

Fact Sheet for **“Are Cretans Really Always Liars?”**  
**Titus 1:10-16**

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01/07/2018

Are all Cretans really liars? One of the youth in my youth group in Tacoma WA had the last name of Cretan. He knew of this passage well. It was *not* one of his favorite passages. And I have a second question. Paul, in verse 15, stated that to the pure all things are pure. What does that mean? What things was he referring to? And “all” means “all”, doesn’t it? In our culture we could ask about meth. We could ask about pornography. We could ask about embezzlement. If we are pure are these things pure?

Here’s the problem. If we don’t know the passage well, then we really don’t know how to apply it well. In a sense it is a closed portion of scripture to us. I really like what Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:16-17. So, let’s open up Titus 1:10-16 with a view towards its teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. This is really an exercise in context. We normally think of context as the verses before and after the passage, but it can be much more than that. It may take in things like geography, the culture of the day, the circumstances of the readers, where the passage is found in the Bible, etc. Here we need to look at some of these other contexts.

**Cretans (1:12)**

Unlike my friend in Tacoma this was a description of those Paul had ministered to, and those he had left Titus to minister to. They were from the island of Crete (Titus 1:5).

**A Prophet of Their Own (1:12)**

This individual was *not* a Christian prophet. This is what one commentator wrote... “To emphasize his point Paul quoted from Epimenides, a Cretan poet and philosopher from the sixth century B.C. who was widely believed to be a religious prophet. Though the quotation may originally have referred to a particular lie (viz. that Zeus was buried in Crete, which was especially offensive to those who believed Zeus was still alive), by Paul’s day the saying had become a proverb which merely emphasized the low reputations of Cretans generally. So little did others think of the Cretans that the verb *kretizo*<sup>1</sup> was invented to mean ‘to lie.’ Of course many noble Christians were in the congregations in Crete, but Paul was frontal in his assertion that the false teachers possessed these baser Cretan tendencies.”<sup>2</sup>

**The Circumcision Party (1:10)**

It’s easy to overlook these words, but they are absolutely necessary to rightly understand this passage. Think about this for a moment. The OT is thoroughly Jewish. The NT was written by Jewish Christians, with the possible exception of Luke and Acts. The apostles were all Jewish Christians. And Jesus himself was Jewish. Judaism is all about the Mosaic Law. But Christ came with a different message. Those who had grown up, steeped in the Jewish culture of a righteousness by works, often had a hard time with these thoughts... Rom. 3:28; 10:4; Gal. 3:11; 5:18.

The Pharisees also emphasized the oral law, which often went far beyond the Mosaic Law (Acts 1:12; Mk. 7:3-4; Gal 2:11-12). Here’s a quote from the Mishnah giving a sense of detail that goes beyond the Mosaic Law... “Utensils of wood, leather, bone, or glass that are flat are not susceptible to uncleanness. If they form a receptacle they are susceptible. After they are broken they become clean, but if again utensils are made of them they once more become susceptible. Earthenware vessels and vessels of alum-crystal are alike in what concerns uncleanness: they contract uncleanness and convey uncleanness through their air-space, and they contract uncleanness [when upturned] from what touches their

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<sup>1</sup> Notice that this word sounds like “Crete.” This verb was not used in the NT. The word for ‘liars’ here is ψεύστης (pseu'-steis).

<sup>2</sup> The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, p. 763.

[concave] bottoms but not from what touches their outer sides; and when they are broken they become insusceptible to uncleanness.”<sup>3</sup>

What was true about the circumcision party? First they didn’t keep the Law themselves (Gal. 6:13). And, for financial gain (1:11), they pressured the Christians in Crete to observe the Mosaic Law as well as the oral law.

**<sup>10</sup> For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. <sup>11</sup> They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.**

They were teaching righteousness by works, both of the Mosaic Law and the oral law. And, like those Titus was left behind by Paul to minister to, they were Cretans.

**<sup>12</sup> One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons."**

This is the quote from Epimenides. Paul was just using an illustration from well-known Cretan culture. He did the same kind of thing in Athens Acts 17:23).

**<sup>13</sup> This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, <sup>14</sup> not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.**

In English there are two sentences here, but Paul wrote them as one. And “them” doesn’t refer to the Cretans but to those of the circumcision party. Here’s the point. Paul was *not* saying that what Epimenides said was correct, that Cretans were always liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons. What was true was what Paul had written in verses 10-11 about the circumcision party. They were following the baser Cretan tendencies that Epimenides had voiced.

**<sup>15</sup> To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.**

You can almost hear the Jewish dietary regulations in these words. You can almost hear all the requirements for purity that are found in both the Mosaic Law and the oral law. If you go down this path you can never be perfect. Think about Matthew 5:48. If righteousness is gained by squeaky clean works, then none of us will ever be righteous before God.

“All things” in our culture would not include things like meth, pornography, and embezzlement. “All things” would not include sin. But “all things” would include our choice of foods, worship styles, and other choices we are free to make.

**<sup>16</sup> They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.**

Now, how would you apply this passage? First, embrace salvation by faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Second, be wary of adding to the Gospel those extra requirements of holiness that God doesn’t specifically and clearly spell out. And be wary of the teaching of others who do. Is eating meat sin? What about bacon? What about alcohol? What music style do you like? Are we more righteous if we worship on the Sabbath? How should we dress for church? Think through things like these carefully. In certain circumstances some of our choices may be wrong while in others they may be fine.

Unless specifically and clearly spelled out in the Bible use this standard... to the pure all things are pure. Be pure before God!

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<sup>3</sup> The Mishnah; Sixth Division, *Tohoroth*; Kelim, 2.1, p. 606.