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Make it Better

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Titus 1:4-5a

To Titus, my true child in a common faith; grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective...

When did you first realize that the world is not always a happy, wonderful, perfect place?

I think it hit me the first day of kindergarten. It was my mother's fault. She set me up. She told me how great kindergarten was going to be. She told me how glad everybody would be to see me. She told me how much I was going to like it.

Bright and early that September morning back in 1953 (being an extremely bright and precocious child, I started school at the age of four; it was either that or Mom just wanted to get rid of me) nevertheless, bright and early that September morning back in 1953, Mom took me by my little hand and led me to kindergarten. We walked down the block, around the corner, up the hill to that big red brick school building where my older sister went.

Oh, I was strutting my stuff that morning on the way to school. I was proud to be such a big boy. I felt all grown up and ready to make it on my own out there in the world.

The trouble started as soon as we walked into the school building. Instead of going upstairs where everything was bright and sunny, upstairs where my sister went to class, upstairs where all the big children laughed and learned; Mom lead me downstairs, down into the dark basement. Down there in the basement, Mom took me into a big room where a bunch of other little kids were. She took away my favorite teddy bear. She kissed

me on the forehead. She said, “have fun” and “see you later.” Then, she left me there in that big room full of strangers.

Actually, everybody was not a stranger. I knew one boy there. He was Carl Conant - or as I always called him, Carl Sydney Conant. From the moment I crawled out of the cradle, Carl Sydney Conant was my nemesis. He lived up the street from me. We went to church together. In my little town, Carl Sydney was always there. I couldn't get away from him.

The trouble was, I didn't like Carl Sydney. I didn't like him one bit. He was a bully. The first thing he did to me that first day in kindergarten, right after my Mother walked out the door, was to push me down on the floor and sit on top of me.

Right then, I suspected kindergarten wasn't going to be all it was cracked up to be. When snack time came, I thought things would get better. I liked snacks. But that teacher gave me a cup of tomato juice and told me to drink it all. I hated tomato juice. I still hate tomato juice.

It didn't take me long to figure it all out. That teacher didn't think I was nearly as cute as my grandmother did.

Oh, I learned my lesson quickly. This world is not a perfect place. The older I got, the more it was so. When I got to high school, it wasn't perfect. I wasn't voted most popular anything. When I got to College, it wasn't perfect. I didn't get a four-point-o grade point average. When I started dating, even that wasn't perfect. None of the girls I dated was perfect (until I met Janet, of course).

When I got out in the work force, that wasn't perfect. None of the bosses I ever had was perfect. After just a short time on any job, I always knew how to do the job better than all my bosses put together.

Can you relate to any of this? It seems that no matter what profession you take up, no matter what your family life is like, no matter what your income happens to be; most of you come to the same conclusion I did back in kindergarten: this world isn't perfect.

That seems to be a lesson this fellow named Titus was learning, and he didn't like it one bit. We have this little book in the back of the New Testament with his name on it, but Titus did not write this letter. It is a letter written to Titus by our old friend Paul.

Paul had learned that Titus was getting discouraged by all the imperfection he saw around him. Paul had found out that Titus was feeling like a failure on his new job. Paul had heard that Titus didn't like his new job one bit.

Paul was worried about Titus. He was worried that when faced with this imperfect world, Titus just might decide to quit. So Paul wrote this letter to Titus. The purpose of this letter was to encourage Titus to stay on the job. Paul also wanted to give Titus a little bit of good advice.

We don't know very much about Titus. We know his parents were not Christians. They were not even Jews; they were Greeks [Gal. 2:3]. We know that one day when Titus was a young man he heard Paul preach, was converted immediately, and quickly became one of Paul's right-hand-men.

When trouble broke out in the Christian church in Corinth, Paul sent Titus over there to straighten out the mess in Corinth (I Cor. 4:17 and 16:10). Titus did a great job. In fact, he stayed there in Corinth with that church. We know that Titus loved those church people, and they grew to love him. We know that in Corinth Titus felt true Christian fellowship, love and acceptance. We know that Titus was quite happy in Corinth.

Then, like a flash fire, trouble broke out in the Christian church on the Island of Crete. Paul decided that since Titus had done such a good job in Corinth, that he would send Titus off to Crete to put out the fire, to settle the trouble, to solve the problem, to make those Cretans get back on the right path.

We don't know how much Titus knew about the situation, but it seems that the church in Crete had a bad reputation. Those Cretans were known to chew up young ministers and spit them out. They were contrary, set-in-their ways, stubborn, nasty, and mean. We don't know if Titus knew that.

Nevertheless, Titus packed his bags, said "farewell" to his friends in lovely Corinth, and headed over to the island of Crete. As soon as he got there, Titus was hit in the face with an imperfect world!

Have any of you ever taken a job, hoping for the best, only to discover that it was a real mess?

The first church I worked in was Hanover Avenue Christian Church in Richmond, Virginia. Rev. Robert Maphis was the pastor. He took me under his wing. He let me do any thing I wanted to do. He protected me

from harm. He shielded me, taught me, and carefully brought me along in the ministry. If you want to draw parallels, you could say I was like young Titus, and Bob Maphis was like Paul to me. Anyway, I grew to love that church and those people. I was safe there, accepted, part of the family. I was happy.

Then one day, it was time to go out on my own. I had to leave those friendly confines. Rev. Maphis sent me off from Richmond to Shenandoah, to serve my own church. I expected it to be just like Hanover Avenue Christian Church, but it wasn't. Off in Shenandoah, I wasn't protected any more. Off in Shenandoah, I didn't have my Paul to take care of me.

Right off, I learned that I had to do everything. I even had to do things I didn't want to do. I had to serve as secretary and run off the Sunday bulletins, cutting stencils and running a mimeograph machine. I had to act as a janitor and bang on the furnace when it didn't work. I also had to listen to my church people's complaints. I had to hear their troubles. I had to referee their fights. I didn't know what I was doing, but I had all the responsibility put on me! I quickly learned how imperfect a Christian church can be.

But a marvelous thing happened, I also grew to love those people. I was happy there. Then, it was time to move on to another church.

My second church wasn't on an island, but it sure could have been Crete! Before I moved to Narrows, the Regional Minister told me something that should have made me unpack my bags and stay in Shenandoah. He said, "Jerry, remember, this church has great potential." You see, I was too young to know what that meant.

Do you remember what it was like getting fixed up on a blind date? When your friend says, "Remember, this girl has a great personality," that spells trouble. It only takes one time to learn what that means!

A church with a great potential is like a blind date with a great personality. A red flag should start waving. You can bet on it: neither the girl nor the church is perfect. It usually means they're trouble. It usually means, watch out.

Can't you just imagine Paul - just when he was waving good-bye to Titus as the ship sails off to Crete - yelling, "Now remember, Titus, that church over there in Crete has great potential."

And it was almost by return ship that Paul got the news: Titus was not happy in that imperfect world over there on the Island of Crete. That's when Paul wrote this letter back to Titus to give him some encouragement, and a little bit of advice.

Paul didn't waste any time. "Titus," he wrote, "this is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective."

Paul was saying, "Yes, I know Crete is a mess. I know it's imperfect. I know there are a lot of problems. But that's why I sent you there. I want you to make everything right."

This little book tucked away in the back of the New Testament has become, over the years, a handbook for young, discouraged ministers.

But in a much larger sense, it is a handbook for all of you, too. Whenever you feel discouraged, whenever you're stymied by this imperfect world, whenever things don't work out your way - you can open up this book and read it in ten minutes. And when you're done, maybe you'll feel encouraged to keep on plugging away.

This world is bound to get you down. Somewhere along your journey, you're going to pull off the highway and check in to the Holiday Inn of Disappointment - the one built out there on the field of Shattered Dreams. You will stand there in that rented room, look around, and think: what a life you've got! Your job isn't perfect. Your marriage isn't perfect. Your children aren't perfect. You will stand there feeling lost, and reflecting back at you in the big mirror over the dresser is an image of this imperfect world.

And that's exactly when you need to hear Paul's voice. He's telling you: "that's why you're here." You live in an imperfect world, and your job is to make your little part of this world a little bit better.

You might feel like Gilligan, marooned when a two hour tour when dramatically astray. You might feel stranded like Titus out there on some disappointing island like Crete. You might look out with dismay over some vast, empty ocean - and you think:

"So this is my life. I've got this wife, and I've got these kids, and I've got this job, and all this responsibility keeps piling up on me. And none of it's what I dreamed it would be, nothing's turned out like I wanted it to."

And it's right then when you need to hear Paul's voice talking to you. "Then make it better, make it all better. That's your purpose in life. That's your sacred calling. That's what God wants out of you: make it better."

I know you have lived long enough to know this world isn't perfect. But, you should also have lived long enough to know that any bad situation can be turned around for good. Any situation. All it takes is you.

A psychologist interviewed two young men, brothers, whose father had been a hopeless alcoholic. It turned out that one son had grown up to be a teetotaler, while the other son had grown up to be a drunk. "How did this happen," the psychologist asked both men. Both gave the exact same answer: "What do you expect with a father like mine?"

Think about your own up-bringing, your own faith, your own life. Has some of it been defective? Have there been mistakes made? Have you ended up imperfect? You bet 'ya! But the message of this scripture is: you can make it better than it is right now.

"That's why I left you in Crete," Paul wrote to Titus, "so you might amend what was defective. So stop all that talk. I know Crete is hard, but that's why I sent you there. I know you can bring out the best in that bad situation. I put you there on purpose, and that's where you'll say."

Then, Paul started giving Titus some advice. "Quit feeling sorry for yourself," Paul wrote, "get back to work - right there in Crete,

- right there in the place you don't want to be;
- right there with those people you don't like;
- right there in that Church that has a bad reputation;

- do it right there, take whatever is imperfect and make it a little bit better."

Isn't that good advice? Maybe you need to hear it. Quit feeling sorry for yourself. Stop moaning about how unfair life is. Don't complain about your flawed relationships and your lousy job and your second rate life - get busy and make it better!

A slave was condemned to death by torture. In desperation, the slave petitioned the king, "If you spare my life," he begged, "I'll teach your horse to fly." The king took him up on that offer. "I'll give you a year," the king said, "but if you don't make my horse fly in that year, I'll torture you myself until you die."

The slave was sent back to his prison cell. “What are you so happy,” asked his cell mate. “All you’re getting is just another year of life in this stinking prison, and at the end you know you’re going to get tortured and die an awful death.”

“This is a wonderful chance,” the slave explained, “I’ve got a whole year of life, and in that year - who knows? - the king may die, or he might change his mind, or - who knows - that horse may fly!”

You may think you’re stranded on some awful island with no boat on the horizon. You may feel like your life is surrounded by prison walls. You may think all the troubles of this imperfect world are weighing you down. But if you work at it, who knows? Your job may fly. Your children may soar. Your life may sail along with joy. Your closest relationships may break the bounds of earth.

If you work at it, this faith of yours, which has always just limped along on wounded legs - who knows, it just may sprout wings and fly!

It really is, always, just up to you.

It doesn’t matter if you end up in Crete or in North Tonawanda, pray that God will give you the power to make the life you live just a little bit better.