says that this is an explanation of why we believers ought to be gracious. Paul says we ought to be gracious because, ► “we also once were foolish ourselves.” There are two important implications here. One implication is that the believers to whom Paul refers were once foolish. The other implication is that the governmental authorities to whom Paul referred earlier are now foolish at the time of his writing. In effect, Paul is saying to the Cretan Christians ruled by the unbelieving Roman authorities, “you were once fools just like they are.”

²⁰ Pat Robertson, *The Turning Tide: The Fall of Liberalism and the Rise of Common Sense* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 301.

²¹ Rick Scarborough, *Liberalism Kills Kids* (Lufkin, TX: Vision America, 2006), 205. Scarborough is the founder of Vision America and is endorsed by James Dobson, Alan Keyes, D. James Kennedy, Tim LaHaye, and Rick Perry, Governor of Texas.

Just how foolish were the Roman authorities of that day? Not too long before Paul wrote this letter to Titus, a guy named ► Caligula ruled the Roman Empire, including Crete. Let me read you a description of what Caligula was like.

[Caligula] came to the throne at the brash age of twenty-five. History tells us he was a brutal tyrant who raised taxes, spent prodigious amounts of money, and murdered the prefect who had helped him get chosen as emperor in the first place. He shocked the Roman senate by announcing that he intended to appoint a new member to the august body: his horse!

In his sexual life, there were no boundaries; Caligula enjoyed the intimacy of both women and men. He was particularly smitten with his three sisters, especially Drusilla, even though she was married to someone else—whom he ordered to be executed. People seriously thought the young ruler was mentally ill.²²

Caligula was, of course, a Democrat. Some years later, the Republicans were finally able to get their man in office. His name was ► Nero. Let me read you a description of what Nero was like.

Nero started things off with a bang by poisoning his fourteen-year-old stepbrother. . . . He carried on a couple of very public affairs. In time he had his ambitious mother murdered. He got married but then had his first wife murdered as well.

. . . Nero was known for cavorting in the streets of Rome at all hours of the night and early morning. He loved to race chariots and also fancied himself a great actor; the theater crowds obligingly applauded even as they winced at his lack of talent.

. . . when Rome went up in flames in A.D. 64, Nero pointed to the Christians as a handy scapegoat, which unleashed vicious persecution. . . .

Meanwhile, Nero ran the empire into serious debt; his gifts to various friends each year mounted up to five times the cost of maintaining the whole Roman army. When the senate finally began laying groundwork to impeach him, Nero, then thirty years old, avoided further embarrassment by slitting his own throat. He left the treasury bankrupt and the soldiers well behind in their pay.²³

²² Dean Merrill, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Church: Finding a Better Way to Influence Our Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 33.

²³ Merrill, 35.

Nero was in office at the time Paul wrote his letter to Titus. It is believed that the apostles Peter and Paul were eventually executed by decree of the Roman government under Nero.

- B. How would you feel if you were a Christian living in the Roman Empire back then? Would there be a part of you that would want to rise up and throw off the evil oppression of such an immoral government? Do you think you would want to shake your fist in righteous anger? Would you have wanted to be among those lobbying for the impeachment of Nero? Would you be outraged? I probably would.

We have evidence that the Cretans felt that way, too. For example, two ancient Greek historians, Polybius and Plutarch tell us that the ancient Cretans were indeed fuming under Roman rule; their anger against the tyranny of Rome burned.²⁴

Strangely, Paul does not fan those flames. Instead he says, “You and I were once no different than them. We were cut from the same cloth as Caligula and Nero.”

It’s as if Paul is encouraging us as believers to step back, calm down, and consider a very important question as it relates to the transformation of people and culture: ► “What changes us? What truly transforms people?”

- C. Paul answers his own implied question in Verses 4 through 7. It’s one of the most beautiful summaries of life transformation in all of Scripture. Paul says that we believers are transformed by the kindness, love, mercy, and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We didn’t transform ourselves. We’re no better than anyone else. We didn’t pull ourselves up by our own self-righteous bootstraps. God in the person of Jesus saved our bacon. He poured out His grace by giving His life in payment for our sins so that we might have eternal life. We merely received His gift of eternal life by faith. Paul ► says,

^{NAU} **Titus 3:4** But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, ⁵ He saved us, ► not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ► ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life.

So in answer to ► the question, “What changes us?” Paul ► says, “The grace of Jesus.” We believed in Jesus for eternal life, and when we did, He washed away all our sins, and poured out His Holy Spirit within us to empower us to begin to be godly, to begin to live right, to begin to view things the way God does. To be sure, we still struggle. But we can progress by God’s grace.

²⁴ Knute Larson, *Titus, Holman New Testament Commentary*; Max Anders ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 380.

I think Paul's logic in this context goes something like this: That's what it took to begin to change us; therefore, that's what it's going to take to change others. And if that's what it's going to take to change others, then our primary form of activism should be winning people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

And there's the point: We are to be messengers of grace. That's our identity. That's our priority. That's what we're to be known for.

Let ► us be known as models and messengers of grace.

III. A number of inferences flow from this.

- A. First, I believe that political activism is not the primary business of the church; bringing people to Christ is. As bad as the Roman government was under Caligula and Nero, Paul does not call for its reformation in our text. He doesn't call for Nero to clean up his act. He doesn't mobilize believers to pressure Nero to reflect Judeo-Christian values. Instead Paul calls for Christians to be godly citizens so that people might be transformed by Jesus Christ. That's his priority.

Some of my Christian friends agree with me on this point, but are quick to argue that we Christians also have a biblical mandate to transform our culture for God. They often appeal to Jesus' command to be the salt and light of the world in Matthew 5.

Because salt was used as a preservative, my friends take this to mean that we Christians are commanded to keep pagan society from rotting. And because light exposes things, they take this to mean that we Christians are to expose what is immoral in our pagan society.

But I'm not convinced that this is what Jesus meant. And I'm even less convinced that this is what He modeled.

I've argued in a previous sermon that being salt and light is about giving the world a taste and a glimpse of who Christ really is.²⁵ It's about displaying the goodness of God's grace. It's not about using a flood of light and a flush of saline to expose and remove the sinful splinter in the eye of another.

Moreover, if there was ever a time when it would be reasonable for somebody to say, "We need to rise up and take this country back for God" it would be when Jesus was on earth in Israel. If any country ever had a claim to be founded by God and blessed by God, it would be Israel. If there was ever "one nation under God" it was Israel. What's more, when the Jewish Jesus began His ministry in Israel, His country had been

²⁵ Bob Kerrey, "What Is Our Role in this World as Christians: A Study of Matthew 5:13-16," January 20, 2008, available at www.moonvalleybible.org.

overthrown and was ruled by an immoral Roman Empire—an empire that oppressed His own people, the people chosen by God.

Conspicuous by its absence is any effort by Jesus to rise up and take back the country for God. And I don't think it's because Jesus was cowered or intimidated into silence by secular humanists. On the contrary, He explained,

^{NAU} John 18:36 . . . “My kingdom is not of this world.” . . .

That's Jesus' way of saying, “That's not my issue. I'm not about politics.” One commentator explains it this way:

Jesus was in the business of cleaning up society one person at a time, from the inside. He held out little hope for reforming societal systems or getting pagans to behave themselves better through public pressure. He called for a revolution of the heart, which in turn would make all the difference in visible conduct. Somehow he thought this was more effective in the long run.²⁶

Christ died and rose up, not to take back His country for God, but to seek and save the lost.

- B. This does not mean, however, that political activism is wrong. Nor does it mean that political activism is insignificant. Nor does it mean that political activism and evangelism are entirely unrelated. It just means that, in our political involvement, we ought to be, above all else, models and messengers of grace.

In two places in our text, Paul calls for good deeds.²⁷ The good deeds to which Paul refers can, in fact, include political activism. For example, it can be a good deed to work tirelessly in the political realm for the benefit of people oppressed by injustice. While social service can relieve a human need, sometimes it's more effective and efficient to remove the cause of that need politically.²⁸

- C. Moreover, I believe we are free to be as politically active as we are compelled to be, as long as we operate within the profile of a gracious citizen, and as long as we don't lose sight of our primary goal: to win people to Christ with the message of God's grace. Paul is by no means forbidding political activism in our text; he's simply establishing some parameters for it. If our activism does not fit the profile of a gracious citizen, or if our activism ever undermines the good news of Jesus Christ, we're shooting ourselves in the foot.²⁹

²⁶ Merrill, 30-31.

²⁷ Verses 1 and 8.

²⁸ Tom Minnery, *Why You Can't Stay Silent: A Biblical Mandate to Shape Our Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001), 49.

²⁹ The late Christian author, C.S. Lewis said, “He who converts his neighbour has performed the most practical Christian-political act of all” (Lewis, *God in the Dock*, p. 199).

- D. In addition, I believe that we should be very careful about mandating what believers should and shouldn't do politically to bring about social reform. Paul says a good deal about *how* we are to relate to governmental authorities: submissively, obediently, peaceably, gently, humbly. But he says very little about *what* we must do. He speaks generally in Verses 1 and 8 of doing good deeds. Elsewhere, Paul encourages us to pray for authorities.³⁰ But he says nothing specific about rallies or protests or picketing or lobbying or writing legislators or voting a certain way.

Paul's silence frees us to do a lot of things, but not all things are profitable when our goal is to be known as models and messengers of grace.³¹ I believe Paul's silence should give us pause about mandating anything, or insinuating that people are less than godly if they aren't as politically active or conservative as we think they should be. Elevating personal preferences to the level of public mandates is legalism. We should be very careful to avoid becoming modern versions of some ancient legalists who also happened to be heavily involved in both religion and politics. The Bible calls them Pharisees.

- E. And another thing. The tone of Paul's writing in our text does not seem to reflect a "sky-is-falling" mentality. He's not wringing his hands. He doesn't seem to be fearful of what the government might do. He's not an alarmist. Instead, he speaks of the "hope of eternal life" in Verse 7 and exhorts believers to "speak confidently" in Verse 8.

I'm as concerned for my children's future as anyone. I'd like to do whatever I can to keep America a good and safe place for my kids and grandkids.

But the truth is, God is in control; He has promised to build His church³²; He is not the least bit constrained by social systems; and I suspect He often doesn't see threats the same way we do.

Thousands of years ago, the Israelites refused to take the Promised Land because they thought the big-bad inhabitants of the Land posed a threat to their children. In Numbers 14:26-32, God says, in effect, "Okay. Have it your way. You parents wander around in the desert another forty years until you die. Then I'll take your kids into the Land Myself." God had a whole different view of the threat.

Many of us parents might balk at raising our children in China. It's not nearly as easy to be a Christian in China as it is in America. There is still much opposition and hostility that threatens Christians. But it's no big threat for God. In China, about 30,000 people are coming to Christ every day. Meanwhile, here in the States, we're closing sixty churches a week.³³

³⁰ 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 6:12.

³² Matthew 16:18.

³³ Merrill, 59-60.

God is so much bigger than our puny political systems.

- F. Finally, I believe it is unwise and unproductive to expect unbelievers to act like believers. Instead, by our godliness, love, and good deeds we ought to attract unbelievers to become believers.

Paul tells the Cretans that they were once as foolish as their unbelieving governors. In doing so, I believe he's trying to cultivate in them a heart of compassion for people who don't know Jesus, even for the likes of Nero, the ruler who would eventually have Paul executed.

So let us be known as models and messengers of grace.