

“Spiritual Leadership”

Titus 1:5-9 ¹

I had planned to use Mark’s record of Jesus’ Great Commandment this morning, but when I looked at my previous preaching schedule, I noticed that I’ve already used that as a text earlier this year. So, since today is our annual “Deacon Sunday,” I decided to use Paul’s words to Titus about “Spiritual Leadership” instead.

As you may know, Titus, together with 1 and 2 Timothy, makes up what we know as the “Pastoral Epistles,” letters Paul wrote to the pastors of churches rather than writing, as he usually did, to the churches as a whole. I encourage you to follow along in the text, and while you’re turning to Titus, let me tell you a little bit about him.

Titus was a Greek, a Gentile believer first mentioned in Galatians, the earliest of Paul’s letters in the New Testament.² Although he’s not mentioned in Acts, Titus was quite involved in Paul’s missionary work, and he and Paul became increasingly close over the years, such that Paul called him “*my true son in our common faith*” (Titus 1:4).³

It was Titus to whom Paul entrusted the delicate task of delivering his severe letter to Corinth,⁴ and Titus’ genuine concern for the Corinthians no doubt contributed to the success of his visit.⁵ Later, Titus probably delivered the letter we know as 2 Corinthians, as well.⁶

After being released from his first Roman imprisonment, Paul apparently made additional missionary journeys not recorded in Acts. On one of these journeys, Paul took Titus with him to the island of Crete, where Paul appointed Titus to oversee and administer the church there (Titus 1:5). Titus was in Crete when he got this letter (Titus 3:12).⁷ Let’s look, then, at the beginning of the letter, and see what Paul had to say about church leaders:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who cannot lie, promised before time began. In his own time he has revealed his word in the preaching with which I was entrusted by the command of God our Savior:

To Titus, my true son in our common faith. Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

The reason I left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint elders in every town. An elder must be blameless: the husband of one wife, with faithful children who are not accused of wildness or rebellion. As an overseer of God's household, he must be blameless: not arrogant, not hot-tempered, not an excessive drinker, not a bully, not greedy for money, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, righteous, holy, self-controlled, holding to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it (Titus 1:1-9).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 28, 2018. Deacon Installation Service.

² Galatians 2:3

³ cp. 2 Corinthians 8:23; 1 Timothy 1:2

⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:1-4, 7:13-15

⁵ 2 Corinthians 8:16-17, 12:18, 2:13, 7:5-6, 13-15

⁶ 2 Corinthians 8:6, 16-18, 23

⁷ Daniel C. Browning, Jr., “Titus,” *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991). Following Paul’s subsequent reimprisonment, Titus was sent to Dalmatia (2 Timothy 4:10). According to church tradition, Titus was the first bishop of Crete.

This is a parallel passage to 1 Timothy 3:1-13, where Paul gave similar guidelines to Timothy, who was pastor of the church in Ephesus. The two lists are almost—but not quite—identical, giving sixteen or seventeen character qualities for persons chosen for spiritual leadership.

We're just going to look at two of these this morning, but before we do, let me point out that, in the opinion of many, including myself, the gendered language Paul used here was quite culturally conditioned. Paul's words to Titus on the island of Crete took into account the cultural situation there, as did Paul's words to Timothy in what we know as western Turkey.

When Paul wrote to Titus, he had already penned his famous dictum that "*those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:27-28). And it's important to remember that in those days and in those places, women were very much second-class citizens. Wives were seldom seen in public.

Paul was concerned that as churches in that part of the Mediterranean basin tried to live into the realities of "no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female," they would move too quickly, bringing reproach on the message of Jesus rather than creating openness to it. In other areas, such as Thessalonica and Philippi, where women's rights were much farther along, Paul welcomed women as equal partners; and Philippi was clearly the church to which he felt closest.

I've written at length on these matters, and I'll be glad to send that document to you, if you're interested. I've said all this to say that when we read these words in Titus, we do no violence to Paul's intent at all to understand his instructions as being for both male and female leaders alike.

When we think about spiritual leadership, we do well to begin by remembering that Jesus turned our typical ideas about leadership on their heads. Jesus' Master Principle of Leadership was that "*whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all*" (Mark 10:43-44).

Henry Blackaby wrote that "God is not necessarily looking for leaders, at least not in the sense we generally think of leaders. He is looking for servants."⁸ And Oswald Sanders added that "A shepherd's work requires a shepherd's heart. . . . Leaders serve, not from a sense of mere duty, but because of *love*."⁹ Spiritual leaders can't genuinely serve people if they don't genuinely love them.¹⁰

This morning I want to think briefly with you about spiritual leadership using just two of the nearly twenty characteristics Paul listed for Timothy and Titus. The two characteristics I'll use today are "holy" and "blameless."

To be "**holy**" is to be set apart for God's service, which is something that happens in our lives in at least three ways. In the first place, God chose us from the beginning of creation to

⁸ Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda* (Nashville: Broadman Holman, 2001), p. xi.

⁹ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967, 2007), p. 48.

¹⁰ A second initial caveat is that while spiritual leaders frequently work to build consensus, in the last analysis, spiritual leaders do not lead by consensus, but by what they know God has said (Blackaby, p. 249). "The spiritual leader's task," Blackaby wrote, "is to move people from where they are to where God wants them to be. **Spiritual leadership is moving people on to God's agenda**" (Blackaby, p. 20).

be holy and blameless in His sight because of the redemption and forgiveness that became available to us through the blood of Jesus (Ephesians 1:3-8). The Bible tells us that we “*are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession*” (1 Peter 2:9), which is a status God has reserved for us and to which invitations have already been sent; but there is a second “setting apart” required in order to accept the invitation.

The New Testament refers to Jesus as “Lord” nearly two hundred times, a position He has every right to occupy, but that He occupies in our lives only by invitation . . . at least until the great Day of the Lord when all will be compelled to acknowledge Him.¹¹ For Jesus to become Lord of our lives requires that we first be born again through faith in Him (John 3:3, 16), but it requires more than this.

To be “set apart” in this second sense—the sense of making Jesus *Lord*—is to choose to be completely abandoned to God’s purposes in our lives and in our world; and such abandonment means that we give up the right to have any part of our lives “floating free from the Holy Spirit’s control.”¹² The New Testament speaks of this second kind of holiness, this second kind of being “set apart,” as being “*filled with the Spirit*” (Acts 2:4).

Oswald Sanders wrote that “To be filled with the Spirit is to be controlled by the Spirit. The Christian’s mind, emotions, will, and physical strength all become available for the Spirit to guide and use. Under the Spirit’s control, natural gifts are lifted to their highest power, sanctified for holy purpose.”¹³ While being born again is a once-only experience, being filled with and controlled by God’s Spirit requires us to continually choose to submit our wills and purposes to God’s will and purposes—all day long, every day, as long as we live.

There are many spiritual disciplines that can help us in conforming our wills to God’s will, chief among which are fervent prayer and diligent study of God’s Word.¹⁴ The Bible mentions the Spirit’s help in prayer more frequently than any other help He gives us, and it is prayer, more than any other single activity, that determines how connected our lives are to God’s power.¹⁵

And, because they recognize their utter dependence on God, those who intend to serve Jesus completely fill their hearts and minds with His Word. When our minds are frequently focused on God’s Word, we find ourselves thinking more and more according to God’s mind and we find ourselves yearning more and more for God’s heart all day long (Romans 12:1-2).

If we have “loaded the heart drive” in this way, then when we face temptations or other decisions, God’s Spirit brings appropriate Scriptures to our awareness, showing us a way forward. Discovering God’s will is not so much a matter of compiling our own lists of pros and cons as it is of living in intimate relationship with a personal God who has promised to show us the Way.¹⁶

And for those who have become “holy” and “set apart” first through salvation and then through choosing to make Jesus Lord, there sometimes comes a third setting apart, which is the setting apart that the church does for those called to serve through leadership such as

¹¹ 1 Peter 3:15; Philippians 2:10-11

¹² Sanders, p. 52.

¹³ Sanders, p. 80.

¹⁴ See Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), and Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines* (HarperOne, 1990).

¹⁵ Sanders, p. 86; Blackaby, p. 151.

¹⁶ Blackaby, p. 193.

serving as Deacons. This third setting apart comes only when the first two have become well developed, and that's what we're about today.¹⁷

After "holiness," the second characteristic of spiritual leadership I want to highlight this morning is actually the first one Paul mentioned to Titus, which is that spiritual leaders must be "**blameless**" or "*above reproach*."¹⁸ The word we usually use for this character quality today is "integrity."

We used the word "integrity" a lot in the Navy, both as it relates to character and as it relates to the hull of a ship. One of the most critical characteristics of a steel ship is that it has watertight integrity—that it doesn't let water enter the ship in places where it doesn't belong.

As Christians, while we're never going to be sinless on this side of heaven, we need to give as much priority to "sin-tight" integrity as shipboard engineers give to watertight integrity. The forces of evil know our weaknesses, and they watch for opportunities to compromise our power and our witness with unsleeping eyes.

Spiritual leaders are no more immune to moral failure than those they lead, and they are actually much more prominent targets as the result of their more prominent position. Person for person, taking a leader down does a lot more damage to God's kingdom than does taking out one of the troops.

And it's important to realize that we don't achieve lives that are "above reproach" by accident. Integrity happens only on purpose. Oswald Sanders put it this way: "With respect to relationships within the church . . . the spiritual leader should be a [person] of unchallengeable morality. . . . Detractors should not have a rung to stand on. . . . A leader cannot allow a secret indulgence that would undermine public witness."¹⁹ While this principle applies to every person who follows Jesus, it is especially critical for leaders. Our lives must be "squeaky clean."

Henry Blackaby pointed out that "When Christian leaders forgive others, people come to understand that God is a God who forgives. When Christian leaders are patient with those who fail, people come to understand that God is, by nature, long-suffering. When Christian leaders live with holy integrity, people gain a glimpse of God's holiness. The first glimpse of the true God that many people see will be reflected in the Christians who work alongside them week by week. To accurately reflect God's nature to others is to bring him glory."²⁰

At this point, as you think about being "holy" and "blameless," you may be feeling discouraged, thinking that such words couldn't really be used to describe you. If that's how you're feeling right now, I'd like to offer two words of encouragement.

First, don't evaluate the future potential of your life based on what you can see today. The Bible is chock full of stories about people who seemed completely unpromising from a human standpoint but who God used in extremely powerful and world-changing ways.

Dwight L. Moody, one of the greatest preachers this nation has ever known, began with so little knowledge of the Bible that his first application for membership in the Mount Vernon Congregational Church of Boston was turned down. His grammar was so horrible that the church asked him not to speak in public meetings; and his Sunday School teacher said of him

¹⁷ Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:6, 10

¹⁸ Titus 1:6; 1 Timothy 3:2

¹⁹ Sanders, pp. 40-42. See 1 Peter 3:16.

²⁰ Blackaby, p. 145.

that “I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker than was his when he came into my class; and I think that the committee of the Mount Vernon Church seldom met an applicant for membership more unlikely ever to become a Christian of clear and decided views of Gospel truth, still less to fill any extended sphere of public usefulness.”²¹

The good news is that God is well able to “hit a straight lick with a crooked stick,” and the more crooked is the stick, the more amazing is the result. God intends to be glorified through your life. Don’t give up!

And second, while you’re wondering about your own potential, I’d like to remind you of Viktor Frankl’s affirmation that “what would give light must endure burning.” God is able to so order your circumstances that your character becomes more and more like Jesus, and God actually intends to do that if you will let Him do His work (1 Peter 1:6-7).

God will take who you are and who I am today and put us through the Refiner’s Fire, removing those faults that block His Spirit’s work and tempering our character so that we have the flexibility and strength needed for victory on the fields of spiritual battle. No matter how old or young you are, it remains God’s purpose today to so shape your life that “holy” and “blameless” can truthfully be used to describe you, and God will be glorified by that transformation.

Finally, when Paul told Timothy that spiritual leaders must “*keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience*” (1 Timothy 3:9), and when he told Titus that spiritual leaders must “*hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so [as to] encourage others*” (Titus 1:9), part of what he meant is that spiritual leaders must continually work to turn people’s focus away from their apparently impossible circumstances and redirect them toward the faithfulness and greatness of God (Nehemiah 4).²²

If you and I focus on our circumstances, we will frequently become discouraged; but such discouragement means that we’ve stopped believing that God will do what He says He will do: “*See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland*” (Isaiah 43:19).

As Oswald Sanders put it, “Through all the highs and lows of leadership, in times of great certainty and crippling uncertainty, those who have led in . . . bringing God’s message of light and life into dark places have been those whose souls have never ceased to say ‘Yes’ to Jesus’ invitation, ‘Follow me.’”²³

Let’s roll.

A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify.

A never-dying soul to save and fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill;

O may it all my pow’r engage to do my Master’s will.

Arm me with watchful care as in Thy sight to live;

And now Thy servant, Lord, prepare a strict account to give.

Help me to watch and pray, and still on Thee rely;

O let me not my trust betray, but press to realms on high.²⁴

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dwight_L._Moody

²² Sanders, p. 167.

²³ Sanders, p. 171.

²⁴ Charles Wesley, “A Charge to Keep I Have”