



1 Timothy 3:1-2a Above Reproach By Faith In The Gospel

Written & Preached by John Cole | June 8, 2025

AN IMPOSSIBLE GOAL

The world tells us to reach for the skies and go after our dreams. Not only is that bad advice but also it aims low.

High goals are those you cannot reach on your own. The highest goals are those you can only reach by the grace of God. Those goals are defined *by God*—not for you or me *alone* but for all God's redeemed people.

Rather than reaching for our dreams, we should reach after God's purpose for all His people by faith in the gospel.

As we preach through 1 Timothy, we are slowly going through the given qualifications for pastors as an opportunity to establish our church's convictions about this partnership for years to come. Among other things, pastors are to be examples who serve as markers as we all press on toward our goal of Christ.

Christians: Consummated union with Christ is our goal, and present Christlikeness by shared faith in the gospel is our journey toward it.

Our text today presents this in one Greek work that means "above reproach," and it is required of those who oversee and pastor Christ's church. This neither means sinlessness nor perfection, but it does mean that the work of pastoring requires a present testimony of not deserving reproach that could dishonor the name of Christ and His church.

The burden of today's sermon is to show biblically how churches are to find men like that. Men who live presently above reproach according to all the church's calling in the gospel. Are these special people? Do they have inherent qualities that make them above reproach? If not, where does it come from? Let's read our text.

1 Timothy 3:1-2

¹ This is a true saying, If a man desire [aspire/reach for] the office of a bishop [overseer/elder/pastor], he desireth [longs for] a good work.

² **A bishop** [overseer/elder/pastor] **then must be** [presently] **blameless** [above reproach]...

Blameless so as to be above reproach?! How can anyone live up to this? How can anyone *presently* be above reproach?

Well, first of all, there are particular descriptions that follow this “blameless/above reproach” requirement for pastors. We will spend a couple weeks in those.

Today, I want us to hear and devote ourselves to a broader NT theology of sanctification in relation to church fellowship. This will not exhaust the study of sanctification by any means, but it will help us answer the question: *Where do you find men who can pastor, being above reproach?*

GOD'S PLAN FOR ALL THE CHURCH

Have you ever watched someone paint on a large canvas? It starts off looking strange and unimpressive, but over time, the many layers of handiwork done by the artist come together and reveal his masterful design.

For example, our son David has just recently started painting, and he sent these various images to our family as he worked on this painting.

› Show through pictures of David's artwork.

This illustrates well the work God is doing with His church. His masterful design is being revealed layer by layer in Christ's church and in our own lives. Don't judge the work God is doing in yourself and in your fellow church members too quickly. We must presently trust the work of our Master as He works all things for the good of conforming us to the image of His dear Son.

As one pastor-theologian put it,

The church is the locus of God's glory, the theater in which he displays his grace and love. The church features God's wisdom and declares to the whole universe that the outworking of history is not arbitrary but fulfills God's plan.

Thomas Schreiner

Therefore,

THE CHURCH NEEDS TO BE PARTICULARLY ABOVE REPROACH.

Particularly...because scripture gives specific applications and reasons for us to be above reproach. In our present text, it is the application of pastoring. Later in the letter, it will be the application of who the church supports with benevolence funds. Concerning those receiving assistance, it says...

1 Timothy 5:7

And these things give in charge, that they [recipients of financial assistance] may be blameless [above reproach].

I will wait until we get to chapter five to teach this text. I simply want us to see that particular benefits and responsibilities require a trustworthy testimony.

The natural sinful self and the indwelling sin of believers likes to tell us that we are entitled to things. Bad theology joins in with that and says that since God is loving and gracious, we should "in love" give people whatever they desire or think they need.

Biblical theology says that in love God saves sinners by grace through faith and then over time enables them by faith in the gospel to grow in trustworthiness and ability for particular responsibilities. In love and by grace, God grows us. God doesn't just give us everything we desire.

So, a man may have a good desire to be a pastor within Christ's church, but that doesn't mean it is given to him. By God's grace, the church should require for him to grow with a testimony that is above reproach. The church needs to be particularly above reproach. Because...

THE CHURCH *WILL BE* PERFECTLY ABOVE REPROACH.

As we will soon see, God's plan for His church is to be perfectly above reproach. The goal God has for us should be definitional to our present pursuit.

Before reading our next scriptures, reflect with me on these words by the late and former NCAA coach and sports announcer, Jim Valvano...

A magazine article summarized [his life]. Throughout his colorful coaching career he had been obsessed with the game and with winning. But years later, stricken with cancer, he came to realize the triviality of the goods and values to which he had been passionately devoted. He said: "You get sick and you say to yourself, 'Sports means nothing,' and that feels terrible."

Because he had spent little time with his wife and children, he confessed, "I figured I'd have 20 years in the big time, who knows, maybe win three national titles, then pack it in at 53 or 54 ... I was going to make it all up to them, all the time I'd been away. ... It sounds so silly now ... But it went on and on, that insatiable desire to conquer the world." - VCG
Our Daily Bread, Sept.-Nov. 1997, page for October 17.

Being driven by the wrong goals will deceive us in the present. All Christ's church must know God's goal for us that He is sure to accomplish...

Ephesians 1:3-4

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly *places* in Christ: ⁴ According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, **that we should be [presently] holy and without blame before him in love:**

God has blessed all believers in Christ according as He has chosen us in Christ that we presently should be holy and without blame before him in love. While this text uses a different Greek word than in 1 Timothy, it still conveys a similar idea. However, this “blamelessness” is about how we are seen in God’s sight.

This is a work of God in us. There is no way we ourselves can make ourselves holy and without blame in God’s sight. This is two verses of a 10-verse sentence in the Greek that makes very clear that all these realities of believers are ultimately the results of the eternal purpose and work of God’s grace—not of our efforts.

So, it is with this understanding that Paul prays for another church...

1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

²³ And **the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming** of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ Faithful is he that calleth you, **who also will do it.**

Paul prays for the goal he knows God is faithfully bringing to completion in believers. Similarly, Jude closed out his letter with this doxology...

Jude 24–25

²⁴ **Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,** ²⁵ to the only wise God our Saviour, *be* glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.

So, now that we know that we have particular reasons to be above reproach and that God is faithfully bringing this purpose He has for us to completion, we must next recognize that...

THE CHURCH IS TO BE PRESENTLY ABOVE REPROACH.

Former Senator Dwight W. Morrow searched in vain to find his railroad ticket as he was on a train leaving New York City. “I must find that ticket,” he muttered. The conductor, who stood waiting beside him, said, “Don’t worry about it, Mr. Morrow. We know you had a ticket. Just mail it to the railroad when you find it.”

“That’s not what’s troubling me,” replied Morrow, “I need to find it to know where I’m going.”

Our Daily Bread, September 11, 1992

Brothers and sisters, as we have seen, we do not have this problem. God has told us where we are going. Our problem is that too often, we are more interested in other rides and destinations. Notice next with me Paul’s instruction to the church of Philippi on the heels of describing our eschatological future.

Philippians 2:10–16

¹⁰ That at the name of Jesus **every knee** should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth; ¹¹ And *that* **every tongue** should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.** ¹³ **For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do** of *his* good pleasure.

¹⁴ Do all things without murmurings and disputings: ¹⁵ **That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation,** among whom ye shine as lights in the world; ¹⁶ Holding forth the word of life [the gospel]...

Christian, since by faith in the gospel your future salvation is secure in Christ and your present sanctification is according to the work of God in you, work out what God has given you for all to see! Hold out the gospel to the world! Presently live above reproach—by the saving work of God in you.

Peter said something similar but with the motivation of being found of the Lord according to your sure future...

2 Peter 3:13–15

¹³ Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. ¹⁴ Wherefore, beloved, **seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless.** ¹⁵ And account *that* the longsuffering [patience] of our Lord *is* salvation...

By the Spirit, Peter writes to the Christian: Be diligent! Make every effort to grow in sanctification by Him and before Him.

For the non-Christian, Peter adds: Consider the long suffering of our Lord as salvation. If you are here today and have not yet turned from your sin to faith in Christ for salvation, please don't wait! The Lord's tarrying is salvation for many. Let it be yours!

As promised in love, God came in Christ to live the life we cannot live, die the death we deserve, and rise to save sinners into life eternal. Trust in Him! Turn from your weary way and find in Him rest to your soul. Simply cry out where you are for God's loving and gracious salvation. Look to Jesus as your righteous, eternal Lord.

All who receive Christ by faith are brought by His Spirit into His church. As a part of His church, God has provisions for your sanctification.

GOD'S PROVISION FOR ALL THE CHURCH

God does not tell us to become something we cannot. God tells us to pursue holiness because God provides the means for us to do so.

We use to have a beautiful cherry tree in our front yard. Well, a heavy snow a couple years back greatly damaged much of its branches. I tried pruning it, but it kept dying. So, I cut off all its branches at about five feet from the ground. I would have cut it all the way down, but I was using a battery-powered saw-zaw. Though with a good tree-grade blade!

Recently I determined it was time to finish the job, but there was no way I was going to cut through that large trunk with my battery-powered saw-zaw! I needed far more power and teeth than the tools I had available. Thankfully, Greg Kopp kindly lent me his gas-powered chain saw. And let me tell you... that thing can cut through anything. Just look at how it shortened my finger!

Seriously, it was fun to make progress with power! My sons even had to have a go at it! Now if we were trying to cut through that trunk with the sawzaw, I'd still be out there... and without my sons! There is no way they would be drawn to take part in that.

And yet, I still must point out... it still took time and work. Though it was far more enjoyable and doable, it still didn't get completed in a split second.

The same is true about God's powerful provisions for our sanctification. We actually find joy in them. God will complete His work in us. And yet, we will need to expect it to take time and work.

Let's talk now about means of grace through which God saves and sanctifies His people in history. The first means is the preaching of the gospel.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL RESULTS IN SOME COMING TO FAITH IN THE GOSPEL.

As one English preacher put it,

Thus the gospel creates the church, which spreads the gospel, which creates more churches, which in their turn spread the gospel further *ad infinitum*. This is God's plan for ongoing evangelism through local churches.

John Robert Walmsley Stott (English Preacher)

Through our preaching of the gospel, God saves sinners. Paul wrote it this way to the believers in Rome...

Romans 1:15–17

¹⁵ So, as much as in me is, **I am ready to preach the gospel** to you that are at Rome also. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for **it** [the preached gospel] **is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth**; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For **therein** [in the preached gospel] **is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith**: as it is written, **The just shall live by faith.**

From outside of ourselves comes to us the preached gospel, and faith in the gospel is passed on from one and created in another by the work of the Spirit in us. In this way, the just live by faith.

Christian faith and belonging in Christ's church does not come from ourselves. It is a gift from God from outside of us. Faith in the gospel is a provision of God given through the means of preaching the gospel.

Are you hearing the gospel when it is preached?

Are you preaching the gospel to others?

Preaching the gospel is not complicated. It is neither a sales pitch nor an academic defense of the faith.

It is simply announcing to someone else that: *God saves sinners through the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, so turn from your sin and believe on Jesus as Savior and Lord!*

Every born again Christian can and should do that. Announce it! Gain confidence by coming on Wednesdays to become more equipped. Practice it with other believers. But ultimately, just announce it! Pray it. Incorporate it into answers and counsel regarding life questions.

- Know someone who is facing illness? Tell them of the eternal, resurrected life Jesus gives.
- Know someone who is experiencing a divorce? Tell them of the One who proved He will never leave you nor forsake you by His life, death, and resurrection.
- Know someone who thinks they have life all figure out? Tell them of the final judgment they will face unless they turn with faith in Jesus and find peace with God through His substitutionary death and resurrection.

God brings sinners to faith in the gospel through the preaching of it. And...

FAITH IN THE GOSPEL GROWS THE CHURCH IN SANCTIFICATION.

Faith in the preached gospel unites us to Christ in His death and resurrection. That's what the symbol of water baptism declares. Being united to Christ, we continually die to our sins and live in Christ's righteousness.

This is God's work in us that is based on Christ's reconciling work and continually received through faith in the gospel.

Colossians 1:21–23

²¹ And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in *your* mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled ²² In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: ²³ **If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and** which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister;

So, we gather to hear, sing, pray, and display the gospel over and over again to one another as God's means of making us more and more *holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight.*

GATHERING TOGETHER IN THE GOSPEL GROWS THE CHURCH IN FAITH.

This is God's normal means of growing the believer's faith in the gospel and thereby growing us in sanctification. Both our salvation and our sanctification comes from God working in us through the means of others sharing faith in the gospel with us.

This is God's provision that accords with His sure goal for us—Christlikeness. While we will never fully arrive there until the resurrection of believers at Christ's return, we still similarly depend on God's power working in us to presently grow in sanctification. God normally does this in the present time through the means of the gathered church.

Hebrews 10:22–25

²² Let us **draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith**, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us **hold fast the profession of *our* faith without wavering**; (for he *is* faithful that promised;)

²⁴ And let us **consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works**: ²⁵ **Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together**, as the manner of some *is*; but exhorting *one another*: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

With our eyes on the day of Christ's return, let's faithfully assemble and encourage one another on to sanctification... living without rebuke... love and good works. This is the normal means by which the gospel dwells in our hearts and transforms us.

Colossians 3:16

¹⁶ **Let the word of Christ [the gospel and His teachings] dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another** in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Since the resurrection, the church has been depending on this means of grace from God to grow in sanctification and give witness to the gospel. Just consider the first recorded converts to Christ after the resurrection.

Acts 2:41–42

⁴¹ Then **they that gladly received his word were baptized**: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls. ⁴² And **they continued stedfastly** in the apostles' **doctrine and fellowship**, and in **breaking of bread**, and in **prayers**.

Churches have not been faithful to preach the priority of the gathered church. We read in Acts of this early church in Jerusalem meeting in homes throughout the week. Church gatherings had come to characterize their new life in Christ. Scripture records the early church coming to call Sunday “the Lord’s Day” because they dedicated that day for gathered worship. Gathering was priority.

Our seeker-sensitive, consumer-oriented churches today have pitched the idea of multi-site, multi-service, multi-style, online-community “worship services” as though our lives are not to be centered around, dependent on, and looking forward to our weekly Lord’s Day like the early church. Sadly, many Christians have been deceived by this unfaithful representation of church.

- Christians announce and plan career plans without the gathered church at the center.
- Christians move locations without the gathered church at the center.
- Christians engage in hobbies without the gathered church at the center.
- Christians engage their kids in extra-curricular and educational programs without the church at the center.

We can’t create faith in our children, but we can prioritize bringing them to hear and see the true gospel preached among the gathered church. Their eternal destiny is more important than checking off boxes for future college and career. Those are good things, but they are far below bringing them **with you** to the gathered church.

God saves and sanctifies through the normal means of the gathered church. Just consider what means of grace we see in these two verses: *the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers.*

Normal Means of God's Grace:

- Church Fellowship In Sound Doctrine
- Baptism & Lord's Supper
- Corporate & Individual Prayer

Let's wrap this up.

1 Timothy 3:1-2

A bishop [pastor] **then must be** [presently] **blameless** [above reproach]...

We began by asking: *how do churches find men who are above reproach to pastor them?* The answer?

SERMON IN A SENTENCE: As the church faithfully gathers to build up our faith in the gospel, God sanctifies all the church—and some men for the work of pastoring.

God saves and sanctifies through the normal means of the church gathering around the gospel. This accords with God's purpose in making us holy and blameless before Him in love. We should expect it and pray for it. Not for our sake alone, but for the advancement of the gospel, the multiplication of Christ's church, the glory of God, and the good of all.

Paul had already testified what God has done for him. The gospel changed him.

1 Timothy 1:12-17

¹² And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; ¹³ Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴ And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. ¹⁶ Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. ¹⁷ Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

And it is by faith in that faithful saying that Paul writes another true saying in chapter 3.

1 Timothy 3:1-2

¹ This is a true saying, If a man desire [aspire/reach for] the office of a bishop [overseer/elder/pastor], he desireth [longs for] a good work.

² **A bishop** [pastor] **then must be** [presently] **blameless** [above reproach]...

Blamelessness (being above reproach in many areas) comes over time from God's sanctifying work that is continually received through fruit of faith in the gospel for the good of others and the glory of God.

Sanctification is not *primarily* an evidence of the Christian's faith. That is secondary. The Christian's sanctification and righteousness is first about loving God and others.

Sanctification occurs in new creations in Christ *because* of the life of the Spirit in them and the forgiveness Christ obtained for them. Christians don't seek holiness to have more of the Spirit; we seek holiness because we have the Spirit.

In other words, we don't do things to get more of God or to be accepted at the final judgment. God gives Himself to us so that we can give more of ourselves to Him since we are accepted now and at the final day through the representative work of Christ.

Sanctification is brought about by Holy Spirit-generated faith in Christ; faith and the Spirit's leadership is not produced by our own works of sanctification. Good works do not produce eternal life, but eternal life does produce good works.

So then you may ask, "How then do we get the faith and Holy Spirit for such sanctification?" And the answer is "it is not of yourself." Justification, glorification, and sanctification is all from the Lord. And the Lord gives these "from faith to faith."

God creates faith through the Spirit-empowered proclamation of His word, and He builds our faith through the same. In this way, the root of our sanctification—faith in Christ—does not originate from us. It is a gift from God.

The normal means of grace through which God gives and builds up Christian faith in the gospel is the gathered church that preaches, prays, sings, and displays the gospel to one another. We display the gospel through baptism, the Lord's Supper, and living as a people who have found true rest in Christ.

So, blamelessness (or growing in sanctification and living above reproach) is a work of God received through faith in the gospel. We receive from God as His Word is passed on "from faith to faith." God begins and completes the Christian's sanctification.

We are called to trust God to build up our faith through the normal means of the gathered church, and we are instructed to seek holiness by that faith. In this very dependent way, Christians grow in sanctification. Any other alternative becomes some form of moralism.

Therefore, bishops/elders/pastors must be men who have been converted and matured through faith in the gospel. They should have a testimony of being Christians who have been built up in the faith by the Word preached, prayed, sung, and displayed to them by the gathered church. Pastors are not better people. They are sinners who have been transformed by the gospel that has been communicated by the gathered church.

Faith in the gospel has matured them as followers of Christ to the *present* point of not needing rebuke or criticism particularly in the areas listed in the verses that follow. This is not a point of perfection; it is a point of characteristically not deserving rebuke.

While we will never arrive to a point of perfection or sinlessness this side of the resurrection, Christians are expected to mature and fight clinging sins. We will never arrive to where there are no more battles against sin, but God's work of sanctifying us does ensure we never stop battling it.

SERMON IN A SENTENCE: As the church faithfully gathers to build up our faith in the gospel, God sanctifies all the church—and some men for the work of pastoring.

This should encourage us to:

1. Prioritize the gathered church.
2. Build up one another's faith.
3. Pray for new and present pastors.