

Sermon for Sunday, June 27, 2010
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CHARACTER OF A GODLY LEADER
1 Timothy 3:1-7

1. The need for leaders

One day, I spent some hours in the grand old library of a liberal seminary in the east. It was intellectually rewarding, but after a few hours with rare and dusty tomes, I needed a break. Walking around, I happened upon a student sponsored bulletin board. It advertised a seminar for its next crop of single graduates.

"The End of Freedom: Living by the Standards of Your Community." The smaller print specified what this meant: the end of freedom to use alcohol and other substances as you wish, the end of sexual freedom, or, how to be discrete when violating traditional Christian standards. "For once you enter the ministry," the poster said, "you need to act as if you are a leader of a moral community." That poster had a view of church leadership that is quite different from Paul's:

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Leadership in the church

So Paul describes church leadership in his letter to Timothy, his trusted partner in gospel ministry. The standards for leaders, Paul says a few verses later, are part of his broad plan for the church:

"I am writing you these instructions so that... you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15).

Paul writes, a leader to a leader, setting the pattern for a godly life in the church. These standards apply to all leaders, but especially the church. A survey of 1 Timothy shows three essentials for the church.

First we guard and proclaim the gospel. We guard it from error because the gospel can be perverted. The gospel can be stated in many ways, but not an infinite number of ways. We can get to the gospel from various perspectives.

- Do you feel trapped? Do you know you are trapped by life's problems, by your own mistakes and flaws? The gospel sets you free.
- Do you sense that you are alienated from self, friends, God? The gospel offers reconciliation first to God, then to the world.
- Perhaps you realize that you have violated the standards of God, of community, even your own values. The gospel removes guilt and shame.
- If you realize that you serve the wrong cause, wrong master, a principle that fails at crucial moments, God is a good king, brings a good kingdom.

These are all ways to state the gospel. But it isn't infinitely flexible. It has a core which Paul summarizes in one sentence: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief or the foremost (1:15). True leaders promote, protect and declare their core principles. The church does, too. The core is that God sent his Son into this world to save, rescue and restore the lost.

Second we keep our relationships in order. Paul says we should live out our identity as the family of God. We create a beautiful life through good deeds. We seek peace, avoid quarrels, pray for each other, live in our roles.

This is the start of my study leave. Last week, I attended two conferences, one near my mother and I stayed with her. My father died in 2006, she remarried in 2008, so I was watching her new marriage. They act like a married couple should. He lets her sleep in and cooks breakfast daily. She makes lunch and supper because he still works half a day. They make plans, tenderly put each other first and act like a family, as should we.

Third a church, like every organization, should have sound leaders. Paul lists the requirements for formal church leaders, here called overseers, elsewhere called elders, and deacons, in 1 Timothy 3.

2. The first standard for leaders - character

We must realize that a study of elders and deacons informs all of us, whether we are formal leaders or not. Paul also describes the traits of informal leaders, people of influence, at times. There are about thirty virtue/vice lists in the New Testament and they all have some overlap. The nearest virtue list in Timothy describes the traits of deacon's wives, perhaps assuming that couples may work together for cases of need. A deacon's wife must be respectable, not slanderous; temperate and trustworthy". (3:11). Comparing traits of an overseer, we see two of same terms: respectable and temperate

The lesson: the standards for overseers/elders apply in measure to all leaders. For Paul, strong leadership is the third pillar of a strong church: The gospel first, family life second, leadership third. Nominations for church officers are open now, so this topic is timely, but the standards for leaders are always vital.

Healthy churches, healthy organizations of all kinds, have good leaders. No human resource is more vital. Our passage speaks directly to officers, but they apply to everyone who functions as a leader or aspires to leadership. But everyone should listen. The poster in that library was wrong. There is one standard for leaders; it holds all the time. The starting point is character

Perhaps no one considers you a possible leader at the moment. That's OK. It gives us time to work on character, which is the foundation for leadership.

Martin Luther said, "Young fellows are tempted by girls, men who are thirty years old are tempted by gold, when they are forty years old they are tempted by honor and glory." Christian leaders can be tempted by glory, the desire for recognition. Church office can be one more line in a splendid career. The man who has enjoyed every success has one more achievement –office in the church. For others, it can be compensation. They may have no rank at work, but they are important somewhere! But Christian leadership is not an item for the resumé. It's a call from God for those who use their gifts for concrete service.

Christian leadership is not granted as a reward for worldly success and social skill – not even theological knowledge. I'll focus on elders, since they're mentioned most often in the Bible. The term includes pastors, who are teaching elders, and ruling elders, who have an "ordinary" vocation. Paul's comments fall into three categories: The character, the family life, and the reputation of elders.

The pattern of a leader's virtues: Fruit of the Spirit expressed (1 Tim 3:1-3)

At first glance, the list of virtues in 3:2-3 looks like a random collection of godly character traits – traits you should practice. Therefore they could feel like a burden: I have to do or be all those things? No way! It's depressing.

If we look again, we see that Paul's list shares a great deal with the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:21-22. That changes things immediately, because fruit is not the result of the plant's conscious effort. If a gardener plants tomatoes, potatoes, corn, squash, he doesn't need to lecture them on their duties or give them inspirational talks. They bear according to their nature – what they are. So it is with us. God's Spirit has done something in us, He has planted us and it's our nature to bear fruit.

It's true that cultivated blackberries and strawberries bear more than wild ones. And Jesus says he is a gardener that tends and prunes plants, so we don't simply relax and see what happens. But the root of spiritual vitality is given by God's Spirit, not earned by our effort.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. 1 Timothy 3 mentions just one of them – self-control - by name. Yet the fruit of the Spirit and the traits of elders overlap:

Fruit of Spirit - Traits of elders (1 Tim 3)

Love	Leaders take care of family and church, which requires love.
Joy	Joy brings leaders contentment, allows temperance, not greed.
Peace	Leaders are not quarrelsome, violent, or quick-tempered.
Patience	Leaders also need patience to care for family and teach well.
Kindness	Leaders show hospitality - a form of kindness.
Goodness	They love the good; they are upright, devout (from 1 Titus).
Faithfulness	Leaders prove fidelity by loyalty to wife, children and the faith.
Gentleness	Leaders are not violent or quick-tempered. They are gentle (cf. 2:24-25)
Self-control	This is explicit; Word versus drunkenness and greed also implies it.

The character of a church leader and the fruit of the Spirit are consistent. The fruit of the Spirit is the result of God's work in us. The list in Timothy describes the external manifestation of the Spirit's work. If the Spirit works in us, it shows over time in our family, in the church and in society.

Again, Paul holds all to roughly similar standards. 1 Timothy 2:15, 5:9-10 calls women to faith, love, holiness, propriety, faithfulness to husbands and children.

The value of pagan virtues

Paul's list has much in common with the fruit of the Spirit. It also has something in common with pagan virtue lists found in Greco-Roman philosophy. Like Paul, they praised temperance, self-control, and hospitality.

The lesson is clear: leaders must meet the valid secular standards of their day! The concern for mission drives this. Believers should conduct our affairs in ways that seem right to secular people today. We may not agree with secular people – agnostics – on everything, but they have some valid ethical principles and it's important that Christian leaders meet them. See novels and movies featuring evil priests or pastors. They tip their hand by making him gluttonous, overweight, drinking, frivolous, then the real evil comes

How much have the ministries of people like Billy Graham been enhanced by their strong marriages and financial integrity? How much does the cause of Christ suffer when ministers are guilty of fraud, deception, and marital infidelity? We deserve the indignation of outsiders when we betray common principles. No matter how unpopular a political leader may be, honesty helps their cause.

Godliness the first requirement (the person and the work)

Notice too that the list describes the character of an elder more than his work. Paul begins, "An elder must be..." not "An elder must do..." Elders must be able to teach and to manage; otherwise the list refers to character, not tasks.

To follow this, let's remember that Paul uses two terms for leaders: elder and overseer. He uses them interchangeably (Acts 20:17,18; Titus 1:5,7), but there is a difference between them.

"Overseer" refers especially to an elder's function; elder refers to his character. Paul calls oversight a "noble task", then lists a series of character traits. This means leaders do the work of leading. But first the leader is a certain kind of person.

I pause to say that, because my faults are numerous. What can a sinner say? By God's grace, I am a better man than I was. Because the Spirit is at work, there is some fruit of his presence. I take heart in that. When you look at yourself, you should too. Perfect? No. Headed in the right direction? I hope so.

If we compare ourselves to God's standards, we might have no leaders. No one is worthy. Yet Paul says the church should examine itself and elect those who are making progress. By the time an elder or deacon is elected here, he has passed three or four rounds of examination. For pastors, it's more. Paul wants leaders of both action and character. We could say the first work of a leader is his own character. The fruit of the Spirit should lead to godliness.

Again, I'm not saying leaders must be all but perfect. If I did, we would have no leaders at all. Pastors are like cardiologists who suffer heart disease. Moral failings hinder kingdom work, but they don't make it impossible.

Comparing 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we see that elders must persevere, keep seeking godliness. Timothy describes the traits of those who are elders; Titus speaks to those who will be. The lists are the same. That means elders have to attain and keep God's standards. Not like soldiers who have to do seventy pushups and run a six minute mile to finish boot camp, and then fall apart. The standards remain. Our standards start high and stay high. Paul makes the traits of leaders public! Everyone knows them; everyone can hold leaders accountable.

Leaders must be strong as they face the issues of the hour. Several traits of a godly leader contrast with traits of false teachers who troubled the church in Ephesus.

- False teachers are violent, quarrelsome (6:3-5). Elders are gentle.
- False teachers love money (1 Timothy 6:5-10). Elders do not (Titus 1:7, Acts 20:33).
- False teachers don't know what they're talking about (1:7). Elders are apt to teach.

Clearly, leaders need to be strong where the church is weak, ready to engage the questions of the hour, not those of twenty years past. They must be strong where the battle rages today.

Today, it seems, first, leaders need to be authentic, open, honest – even if openness isn't natural to them. People want unscripted, open-ended, risky interaction. We expect church leaders to be good people. This is evident in the ongoing outrage over the sexual sins of Catholic leaders, Protestant leaders and politicians

Second, a generation ago, doubters want proof of the Bible's truth claims. People still care about that, but it seems that outsiders are more interested in the effects of the gospel and faith. Do believers show a good life, a beautiful life? If God is alive and faith makes a difference, it should show in our course of life. That's far more daunting than "the answers to objections." But it's the need of the hour.

Third, people expect the church to reflect God's character in its corporate life. If God is merciful, the church should be merciful – both in visible programs and in spontaneous, private acts.

These thoughts cohere with Paul's interest in proven character (above). It also fits the next point: that leaders prove themselves by managing families well. If they can't manage their families, how can they manage the church?

3. Family life of an elder

First, an overseer or elder is faithful to his wife. The way Paul phrases it raises a question. Our translation says an overseer "must be... the husband of but one wife." That phrase upsets people. Here's why: the translation seems to say something we don't literally practice. Translation says: Husband of one wife, but we have overseers who are husbands of two wives – married twice. People accuse: "hypocrites! You take the Bible literally when it suits you." I want to answer that charge – but I must ask you to listen carefully. First, while we have every right to pick up a Bible and say, "This is God's word," accuracy demands that we say something like "I have a copy of a translation of the Bible." Translations are reliable, but occasionally it's hard to render a phrase from Greek or Hebrew to English. That can cause misunderstanding and requires explanation.

The original says an overseer is "a man [or husband] of one woman". This phrase has one of four possible meanings. It can't mean that elders must be married. Jesus was single and he is the great shepherd and overseer of the church. Paul was single, too. Any interpretation that makes us say, "Jesus is unfit" must be mistaken. So "Must be married" can't be it. Besides Paul commends celibacy elsewhere since it granted increased freedom for service (1 Corinthians 7). [If, reading hyper-literally, we think the text requires marriage, it also requires that one have at least two children – cf plural in 3:4.]

Maybe it means elders may marry once in a lifetime. But that would make it wrong for the widowed to remarry (Romans 7, 1 Corinthians 7, Matthew 19). But the Bible clearly allows remarriage after a death. And, we believe, after one spouse deserts or is unfaithful to another. So that can't be right.

Maybe it requires monogamy: one wife, not three. But polygamy was rare at that time, so that probably isn't Paul's main point.

No, the passage requires marital fidelity - monogamy and loyalty, love, dedication. I say this because the phrase "man of one woman" means "a man dedicated to one woman. The grammatically identical phrase in 1 Timothy 5:9 proves the point. It says the church should aid widows who were "a woman of one man." In context, that clearly means "faithful wives".

Here country music finally aids our theological understanding. Paul requires women to be what country music calls "a one-man woman," as in the song "I was a one-man woman, but he was a two-timin' man." Paul wants elders to be "one woman men" deeply faithful to one woman.

The point: leaders should know and love their wives. An excellent marriage is a criterion for leadership. Newly married men say things like, "I don't understand women." Relax. You don't need to understand women. You just need to know your wife. You are a scientist with a narrow field of study – your spouse.

His children

Paul also says elders manage and take care of their children. Some books say church needs three kinds of elders: those who serve its corporate life, its community, and its cause. "Manage" sounds very corporate. Now the church has an economic aspect – it has costs and needs income to function in this world. But the church is not a business. We take donations and use them carefully so we can give away our "services."

Paul says overseers "take care" of their children and the church. The dominant metaphor for the church is family. Overseers are a little like fathers. Fathers "manage" or lead the house. But they "take care," too (Luke 10:34)! Because they "take care", people submit to fathers and leaders "with respect" (1 Timothy 3:4).

Consider how and why children submit to parents. Without love, children submit to parents because they must; they are powerless and dependent. Without love, older children may submit out of fear of punishment. But without love children do not long obtain "submission with respect" (3:4). Parents who don't love their children use law and threats to coerce their children. But they rebel as much and as soon

as possible. If they have more power, parents rule. Mao: Power proceeds from the barrel of a gun. But remove the gun and then what? No respect, no obedience

But children obey cheerfully – most of the time – if they know their parents lead for their good. The church is the same. People follow loving leaders, not power brokers. Leaders gain credibility by serving sacrificially, according to the gifts God gives them. Jesus became qualified to lead the church by serving others.

My oldest child ran cross country in high school. She took up running as a freshman essentially to get in shape, but she showed talent and began to lead the Junior Varsity squad and post strong times- stronger than two varsity runners. Right before districts, a co-captain, a senior, told the coach, "Abby has been running so well lately, she deserves to run varsity for the team." And she said: "And she can have my place." That is leadership. Putting others ahead of self.

3. The reputation of an elder 3:6-7

Not a recent convert. The Greek says, "Not a newly planted person". The idea: maturation is a process that can't be rushed. There is no hurry. Haste produces temptation and "condemnation of the devil." Anyone can assist. Either the kind of condemnation that the devil is under, or the devil will condemn him. Exception: when church starts in a new land. (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5) imply new churches moved fast. But they are unique, not normative. And first, elders may have been experienced synagogue leaders.

Good reputation

"It is necessary to have a good witness or reputation with outsiders" (3:7). Reputation is important. Nothing undermines the church's witness faster than the loss of ethical rectitude. The world already has antagonism toward the church for its high standards, for exposing its dark deeds to the light, for its perceived "holier than thou" attitude. Conversely, the church claims a higher standard and observers will do us the honor of holding us to it.

Conclusion: Churches need to hold fast to the gospel, keep relationships in order, have strong leaders.

Management gets a mention, and leaders do have some tasks: elders should be teachers, should shepherd the flock, should care, shepherd and manage or lead. Tasks count, but the main thing is be a godly, Spirit-led man. How?

Believe in Jesus. His Spirit enters your life. Bear fruit.