

Illogical! Illogical!

Crieff, 12 July 2026 © Scott McAndless – Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Psalms 119:105-112, Titus 1:5-16, Matthew 5:43-4

Recently I read a book by Rachel Held Evans, a tremendous writer who was, unfortunately, taken from us far too young. As she was writing about some of the ways that we use the Bible, she made the point that she had never in her life heard anybody preach a sermon on Titus 1:12, where it says, **“Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.”**

We claim to be people who take the Bible seriously. Some even claim to take it literally all the time and to believe everything it says. But, if that is the case, Evans argued, why is no one preaching sermons about how awful people from Crete are?

Why Don't We Protest Cretans?

Why aren't Christians marching with signs that declare that anyone who comes from Crete cannot be trusted and must not be believed? Why haven't we attempted to cancel all celebrities who have any Cretan ancestry? Why aren't Jennifer Anniston, Zach Galifianakis and Nana Mouskouri, who all claim parents who come from that large island in the Mediterranean, banned in all Christian churches?

I mean, the Bible says it. It couldn't be clearer. After quoting this line, attributing it to a Cretan prophet, the writer goes on to add, **“That testimony is true.”** So why don't we talk about that truth? And why, Evans wanted to know, doesn't anyone preach about it?

Getting me to Preach About Something

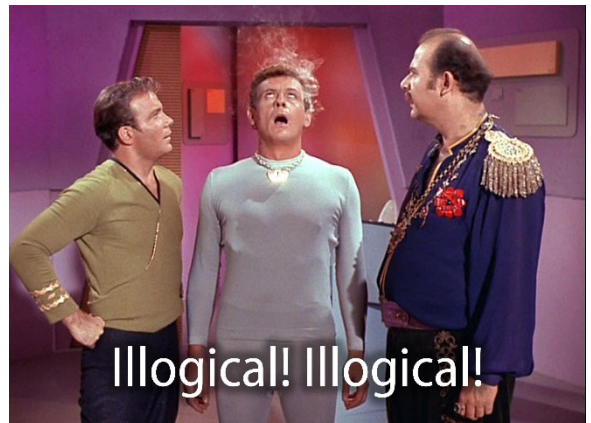
I'm going to confess something to you. There is one way in which you can manipulate me as a preacher. If you suggest to me that no one has ever preached a sermon on a particular passage of Scripture, and especially if you suggest that preachers are *afraid* of talking about it, there is nothing that will make me want to preach that sermon more!

So, let's tackle the question of just how lazy and unreliable people from Crete really are. What is such a saying doing in the Bible, and what should we do with it? It is especially difficult because it is such an absolute statement. It doesn't say that *sometimes some* people from Crete can be a bit duplicitous. It doesn't say, “I once knew a guy from Crete, and he told me a lie.” It is a blanket statement about all Cretans.

The Kind of Statement You Hear

I've never heard anyone say such things about people from Crete, of course, but it is the kind of statement that you do hear all the time in the world today. You will hear people say awful and ignorant things, things that I am not willing to repeat about, for example, *all* Palestinians, or *all* Jews, or *all* Muslims.

You will also hear generalized statements about what is wrong with *all* Republicans, or *all* Liberals, or



all Socialists. Even the U.S. president himself just the other day said something about *all* Iranians being liars.

I could go on and on, but I think you get the idea. If you hang out on the Internet in particular, you will read these kinds of absolute statements all the time. And they are not helpful statements. In fact, I would suggest that they are polarizing our discourse and destroying the fabric of our society more than just about anything these days.

What Was the Writer Saying?

So, I feel like I hear enough of this kind of rhetoric in our modern world. I am not happy to find it in my Bible. But of course, it is in our Bibles. And for me, that means that I need to deal with it and to try and understand what the writer was really trying to get across both to his immediate audience and to us reading it 2,000 years later.

But what if there is more going on in this verse than immediately meets the eye? It doesn't exactly say that all Cretans are liars. It says that somebody said that all Cretans are liars. Well, who said it? The letter only refers to a prophet, but we actually know who that prophet was.

It was Epimenides of Knossos who said it. In fact, he was famous for saying it. He lived over six centuries before this letter was written, and yet he was still one of the most famous sons of Crete. He was known as a highly respected philosopher, poet and was indeed often called a prophet. This saying of his was so famous because it was known as Epimenides' Paradox.

I Mudd

There is an old episode of Star Trek called "I Mudd," in which the crew lands on a planet that is ruled by androids who are perfectly logical. It is an idyllic planet with one flaw: the androids won't let anyone leave.

So the crew needs to come up with a plan to break android control – kind of like we may need to do once AI takes over our society. (Star Trek is nothing if not a reflection on today's society.)

So, this is what the crew does. They begin to act in crazy and irrational ways which starts to overtax the data centres of the entire planet. The coup de grace is delivered when Captain Kirk says this about one of the characters to the Head Android, who is named Norman, "Everything Harry tells you is a lie," Kirk says. "Remember that. Everything Harry tells you is a lie."

And then Harry says this to the head android: "Now listen to this carefully, Norman. I am... lying."

And I'm going to give you Norman's response verbatim because it is so perfect. The android says: "You say you are lying, but if everything you say is a lie, then you are telling the truth, but you cannot tell the truth because everything you say is a lie, but you lie... You tell the truth but you cannot for you lie... illogical! Illogical!" And then the entire planetary system blows up because they cannot process such a statement.

Epimenides' Paradox

Well, that is a perfect illustration of Epimenides' Paradox. And Star Trek didn't invent it; it was invented by Epimenides 600 years before the time of Christ.

When Epimenides said, "**Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons,**" he said it as a Cretan and one who was highly respected. So how do you suppose he expected people to react? Do

you think he was expecting everyone to nod and say, **“That testimony is true,** Cretans are all truly awful people”?

Of course not! He expected everyone to respond à la Norman and say, “You say Cretans always lie, but if you are a Cretan, then that statement is a lie, but if it is a lie then Cretans do not always lie and you may be telling the truth but if you are telling the truth then the statement is false. You tell the truth but you are a liar... illogical! Illogical!”

That is right. It turns out that Epimenides only said that to illustrate just how irrational it is to make blanket statements about groups of people.

Did the Writer Know?

And, like I say, this saying of Epimenides was famous in the ancient world. It was famous for that very reason. It was used to teach people not to make foolish blanket statements. So, my question is this. When this famous saying appears in the letter to Titus, how is it being used? Is the writer simply taking the statement at face value and affirming that all Cretans are awful people, or is he aware of the original famous intent of the statement? Is he actually affirming the irrationality of saying such things?

This letter is traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul. And I would affirm that, if Paul wrote it, there is no way that he would have missed the important philosophical meaning of this saying. Paul, in all his letters, writes in such a way that demonstrates that he has been trained in Greek rhetorical and philosophical techniques. Paul would have known about Epimenides’ Paradox.

Modern New Testament scholars do argue, however, that this letter was not written by Paul. They say it can’t have been because it deals with matters and concerns that only arose after Paul’s death. Instead, they say it was written by someone who felt inspired by God to write for the church the wisdom Paul would have given concerning new challenges that had arisen after his death.

I’m not going to delve into the question of authorship today, but let me just say that whoever wrote this letter was no fool. When he tells his readers that this famous saying came from a Cretan philosopher, he must recognize there is a logical paradox at work in it.

He Doesn’t Believe It

But, even more importantly, even though this writer says that **“that testimony is true,”** He actually doesn’t believe that **“Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.”** The whole point of this letter is that he wants Titus to help the Christians in Crete to be good, noble and righteous people. That would simply be impossible if they were *always* liars, vicious brutes and lazy gluttons.

So, I am left with the conclusion that this blanket statement appears in this letter for the same reason that Epimenides said it in the first place. He is writing to teach his readers just how foolish it is to adopt such attitudes towards any group. He is actually trying to show us that stereotyping, racism and exclusion are illogical.

Jesus’ Teaching on the Other

Such a notion should hardly be surprising to Christians, of course, who are followers of the one who challenged his disciples, saying, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

Jesus did not invent the notion of loving your neighbour. It was a command that, even in his time, all Jews agreed was at the heart of the Old Testament Law. But it had always been understood in a very particular way.

People had always had a clear understanding of who their neighbour was. Their neighbour was their fellow Israelite. Their neighbour was someone who shared their culture, language and religion. So, for as long as this teaching had existed, no one would have seen any conflict between loving your neighbour and believing that **“Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.”**

A Radical Idea

But Jesus shattered such an understanding. Here, and in other famous teachings like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he showed people that the love they owed to their neighbour extended much further. It extended to the very people that they feel least comfortable loving.

This was a radical idea. But Jesus said you should behave in this way to reflect the true nature of God. He insists you should do it **“so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”** He taught that by loving those who are most different from us, we become most like God.

Our Polarized World

We live in an increasingly polarized world. And one of the big symptoms of that is that we are surrounded by people who are constantly telling us that we cannot make peace or work with certain groups because they **“are always liars,”** or because they are all **“vicious brutes,”** or **“lazy gluttons,”** or because of some other shared trait that makes them completely evil.

This is not just some minor problem. It is something that is killing thousands of people daily, as it starts wars or prevents them from being ended, as we see at this very moment alongside the waters of the strait of Hormuz. It is threatening to tear whole countries apart, including our own.

An Antidote

Friends, we need an antidote to such rhetoric. And we have it. We have it in Epimenides, who demonstrated that such thinking is deeply illogical and self-defeating. Even more important, we have it in Jesus, who taught us to practice love for the very people we find hardest to love.

And how do we deploy that antidote? There is only one way. We need to start by living out this teaching of Jesus in the most radical way we possibly can. We need to welcome the stranger, to reach out to the hated Samaritan, to actually love a lazy, vicious brute of a lying Cretan enough to realize that they are actually none of those things.

I know it is a small thing to do it ourselves, but that is where true revolutions begin, in the small things. When we show the world that it can be done, new possibilities will arise everywhere. That is the challenge that Jesus has left for us.

A Challenge

So, I'm going to leave you with a challenge. This week, I want you to reach out to someone whom you have been taught is unacceptable because of whatever political, ethnic, religious or other group they belong to. I want you to try to get to know that person as a person, not just as a member of their group. That is where it starts; that is how we begin to bring a better world into view.