

# “The Ministry of the Towel”

Titus 1:5-9 <sup>1</sup>

Some of you may have noticed that we skipped over the short book of Titus several weeks ago. That was so we could consider Titus during this special service. As you may remember, Titus, together with 1 and 2 Timothy, make 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.

Titus was a Greek, a Gentile believer first mentioned in Galatians, the earliest of Paul’s letters in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> 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 referred to him as “*my true son in our common faith*” (Titus 1:4).<sup>3</sup>

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

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).<sup>7</sup>

As we begin, let me point out once more 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 so, when we read Titus, we do no violence to Paul’s intent at all to understand his instructions as being for both male and female leaders alike. I’ve written at length on these matters, and I’ll be glad to send that document to you, if you’re interested.<sup>8</sup> So here are Paul’s instructions once more:

<sup>5</sup> *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.* <sup>6</sup> *An elder must be blameless, the husband of one*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 25, 2020. Deacon Ordination Service.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 2:3

<sup>3</sup> cp. 2 Corinthians 8:23; 1 Timothy 1:2

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:1-4, 7:13-15

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:16-17, 12:18, 2:13, 7:5-6, 13-15

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:6, 16-18, 23

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> David C. Stancil, *Theological Determinants of Psychological Sex-Roles: Reexamining the Biblical Evidence*, unpublished paper at the University of Kentucky, 1989. 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.

wife, with faithful children who are not accused of wildness or rebellion. <sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, righteous, holy, self-controlled, <sup>9</sup> 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 1:5-9).

In this text, Paul lists five character qualities to be avoided in choosing congregational leadership, and he lists seven character qualities that are essential.<sup>9</sup> I'm going to focus on just one of the positive qualities this morning: We're going to consider what it means to be "holy."

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 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).

God's first invitation to holiness is the invitation to be "born again,"<sup>10</sup> an invitation to allow ourselves to be adopted into God's Eternal Family through belief in Jesus as Savior, receiving the ever-present Spirit of God into our lives with consistent and continuing Welcome. This "consistent and continuing Welcome" brings us to the second aspect of holiness, which has to do with making Jesus "Lord" in our lives.

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.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup>

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). 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.

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 serving as a Deacon. This third setting apart comes only when the first two have become well developed, and this third "setting apart" is what we're about today.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 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. I'll post a comparison chart with the online version of this sermon.

<sup>10</sup> John 3:3

<sup>11</sup> At least until the great Day of the Lord when all will be compelled to acknowledge Him: 1 Peter 3:15; Philippians 2:10-11.

<sup>12</sup> Sanders, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:6, 10

Peter wrote that we who follow Jesus “*are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession*” (1 Peter 2:9), by which Peter affirmed that we are each to be priests to one another in the Body of Christ.<sup>14</sup> In the Older Testament, the function of priests was to offer sacrifices as they represented the people before God.

You and I still have that function under the “priesthood of the believer,” but priesthood operates differently now. Priests in the Temple offered animal sacrifices; but God calls us who follow Jesus to sacrifice ourselves (Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5).

The Latin word for “priest” is “pontifex,” which means “bridge-builder.” Our work as priests is to offer ourselves as *living sacrifices* to God,<sup>15</sup> focusing our lives on building bridges to others so that we “*may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9). To be a priest means to be one whose very life is a witness to the reality of God’s grace, and that, after all, is what Peter was reminding these early believers to keep doing.

Apparently they did, because about sixty years later, the Athenian philosopher Aristides described “the Christians” to the Roman Emperor Hadrian this way:

- They do not commit adultery or fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs.
- And their oppressors they [comfort] and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies . . . .
- Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly.
- And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting.
- And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother . . . .
- And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. . .
- *This is a new people, and there is something divine in the midst of them.*<sup>16</sup>

The description Aristides gave of Christians provides a brief checklist you and I can use to see how well we’re doing at living lives of holy priesthood in the world. In addition to this “universal priesthood,” the New Testament also mentions congregational leaders called “elders,” “overseers,” and “pastors,” with these terms appearing to be essentially interchangeable, and this brings me at last to the metaphor that gives this sermon its title.

What do you think about when you hear the word “towel”? *Wikipedia* lists more than a dozen types of towels, including bath towels, beach towels, foot towels, hand towels, kitchen towels, paper towels, sports towels, and tea towels.<sup>17</sup>

The word “towel” is actually in the Bible, but it only appears in one place—in John 13, when Jesus used a towel to teach His disciples about servant leadership on the night that He was betrayed. You remember the story.

<sup>14</sup> Peter’s affirmation is the root of the Baptist idea of “the priesthood of the believer.”

<sup>15</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>16</sup>Excerpts from sections XV and XVI of *The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher, A.D. 125*, trans. from the Syriac version by D. M. Kay.

<sup>17</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Towel>

Jesus had gathered with His disciples to observe the Passover, and as the meal progressed, Jesus got up, took off His outer cloak, and wrapped a towel around His waist. He poured water into a bowl, and then began to wash the feet of His disciples, one after the other—including the feet of Peter, who would soon deny Him, and the feet of Judas, who would soon betray Him.

Peter protested, but acquiesced; and then, <sup>12</sup> *when [Jesus] had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them.* <sup>13</sup> *“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.* <sup>14</sup> *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.* <sup>15</sup> ***I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you*** (John 13:1-15).

There are several important things to notice in this scene, but I’m going to comment on only one of them. As I’m sure you remember, people wore sandals in those days, so their feet were dusty and dirty when they came inside for dinner. Water and towels were available at the door for washing off this dirt, and it was the custom in more well-to-do households for Gentile slaves to wash the feet of guests—such work being considered too degrading for a Jew to perform. That’s why Peter was so shocked that Jesus took up the towel and basin to wash His disciples’ feet.

Later, Acts 6 records the selection of the first deacons in the early Church. As you probably remember, in the first weeks and months following the gift of God’s Spirit at Pentecost, literally thousands of persons had confessed their faith that Jesus of Nazareth was God’s promised Messiah, and they had been baptized as an expression of that faith. <sup>1</sup> *But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.* <sup>2</sup> *So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers.*

*They said, “We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program.* <sup>3</sup> *And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility.* <sup>4</sup> *Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word”* (Acts 6:1-4).

It’s the work of Deacons that is our focus this morning, and in the New Testament, Deacons were neither policy makers nor boards of directors. Those very first Deacons began their work in “KP duty,” and we wouldn’t miss the mark by much to say that the farther Deacons get from the kitchen, the farther they get from the Bible.

We’re also told that once those first seven Deacons had been selected, the apostles prayed for them “*as they laid their hands on them*” (Acts 6:6). Such public setting apart for special service is frequently called “ordination,” a practice that goes all the way back to Moses’ ordination of Aaron to serve as the first High Priest of Israel in the wilderness, more than 3,000 years ago (Exodus 29:22).

Now a congregation’s setting apart of some of its own for service through ordination is both more important and less important than we may think it is. **Ordination is more important than we think it is**, because this is not just an isolated moment in the life of one man and in the history of one church. In our ordination of Deyon Green this morning, we stand in the stream of thousands of years of history in which men and women have been called to carry out God’s purposes in the world.

We are not alone today. We have with us at this very moment—as, indeed, we do in every moment—all the heavenly hosts as witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). We dare not take this moment lightly. We must, as we have done, look with serious purpose at Deyon’s commitment to Christ, at his character as one who will lead us, and at his competence to do so. The Kingdom of God is at stake.

**But ordination is also *less important than we may think it is*.** Ordination, in the sense in which we engage in it this morning, is more a human than a divine action. If Deyon is indeed called to this work, as we believe he is, then he has already been called and has already been commissioned by God to do it. What we’re doing this morning is confirming that call and affirming his willingness to commit himself to it.

Deyon, it’s important to remember that a title and a certificate do not a Deacon make. What we do today will not make you a better person, impart the Holy Spirit in some special way, or give you some mystical power or authority. But ordination does represent our recognition of God’s work in your life, and it is both our invitation to special ministry and our blessing as you undertake it.

Ordination is a beginning, but it is not an end. It is departure, not arrival; it is casting off, not mooring. Ordination marks the deepening of your commitment to Jesus and to His Church, but it is not the origin of that commitment. You’re continuing today what you’ve already begun—your personal journey of faith and obedience that has led you to leadership in the community of faith.

As Paul indicated to Timothy, you are being affirmed by your brothers and sisters in Christ to be ordained as a servant leader because you have already shown yourself to be a leader. As you assume this more visible role today, bear in mind that our congregation will not rise to a higher level of spiritual maturity and commitment than its leaders demonstrate.

From this point on, you are no longer a “thermometer” that indicates temperature; you’re a “thermostat” who sets the temperature in this congregation. You will lead us to grow or to decline in our faithfulness to Christ in large measure by how you lead and serve.

Finally, back to the towels. One definition of a towel is that it’s “a piece of absorbent fabric used to draw moisture to itself *through direct contact*.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus’ expression of humility and care with that towel long ago was “up close and personal,” and your ministry among us as a servant leader will be best discharged in ways that are also “up close and personal” with the members of the families under your care.

Providing ministry to your families means investing time in them. Providing ministry means expending the effort it takes to know their names. Providing ministry means giving attention to special days and moments in their lives. Providing ministry means visiting people where they live and work. Providing ministry means being with people in the quiet and ordinary moments of their lives so that you are also able to be with them in the pivotal moments.

Deyon, there are few privileges more awesome than being invited to serve as an undershepherd of God’s Family . . . and it is to this ministry that you are called. You’re involved in a work that is not your own. The One who has called you to it is greater than you, and He will equip you to do it.

And all God’s people said, “Amen!”

<sup>18</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Towel>