

Lessons in Leadership

Titus 1:1-9

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A common theme for movies, especially sports movies, is a disciplined leader helping a rag-tag group become a powerful and successful team. One of the greatest examples of such a movie is *Hoosiers*, which tells the story of a coach taking a group of nobodies from a small town in Indiana, and by teaching them the fundamentals of basketball and life, helps turn them into the best basketball team in the state.

In many ways, that's what the book of Titus is seeking to do. Paul was writing to the young man Titus about how to guide the young church on the island of Crete into maturity and functioning as they should. As we look at Paul's instructions to Titus, we'll find they apply to churches today as well. He gives us a playbook to become more than anyone would have thought just by looking at us. He's going to teach us what it means for Christians to play as a team and to be successful in the work of the Lord.

Background

As we embark on our new study of Titus, it is necessary to understand the context of what is going on. Paul gives us a glimpse in these opening verses.

This letter is from Paul, a slave of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ. I have been sent to proclaim faith to those God has chosen and to teach them to know the truth that shows them how to live godly lives. ²This truth gives them confidence that they have eternal life, which God—who does not lie—promised them before the world began. ³And now at just the right time he has revealed this message, which we announce to everyone. It is by the command of God our Savior that I have been entrusted with this work for him. ⁴I am writing to Titus, my true son in the faith that we share. May God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior give you grace and peace. (Titus 1:1-4, NLT)

Paul was writing this letter to Titus, and we find out in v. 5 that Paul had left him on the island of Crete. He was now tasked with building on the foundation he and Paul had begun to establish, guiding this new church into maturity.

Paul probably wrote this after his release from prison in Rome, which we read about at the end of the book of Acts. Acts doesn't record Paul stopping in Crete to establish a church, so he and Titus probably traveled there after he was released from prison.

Crete is a small island, only about 150 miles long, and only about 40 miles wide at its largest point. It had a significant Roman presence but also had a significant Jewish community as well. We also know there were people from Crete (Cretans) present in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). So there was likely a group of Christians already present on Crete when Paul and Titus arrived.

Titus isn't mentioned in the book of Acts, but from Paul's other letters, we know he became a trusted partner of Paul and was present on many of his journeys. Some have suggested that Titus isn't mentioned in Acts because he was Luke's brother, and Luke didn't include either of them in the story. We can't be certain, but it seems plausible.

Since Paul calls Titus his true son in the faith most assume God had used Paul in bringing Titus to faith. In some sense, Paul felt a spiritual fatherhood for him. Like a father, he was proud of the leader Titus had become. He was now entrusting him with carrying to completion the work they had started together.

As Paul begins the letter, he starts with his credentials. He describes himself as a slave of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ. Any time we hear the word slave, we tend to bristle, because we have been taught that slavery is bad, so the idea of being a slave to God seems wholly inconsistent with the God we know. But slavery in the ancient world was not the same as the slavery we often think of. Paul wasn't saying God was an evil tyrant, but that he viewed himself as a servant of God, so his only concern was how to please his Master. This concept is a good one for us to embrace as well.

He also describes himself as an apostle. Apostle literally means one who is sent. In the early church, the apostles were the men chosen by Jesus to carry the gospel into the rest of the world and establish the church. They were empowered to speak with God's authority, much like the Old Testament prophets. That is why Paul, Peter, and John were tasked with writing the majority of the New Testament (outside of the gospels and Acts). We can reasonably assume that James and Jude were considered apostles as well. Paul mentioned his apostleship as a reminder that what follows was not merely his opinion or counsel, but the very word of God. The apostles of the early church were unique, and as Christians we do not believe this gift of apostleship exists in the same way today it did in the first generation of the church.

After establishing his credentials, Paul turned to his calling. He said his job was to: "proclaim faith to those God has chosen and to teach them to know that truth that shows them how to live godly lives." In other words, Paul's task was twofold. First, he was to proclaim the gospel. He was to share the message with people who had not yet believed and call them to faith. But his job didn't end there. His second task was to help them know the truth that shows how to live godly lives. The way to do that was to help them know more about God. Paul was not merely seeking to impart knowledge to Christians. Knowledge is of little value unless it changes the way we live. But his premise was that the more we understand who God is, the more our lives will conform to His will. Paul said part of his job was to call people to godly living. The task of the church today is the same. We are to proclaim the gospel to a lost world, but we are also to teach the truth to those who believe so they may live the kind of life God desires.

Marching Orders for Titus

After explaining his reason for writing, Paul immediately gave Titus his marching orders.

⁵ I left you on the island of Crete so you could complete our work there and appoint elders in each town as I instructed you. (Titus 1:5, NLT)

Paul reminded Titus that they had begun the work on Crete together, and he had left him there to finish the work. He explained that part of Titus' job was to appoint elders in each town.

There is significant debate in the church about precisely what the term "elder" means. People debate whether this refers to only to pastors, to other leaders, to denominational leaders, some mixture of these, or something else entirely.

There is good reason for this debate, of course. We want to structure our churches according to God's Word. If Paul is spelling out how our churches should be structured, we want to follow it. Personally, I don't think Paul's instructions in this passage (and others like it) are laying out the details of how a church should be governed. I think he's giving us guidelines about the kind of people we should be looking to as leaders. I suspect there are other believers who will disagree with me on that, and I'm not saying they are necessarily wrong. But as I've wrestled with these issues for many years, I think Paul is telling us what good spiritual leaders look like rather than trying to lay out a specific form of church government all churches must follow.

One thing does seem to be clear, even in this simple statement to Titus though. Paul says to appoint elders in each town. In other words, each community should have local leadership, and the leadership of a local church should not rest on a single person, but on multiple leaders together. This is a good principle that should apply in all churches. The church should never be dependent upon a single person for leadership, even if one person does most of the preaching. Preaching and leadership (while closely intertwined) are not the same task.

Qualities of Church Leaders

After telling Titus that he should appoint elders (or leaders) in each town, Paul explains the kind of people he should be looking for to take on this task.

⁶ An elder must live a blameless life. He must be faithful to his wife, and his children must be believers who don't have a reputation for being wild or rebellious. ⁷ A church leader is a manager of God's household, so he must live a blameless life. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered; he must not be a heavy drinker, violent, or dishonest with money.

⁸ Rather, he must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must love what is good. He must live wisely and be just. He must live a devout and disciplined life.

⁹ He must have a strong belief in the trustworthy message he was taught; then he will be able to encourage others with wholesome teaching and show those who oppose it where they are wrong. (Titus 1:6-9, NLT)

This is a pretty daunting list, as is the list Paul gives in 1 Timothy 3. But before we get into the details of each of these characteristics, we should note something important. The qualifications Paul gives are almost entirely about a person's character, not about their skill, knowledge, or credentials. Certainly, pastors need some specific skills and

gifts, but we see that the most important qualification for a church leader is not their ability to turn a phrase or draw a crowd—it's their character and how they live their lives. This is by far the most important quality we should look for in our church leaders.

I want to look at these characteristics carefully. The first one is that an elder must live a blameless life. Paul says this twice in these verses. Most of us hear these words and assume Paul is saying a good leader must be perfect in all they do. That clearly isn't what Paul is saying though, because in other places he talked about his own failures and weaknesses. If we are expecting a Christian leader to be perfect, we will never find one (outside of our Lord Jesus, of course).

If blameless doesn't mean perfect, what does it mean? It means they have a solid reputation amongst others. A blameless person isn't someone who never fails, but someone who admits their failures and seeks to correct them when they appear. A blameless person has earned the trust of others by consistently trying to do what is right, even when it's uncomfortable, inconvenient, or hard. Paul says Christian leaders must show themselves faithful and consistent over time. This was the same reason he told Timothy that he should not be in a hurry to appoint a church leader. We should take time to observe a person's life and ministry before we agree to let them lead.

Similarly, Paul speaks of a leader's family, and says that they too must have a good reputation. He starts by saying that an elder must be faithful to his wife. This doesn't mean an elder must be married, but rather speaks to his character. He should demonstrate commitment to his marriage and his wife. That seems straightforward.

Less straightforward is the instruction about an elder's children. I grew up as a Preacher's Kid (PK). I quickly learned that PK's have one of two reputations. One is that they are perfect little angels who never do anything wrong. The second is that they are rebels and are always at the center of conflicts. Of course, I was in the first category, not the second.

Is Paul saying that if a leader's children make mistakes, then the leader is no longer fit to serve? I don't think that's the principle. Rather, the principle is that if someone is to lead the family of believers, they should demonstrate that they know how to lead their own families well. If someone wants to lead in the church but has not earned the respect of their family, or put in the effort to disciple their children, then they probably aren't ready or able to do the same in the church. Even in the best of families, people fail. Paul isn't looking for perfection, but consistency in what is good and right.

Paul also says what a church leader should *not* be. He should not be arrogant or quick-tempered. These two often go together. If a person does not have a handle on their pride and simply flies off the handle, they are not fit to lead. A significant part of leadership in the church is about managing conflict—a good leader is able to wade into conflict without being drawn into it himself. He should not be a heavy drinker. A person who does not control themselves around alcohol will likely not control themselves in other areas. In the same way, he should not be violent (which is again, a sign of self-

control), and he must not be dishonest with money. All of these speak to a person's ability to show self-control, and a commitment to what is right, even when their desires may pull them in a different direction.

The final set of guidelines Paul gives are things that should be evident in a leader's life. A leader should enjoy having guests in his home. Leaders should welcome others into their homes because this is a unique way to build relationships and establish connection. Someone who wants to isolate themselves from others is not fit to lead.

Paul then also gives several instructions regarding a leader's life. He must love what is good, be disciplined and devout, and must hold carefully to the truth which can save not only himself, but those around him. These are essential characteristics in leaders. It is tempting to become lackadaisical in our faith, believing we have arrived at a place of maturity, so we no longer need to engage in spiritual disciplines. But those disciplines are essential for all believers—especially for those in positions of leadership, as their faith will constantly be attacked from those outside and those within. A leader must be unwavering in their faith and stand strongly on the truth of God's Word. We have seen in recent years what happens when Christian leaders do not devote themselves to the truth of God's Word. They begin following the pattern of the world and lead others to do the same. Every Christian leader should know and be committed to the truth of God's word, no matter the odds against them.

Conclusion

Paul says these are the kinds of traits Titus should be looking for in leaders for the church in Crete. The same characteristics are important in church leaders today. If you're like me, you are probably humbled by this list, feeling as though you don't measure up. I think that's kind of the point—a good leader also recognizes that on their own, they are powerless to accomplish anything. It is only through the power of the Spirit that we can accomplish the task God places before us. We must always remember that.

Though this passage is about leaders, I think it speaks to all of us. Though these are the qualities that *must* be present in those who lead, they are also the qualities that *should* be present in every Christian! It is not just pastors and other leaders who should strive to this standard—it's what we should all be aiming to be!

Here are some applications we can draw from this passage. **First, we should be careful who we allow to lead us.** We live in a time of Christian celebrities. We have people who are talented at speaking and building an audience. But these are not the core qualities Paul holds out to us. While there is value in hearing from other wise leaders, it is difficult for us to evaluate the lives of people we only see on YouTube or TikTok. We don't know what these people are really like. So be careful. At the same, we should be careful who we put in positions of authority in our local churches. Appointing leaders should not be done lightly. We should look for people who embody these traits. If we don't, we run the risk of allowing ourselves and others to be led astray.

Second, we should strive for consistency in our walk with Christ. Notice that most of Paul's qualifications focus on character, self-control, and personal holiness. This is what we should be striving for in our lives. One of the most common charges I hear leveled against the church is that we are hypocritical. They say people come into church on Sunday and talk about love, honesty, and holiness, but on Monday, they are the same mean old cuss they've always been. Is there truth to this charge? Sadly, I suspect there is. We must work to put these truths into practice. We cannot leave church on Sunday and figure we've checked our box for the week. The Lord desires a commitment in the way we live each day. We will not be perfect, regardless of what position we hold, but we can be blameless. We can be people who develop a reputation for striving to live for Christ. When we fail, we should be quick to acknowledge our failures, apologize for them, and work to make things right. This is what every believer should do. The world ought to have a lot of trouble finding a way to make any charges stick against us because we're consistent.

Finally, we should start in our own homes. If you have an unbelieving spouse or children who are not yet believers, this is essential. These people are evaluating the truth of the gospel on the way it impacts you. If your faith doesn't affect how you treat your own family, it probably isn't worth much. Paul points to the way someone leads their family as an indicator of how well they'll lead in other places.

So, how do we lead our families? I think it requires two major things. First, we must **model** right living. Your family learns about how to live by watching you. They see when you get up early to read your Bible. They see how you handle conflict. They see how you treat your spouse and your co-workers. They hear the way you talk about others. They see how you prioritize your time. They see how you make difficult decisions. More than anyone else, your family knows whether you are consistent in your faith or not. Work to lead your family by modeling what it means to live for Christ.

Second, we must **train** them in how to live. We train our children to brush their teeth, take a shower, put on deodorant, eat healthy, and work hard. We know that unless we work to instill those things, our children will not learn them. The same is true with spiritual disciplines. Train your children to make the Lord a priority. Push them to read God's Word for themselves. Make sure they are regularly in worship, Sunday School, and youth programs. Sometimes this means that we will have to say no to other things to teach them that the things of God come first because they are more important. If we want our children to make the Lord a priority for themselves, we have to train them how to do it. We must work to instill these truths consistently.

The principles Paul gives are essential for church leaders, but it would be a mistake to assume they don't matter for everyone else. Paul's point is this: this is how Christians should live. A leader cannot teach others to live this way unless they are already doing it themselves. May each of us strive to be people who are consistent, who put Christ first, and lead others toward Him—whether we are in a position of leadership or not.

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