

1 Timothy 3:1-7
Leviticus 21
Psalm 15

“The Office and Character of the Bishop”

(September 11, 2011)

Why did God require these things of the priests?

Did you hear the refrain?

“They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God” (v6)

“He shall be holy to you, for I the LORD who sanctify you, am holy.” (v8)

“I am the LORD who sanctifies him” (v15)

“that he may not profane my sanctuaries,
for I am the LORD who sanctifies them” (v23)

God’s concern is for *holiness*.

And in the Old Testament,

that concern for holiness had a very strong *outward* component.

In the New Testament,

the focus turns more inward – more towards character rather than ceremony –
but you can see how the one points forward to the other.

In verses 17-21 Moses lays out a series of “blemishes” that disqualify a man for the priesthood.

Gregory the Great in Book of Pastoral Rule suggests that these “blemishes”
have their spiritual counterparts.

The OT priest should not be blind –

“Indeed, a man is ‘blind’ if he is ignorant of the light of heavenly contemplation
because he is oppressed by the darkness of the present life.” (45)

“Likewise, a man is “lame” if he sees the way that he ought to go” but doesn’t.
an injured foot or hand represents the one who is completely lacks good deeds,
while a hunchback is so weighed down by the cares of the world
that he cannot lift his eyes to heaven.

Certainly, Moses is talking about outward defects with respect to the OT priesthood –
and in the NT, physical defects do not disqualify a man for service.

The OT priest must be a perfect physical specimen

because he is the one who represents Israel (and thus, humanity) before God.

In the NT, Jesus Christ *is* that high priest – that perfect specimen of a man
who represents us before God.

Therefore it is not necessary for pastors today to be perfect physical specimens –
rather, we must relay, in word and in deed,
the character of Christ to the congregation.

That is why our Psalm of response needs to be sung with two things in mind.

Psalm 15 asks who can sojourn in God’s tent?

The Psalm goes on to describe a man who is upright and holy in life.

Certainly that righteous and holy man is Jesus Christ!
He is the one who dwells on God's holy hill!
If he does not dwell at the right hand of God,
then we have no prayer of dwelling there!

But Psalm 15 is not describing something that should only be true of Jesus.
It should also be true of us!
This is the character of the Christian – the one who is a child of God.

This is who *we* should be.

Sing Psalm 15
Read 1 Timothy 3

Ten years ago today, on a Tuesday morning,
most of us were going about our daily affairs,
when word came that an airplane had hit the World Trade Center in New York City.

If you had never thought about Paul's admonition to "pray for kings" and rulers,
"that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life,"
September 11, 2001, woke us up to the necessity of it!

In our day, many often think of Paul's admonition
in terms of praying that the government will leave *us* alone,
and so we thank God for our religious freedom!

But I think Paul's main concern in 1 Timothy 2
was actually that the governing authorities *protect us* from marauding armies.

If you do not have a strong government that is able to defend you from your enemies,
then you will not live at peace.

We don't tend to think about this so much in the United States,
because we don't have many powerful enemies nearby.
(9/11 was the first time that a foreign enemy had struck mainland America in a *long* time)

But for most of human history, powerful enemies have been much closer.

And in the early church, powerful enemies might live just around the corner.
The book of Acts makes it clear that early Christians were in danger of persecution
from Jews as well as Gentiles.

When you became a Christian, you left behind your old way of life.
If you were a Jew, you would be expelled from the synagogue.
If you were a Gentile, you would leave behind the pagan temples.
Your patron (whether Jew or Gentile) *might* turn against you,
leaving you alone and abandoned to face the world.

And in the early church, your bishop was a key figure in protecting the church.

September of 2001 contains another anniversary.

September 23, 2001, was my first Sunday at Michiana Covenant.

The previous pastor had resigned, and I was asked to fill the pulpit for a few weeks – maybe a few months – until the congregation could figure out what to do next.

1. “A Noble Task”: the Office of Bishop (v1)

¹*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*

I want to start by explaining this “noble task.”

This phrase is literally “a good work” –

but there are two different words for “good” – agathos and kalos:
and the word “kalos” has a range of meaning more towards the “beautiful”
and not just the moral good.

Paul will use this phrase in three other places in 1 Timothy.

In 1 Tim 5:10, he will use two different phrases for good works:

the widow must have a reputation for good works –
for “kalos”/beautiful works –

but at the end of the verse, Paul says she must have devoted herself
to every good work (agathos – the morally good work).

In 1 Tim 5:25, Paul says that “good works” (kalos) are conspicuous,
and in 1 Tim 6:18, he says that the rich are to be
“rich in good works” (kalos).

I don’t want to press the distinction too much –

because kalos and agathos are very much used as synonyms –
but there is an important point that you should see.

There’s an older saying that perhaps captures the idea:

“Handsome is as handsome does.”

We still use the word handsome to refer to a good-looking man.

But the phrase “handsome is as handsome does”

points out that it is not enough to *look* good,
the outward appearance must be matched by a corresponding
inward handsomeness.

So when Paul says that if anyone aspires to the office of overseer,

he desires a “good work” – he is not saying a “morally good work” –

but a handsome work – a beautiful work – a noble task –

one that cannot be performed merely by doing outwardly good deeds,

but – as the old saying goes –

“handsome is as handsome does.”

But what is this work?

What is his noble task?

The word episkopes means simply “overseer” –
and refers to one who superintends – or “manages” others.

The English word “bishop” was originally simply a transliteration of the Greek “episcopos” –
just like the English “presbyter” comes from the Greek “presbuteros”
and “deacon” comes from the Greek “diakonos”.

In 1 Timothy Paul speaks of the bishop in 3:1-7,
deacons in 3:8-13,
and elders in 5:17-20.

In Timothy and Titus Paul speaks in the plural regarding elders and deacons,
but the singular when he speaks of the bishop.

Of course, when he wrote to the Philippians he wrote to the saints at Philippi,
“with the bishops and deacons.”

And in Titus 1:5 Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every town,
but immediately talks about how “a bishop is God’s steward.”

So it seems clear that elder (presbyter) *can* be used interchangeably with overseer (bishop) –
although in other instances the words can refer to different people!

(The most likely solution is that the early church did not have a “standardized” polity.
There is no evidence that the apostles ever had a meeting
to determine a single “church order” for the whole church,
so there may have been some variety in the apostolic church.)

So rather than get into the debate over how to *structure* the church,
I want to focus on *who should lead the church!*

Because *that* is where Paul is *abundantly clear!*

2. “Above Reproach”: The Character of the Bishop (v2-6)

In verses 2-6 Paul lays out the qualifications for a bishop – an overseer –
one who leads – who oversees – the church.

First, I want to ask, is there anything here that is *unique* to the bishop?
Certainly all of these things ought to be true of me.
But there are only *two* things here that should not also be true of *every* Christian.

One is in verse 6 – not a recent convert (some Christians are obviously recent converts!).
The other is “husband of one wife” –
which does not apply to those who are single – or to women!

But besides those that are specific to gender or age,

everything on this list should characterize all of you.

There are not two different sets of requirements:

one for the “special” Christians,
and one for “ordinary” Christians.

Every Christian should have this sort of character.

Why?

Because this is nothing less than the character of Christ himself.

²*Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,* ³*not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.*

The bishop must be “above reproach” – a word used three times in NT (all in 1 Timothy)

The others are 1 Tim 5:7 – where the widow is to be “above reproach”
and 1 Tim 6:14 – where Paul charges Timothy to “keep the commandment unstained
and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ”

In other words “above reproach” has a lot of overlap with the idea of “a noble task” –
the bishop must *live* handsomely – he must live a life that is above criticism.

And the first expression of this is that he must be “the husband of one wife” –
literally a “one-woman man” –

Perhaps “husband of one wife” communicates the wrong thing today.

It may communicate merely the idea that Paul forbids polygamy.

After all, Josephus, Paul’s contemporary, reports that the Jews permitted polygamy,
and it was only after the rise of the Christian emperors
that Rome stepped in to curtail this Jewish practice.

But polygamy was not especially common in the Roman world –
and it was technically illegal.

But Paul goes a step further:

Paul says that a bishop must be a “one-woman man.”

In Roman culture, a man could only have one wife.

If he had a mistress, or a slave-girl, on the side,
that was fine!

Paul is saying that a bishop must be a “one-woman man.”

He may not be married to more than one woman.

He may not have “other women” on the side.

For that matter, he may not be a “serial polygamist” –

in other words, he may not divorce one wife to marry another.

He must be a *one-woman man*.

Why?

Because the bishop should be an exemplar of what a Christian should be.
And a Christian should look like Jesus!
And Jesus has only one wife!

This does not mean that a bishop *must* be married,
but it does mean that a bishop *may* be married –
and so a church that forbids bishops to marry
is contradicting the explicit command of scripture.

Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 9:5
that Peter and the other apostles were married –
and that he (and perhaps Barnabas) were the exception.

Paul then rings off a list of five words that must characterize the bishop:
He must be “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach”

In verse 2 Paul states the principles; in verse 3 the practices.

He must be sober-minded – which means he may not be a drunkard!
But his sobriety must extend to every aspect of life.
His moderation – his temperance – must characterize him in every way.

That is why sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable –
must all be seen together.

Notice that same word “respectable” in verse 2 that we saw regarding women’s clothing in 2:9.
Would you want your pastor’s character to look like your wardrobe?

Paul goes on to say that the bishop must be hospitable:
literally a “lover of strangers”.
In the Bible, hospitality never refers to entertaining friends.
By definition, hospitality has to do with how you treat *strangers*.

If you want examples of hospitality in the Bible,
think of Abraham in Genesis 18, welcoming the three strangers and feeding them;
think of Lot in Genesis 19, welcoming the two strangers
giving them a place to stay (and protecting them from the men of Sodom).

A bishop must be hospitable.
He must welcome strangers into his home.

This is something that should be true of all Christians
(think of Hebrews 13:2 which commands all believers
“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”)

but it *must* be true of the bishop.

The way this happened in the ancient world was that someone would show up in town,
perhaps with a letter of recommendation from his pastor,
or perhaps simply with his own confession of faith,
and would inquire for the Christians.

(Think of how Paul came to Corinth and “found a Jew named Aquila...
and he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.”)
Aquila and Priscilla showed hospitality to Paul, welcoming him into their house.

When was the last time you welcomed a stranger into your home?

On our way home from California, we received hospitality from a family in Prescott, AZ.
The pastor there is a friend of mine – but he was closing on a new house,
and so we wound up staying with a family from his congregation.

Most people would be reluctant to welcome a strange family into their home –
but we are part of a new family in Jesus.

As Paul says at the end of the chapter, he is reminding us how we are to behave
“in the household of God, which is the church of the living God,
a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

In the household of God, the bishop shows hospitality
(and I have been delighted at your response
when I have asked you to participate in this!).

A bishop must also be “able to teach.”

This is essential to the bishop’s “noble task.”

But I would also point out that this is the only mention of his teaching ability.

90% of the passage focuses on the bishop’s character.

10% on his teaching ability.

Why is this?

It’s a simple principle of shepherding:

if the shepherd says all the right things,

but walks in the wrong direction,

where will the sheep be?

The sheep will follow the shepherd.

And so if the sheep are in the wrong place,

don’t assume that he’s teaching the wrong things.

Look for where he is leading!

I really didn’t want to say that.

It would be so much easier to be able to say,
“Do what I say, not what I do!”

Verse 3 adds that he must not be a drunkard.

It is not enough that he be “sober-minded” – he must also be sober in practice!

He must not be violent (literally, a “striker” – or a “bully”) –
rather, he must be gentle – forbearing, patient.

He must not be quarrelsome or contentious.

(I think we of the Presbyterian family need to be more careful on this point!).

And he must not be a lover of money.

He must be a lover of strangers.

He must not be a lover of silver.

Again, all these things should characterize all Christians,
but they *must* characterize the bishop.

⁴*He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?*

I have often said that the scriptures never tell a husband to make his wife submit.

It is important to add that here Paul does tell a *father* to “keep his children submissive.”
(literally, “having children in submission”).

I need to teach my children how to obey – how to submit –

because they will need to obey many authorities in their life:

they will need to submit to governing authorities,

to their masters at work,

to church elders,

and my daughters will need to submit to their husbands.

And above all, they must submit to God.

If I do not teach them submission, it is not that they will *become* wild and unruly –
they are *naturally* wild and unruly!

When I look at families today and see the disorder and chaos in the home,

Paul’s words are vindicated.

It all starts in the home –

in the *household*.

Of course, the ancient household usually included more people than the modern one.

While Paul focuses on the children

(since you can learn an awful lot about a man by watching his children!)

he insists that the bishop *manage his own household well*.

The word “to manage” literally means “to set over” or “to set in front.”

1 Thess 5:12 speaks of those who “are over you in the Lord and admonish you,”

1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of the elders who “rule well” – literally, who ‘are set over’ well!

Every father manages his household.

You will either do it well – or you will do it poorly!

The word “kalos” here again suggests that he must do it well *visibly*.
Again, “handsome is as handsome does” is helpful.

The idea again is that the church should pay careful attention to a man’s character –
because how he governs *his* household will be how he governs the household of God.

What does it mean to govern “with all dignity”?
The word “dignity” can also be translated “reverence” –
if you think of something in between “awe” and “respect” –
you’ll be on the right track.

(There is a question as to whether it is the father or the children who are to act
“with all dignity” –
which could mean that the children are supposed to revere their father)

Dignity is the quality of the one who is treated with awe and respect –
and unfortunately, the same Greek word can refer *either*
to the one doing the awe and respect,
or the one receiving the awe and respect!

Because of that I don’t think that we need to decide whether it is the children or the father
who is intended as the referent of “with all dignity.”
Certainly the children are to treat their father with awe and respect,
and the father is to be worthy of that awe and respect.

Incidentally, this is the biblical root of the title “Reverend.”
The parallel that Paul makes here suggests that the church should “revere” the bishop,
and he should *act* with the “dignity” of his office.
And so the church started referring to the bishop as “the Reverend...”
(in the same way that judges are referred to as “the Honorable...”).

⁶*He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the
condemnation of the devil.*

Verse 6 then insists that the bishop must not be a recent convert.
He must not be (literally) a neophyte – one who is newly planted.

Paul’s concern is that he may “become puffed up with conceit.”
A man who is given to pride must first learn humility –
otherwise he will learn the hard way that pride leads to destruction.

It can tempting to take a man with great talents and thrust him into leadership –
but if he is a new convert – if he has not learned humility
(that most basic of Christian virtues) –
then he may well fall into the condemnation of the devil.

3. “Well Thought of by Outsiders”: the Reputation of the Bishop (v7)

⁷Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Paul phrases Verse 7 in such a way as to suggest that he is adding another category, which I have titled “the reputation of the bishop.”

You may have a man who is all of the above –
everything that you could want in a bishop –
but if is not well-thought-of by outsiders,
maybe you shouldn’t ordain him!

Why is it essential that a pastor have a good reputation?
(Literally, he must have a beautiful witness from those outside.)

Paul gives the reason:
“that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”

Now, for Paul, this is important because the reputation of the bishop
will have a profound affect on the whole church.
If you think in terms of the patronage system in Roman culture,
the bishop will play an important role in protecting the church.
If he has a bad reputation among outsiders,
then he will not be able to lead and guard the church well.

This was crucial in the first few centuries of church history.
If the bishop had a good reputation among the pagans (and the Jews)
then the secular rulers would tend to give the church a break.
If the bishop was a general nuisance,
then the rulers might go after the church.

We live in a very different culture.
Your future probably does not depend on your pastor’s patronage!
But the principle remains true:
the bishop should have a good reputation among outsiders.
A man with the sort of character described by Paul in verses 1-6
should have a good reputation with outsiders.

Paul assumes that *ordinarily* the good deeds and respectable character of the bishop
and the Christian community
will protect them from the snares of the devil.
Suffering will come – persecution will happen –
but you should not do anything to go find it!

Conclusion

Paul said, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Notice the key qualification: “as I am of Christ”

As Hebrews 13:7 adds,

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.

Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”

Scripture tells you to look at your leaders.

Watch how they live – watch the results – and imitate *their faith*.

Don’t confuse me with Jesus!

I am not a perfect specimen of humanity.

As Gregory the Great put it so well at the end of his *Book of Pastoral Rule*,

“I am like a poor painter who tries to paint the ideal man.

I am trying to point others to the shore of perfection,

as I am tossed back and forth by the waves of sin.” (212)

But if all I do is *tell you* where to go –

and I do not go there myself –

then I have no business standing here in front of you.

And so I say with Gregory,

“But in the shipwreck of this life,

I beg of you to sustain me with the plank of your prayers...

since my own weight causes me to sink.” (212)

I’d like for you to turn to #25 in the TH,

a hymn by Gregory of Nazianzus –

whose reflections on pastoral ministry strongly influenced Gregory the Great

200 years later!

When I was ordained fourteen years ago,

we sang this hymn.

You may hear in the third stanza an echo of 1 Timothy 2:8,

“clean hands in holy worship raise” –

and while the song plainly applies to every Christian,

it has spoken to me over and over again of what *I* am called to do.

It was my prayer when I began my ministry –

and it remains that today.

So let us sing “O Light That Knew No Dawn”