

Cretans Are Liars

By Caleb Colley, M.L.A.

One remarkable thing about the Gospel is that it offers all of us infinite blessings regardless of our backgrounds. Neither race, nor social status, nor genealogy matters when it comes to our potential to be saved and our duty to our Creator.¹ This is possible because God is the model of equality. For, while God recognized the culture-specific problems in Crete (“One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true”²), He nonetheless arranged for Titus to teach the Gospel there.³ This fact implies the potential for grace to overcome gluttony, lying, and carnal living despite their deep-rootedness in Cretan culture. It was impermissible for Titus to avoid evangelizing Cretans simply because they were traditionally sinful. As Titus was assigned, so we must exercise stewardship of our spiritual, intellectual, and physical blessings without partiality, even as we acknowledge and address benefits and challenges associated with our own heritage. In a word, we must be just.

But what does justice mean?

Traditionally, justice has to do with rightness in dealings with ourselves and others, including authorities. According to Aristotle, justice is the crowning virtue, or “virtue to the highest degree” or “the complete exercise of virtue.”⁴ This is because “the person who has justice is able to exercise virtue in relation to another, not only what concerns himself.”⁵ Aristotelian virtue promotes a life that fulfills the function of man—a life characterized by balance between

¹ Galatians 3:23-29.

² Titus 1:12-13. All citations of Scripture are from the English Standard Version (2001). In this passage, Paul quotes the Cretan philosopher Epimenides. For more information concerning Epimenides, see Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 10-12; cf. “Epimenides,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/190020/Epimenides> (2010). Epimenides is famous for his supposed introduction of the “Liar Paradox” (see James S. Walker, “An Elementary Resolution of the Liar Paradox,” *The College Mathematics Journal* 35, no. 2: 105-111).

³ Titus 1:5.

⁴ 1129b30-31. All citations of Aristotle are taken from *Introductory Readings*, trans. and ed. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1129b.33-35.

extremes. In Book V of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, the philosopher discusses justice in a variety of contexts, some of which is justice in distribution, rectification, and exchange. To summarize this section of the *Ethics*, we might say that Aristotle thinks that justice occurs when each person involved gets exactly what he deserves.⁶ Consequently, justice also involves doing what one ought to do based on obligations one has taken on. Furthermore, a just person is fair and law-abiding, in Aristotle's view.⁷

In at least this regard, the Christian concept of justice is strikingly similar to the Greek ideal. "Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. Owe no one anything, except to love each other...."⁸ Christian justice is balanced by mercy, just as God's justice is balanced by His mercy.⁹ The Christian pays others what is owed but does more for them, because they possess souls that must be brought nearer to God.¹⁰

The apostle James criticizes some early Christians because they showed partiality.¹¹ We do not know all of the reasons why the Christians preferred the rich visitor to the poor one. Perhaps they thought there would be some later benefit if they won the favor of the rich man, or they did not want to associate with a lower class. Whatever their motivations, the Christians acted wrongly, failing to show the spirit of Christ to all equally.

A number of things might prevent us from treating every person with justice. We might feel inconvenienced by his presence (as an expectant mother feels inconvenienced to the degree that she murders her pre-born child). We might feel permission to abuse him because he has done too little for us ("I can't be expected to help **him**. What has he ever done for me?"). Or, we might decide it doesn't matter how we treat people who are beneath our social station ("This man is merely my assistant. It doesn't matter how I treat him."). It is particularly challenging to treat our enemies justly.

⁶ Ibid., 1130a-1134a.

⁷ Ibid., 1129a-b.

⁸ Romans 13:7-8.

⁹ See Isaiah 30:18; cf. Matthew 22:23.

¹⁰ The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) is a fine example of someone going beyond the call of duty in order to aid the physical welfare of another—we presume that the Samaritan was also concerned with the victim's spiritual condition.

¹¹ James 2.

Yet another possibility is that we treat a person unjustly due to his race or cultural heritage. Our view of race must be carefully constructed, because racial groups really do have “their own internal cultural patterns, antedating the environment in which they currently find themselves,” and these patterns transcend “the beliefs, biases, and decisions of others.”¹² The Cretans, as inspiration verifies, are an example of this. The stereotypes about their laziness and wicked ways were justified—acknowledged by God as being accurate—despite occasional exceptions to the general rule about Cretans’ faults. Thomas Sowell’s extensive, international research shows that some stereotypes about racial/cultural traits are true in our day as well. For examples, “Chinese, German, Japanese, Italian, and Indian immigrants have risen to prosperity in many countries, often after harrowing beginnings, without ever achieving any notable political success.”¹³ Certain races seem always to be better at architecture, others better at sports, others better at the literary arts, etc.

Such cultural patterns might suggest a number of responses on our part. On the one hand, we might be tempted to treat a representative from a politically or economically successful race with more respect than we would give to a representative of a race that was less successful by some measure. Those positive qualities responsible for a race’s success do not provide a legitimate reason for favoring a representative of a given race over a representative of other races.

On the other hand, we might be tempted to favor members of a particular race simply because it had what Sowell calls “harrowing beginnings.” Of course, we can imagine individuals who need special care because they **themselves** have experienced personal hardship or loss. Similarly, prejudices held by some cultures against others make profiling necessary in order to take common-sense safety precautions. If we are to act in accord with these forms of discrimination and still follow James’ pattern, we must make certain that our motives are pure. We must ask ourselves **why** race plays a role in our thinking, and answer the question honestly. Christian love must be our motivation.¹⁴

¹² Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture* (New York: Basic, 1994), x. *Race and Culture* is a thorough, convincing study of the long-term persistence of cultural traits.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:1; 16:14.

Justice requires that we address both the needs and capabilities of the individuals with whom we associate, and the Christian will view both needs and capabilities from a loving, spiritual perspective. Every person is created in God's image and has both a soul that needs saving and talents that must be used in the Lord's service. Still, experience (along with Scripture) warns us that we will have to address culture-related sins as we lead the lost to repentance, and as we conform our own hearts to His will. Our physical heritage, wonderful as it might be in many respects, must take a distant second place to our membership in the family of God, the result of our re-birth.¹⁵ We can be "true to our roots" to the degree that this enhances our connection to our **first-century** roots. This concept may be uncomfortable for some in our multicultural, egalitarian society, where every race is supposed to be as good as all others in every respect (an impossible notion), but Christ continues to preach repentance to every culture.¹⁶ We all need to be shown "the way of God more accurately."¹⁷

The carnal response to the reality of racial differences is to either ignore or excuse sins simply because they are occasioned by culture, or to leave undeveloped the blessings associated with culture simply because their exercise might offend members of another race. But the spiritual response is not to ignore cultural strengths and weaknesses. Rather it is to recognize our differences, with a desire to collectively overcome deficiencies and maximize potential for service in the kingdom.¹⁸

Cretans were sinners, by social definition. Titus was in Crete to give them their opportunity to change and be saved. May each of us take advantage of the same blessed invitation.

¹⁵ Luke 14:26; cf. 1 Peter 1.

¹⁶ See Acts 17:30; Luke 13:3, 5.

¹⁷ Acts 18:26.

¹⁸ Matthew 6:33.