

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

01.11.2026 | First Things First | Titus 1:1-4 | Dr. Ben Day, Senior Pastor

If you have a Bible this morning, I want to invite you to turn with me to Titus chapter one. We're in a series going through the book of Titus. Last week we covered just the first four verses of this book. While it was only four verses and while those four verses could just be seen as a greeting at the beginning of a letter, what we saw was that those verses were packed full of the truth of the gospel. As Paul begins his letter to his son in the faith Titus, he begins by sharing what the truth of the gospel is. He spoke of God's sovereignty in the work of salvation, but also our response to God's work in this process of us being saved and redeemed.

And really that greeting in which Paul opens up by speaking about the gospel, it really sets the tone for the whole letter. This whole letter is a letter in which Paul is seeking to clarify gospel doctrines that were being misunderstood and misconstrued by false teachers. And he wanted to clarify these gospel doctrines so that Titus and the people that he was leading could understand them, but he also wants to make clear connections. That these doctrines are not just things to know, things to have in your head, but they are to go down into your heart and affect your hands. That your whole life is to be shaped by these gospel doctrines. So he's clarifying and he's making these connections all throughout the book. And that's why we've titled the series gospel shaped living.

The really the heart behind this series as we begin 2026 is that we would have lives that are shaped by the gospel. One thing that you might remember is as we ended last week, one thing I tried to bring out was that it's important for us to always keep in mind that what it means to have lives that are shaped by the gospel is not just thinking about individually. Yes, it's true. Each one of us personally want to be shaped by the gospel. It's going to affect our lives as individuals, but truly being shaped by the gospel happens in community. It happens in communion with God's people. It's really not just about having gospel shaped lives, but gospel shaped living is about being a gospel shaped church.

This is what Paul will begin to speak about even in this early part of the letter. This is a letter from Paul to an individual Titus, but we'll see throughout the letter even beginning here. This is a letter about how Titus is supposed to guide and strengthen and give order to God's people. This community of God's people that Titus was set to oversee, he was supposed to show them how the gospel is supposed to shape their lives together as a community. And so what we see here beginning in this first part of the letter is that this is about being a gospel shaped community, a gospel shaped church. And it begins with having leaders that are shaped by the gospel. Paul begins in this letter after the greeting to talk about what Titus is supposed to do. And he begins by speaking about leaders. Now, I think it shows the priority that Paul gives to the leadership of the community of the people of God. I titled this sermon First Things First, because I think as Paul gives instructions, he wants to put the first things first in Titus's mind so that Titus can see these people's lives and these communities shaped by the gospel.

So let's hear what Paul has to say to Titus, especially around this area of leadership. Verse five in Titus chapter one, we'll go through verse nine. Paul writes, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order and appoint elders in every town as I directed you. If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination, for an overseer as God's steward must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction and sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

About four or five years ago, there was this podcast series put out by Christianity Today called The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. It was a podcast series that was really popular, especially amongst Christians or people who have been around the church, but even more broadly amongst non-Christians as well. This podcast traced the history of a church called Mars Hill, which was up in Seattle. It was planted in the mid-90s and it fell, it collapsed, it really imploded in 2014. It had such a unique story, such a rise and fall that they told the story and a lot of it had to do with the pastor of that church, Mark Driscoll. Mark Driscoll, if you've never heard of him, if you don't know anything about him, he planted Mars Hill when he was a young guy in his 20s. He's known for being a strong leader and pretty brash in his words and in his actions. He's a pretty compelling communicator. He's still pastors today, find him online. He's often drawing a crowd because of his ability to communicate. He's often known for being able to give kind of a compelling, strong vision, that kind of vision

that says you need to get on board with where we're going and if not, you might get run over. And it was his leadership style that really shaped the church and the podcast series kind of brought that out in a lot of ways. And there's a lot of lessons to be learned from the story, a lot of things, blog posts, articles were written about what can we learn from the story that was told.

But one of the ones that seemed to stick out to me the most was this tendency that we have in our broader culture, but even in the church culture as well, to elevate people into leadership positions based on their competency rather than their character. We have within our culture this temptation to want to see people put into positions of power and influence. We want to follow people who are effective, who are influential, who are charismatic, who know how to draw a crowd. And so often we tend to elevate those skills and those giftings over someone's character. This is seen in Mark Driscoll's life. I mean, he planted the church when he was in his 20s, just like any 20 year old, probably very immature. And by his 30s, he was not only leading thousands in his church in Seattle, but he was being platformed all over our country, all over the world where probably millions are hearing his voice.

And as he's speaking and as he's writing, many people are seeing concerns with what he's saying, that his actions and his word don't seem to match up what we see in scripture about a godly man and a godly leader. But so often those concerns were lowered. The little red flags were brought down because he was effective, because he was reaching people, because what he was doing was working. And it's not something that we could just put on one church like Mars Hill. It's not something you can even just put on one group. People wanna blame evangelicals or the church in America or things like that. But really, it's a broad problem that we have in our culture. You look at any business, you look at any politician, you look at both sides of the political aisle right now. It's like most people are more interested in a leader who is going to be quote unquote effective. Most people are interested in a leader who can move the needle with his words and with his actions, who will get things done no matter what the cost. They care about that more than the leader's character, the person that the leader is.

What Paul says here, what Jesus says and what the whole New Testament and the whole Bible says is, this should not be with the people of God. That when it comes to leadership in the church, when it comes to what does a church value, when a church prioritize, what should a church culture celebrate and encourage and promote in the positions of authority and leadership? It should be a godly character. It should be godly leaders who are shaped by the gospel. If we're going to have gospel shaped churches, if we're going to have communities that are shaped by the gospel, it begins, Paul says, with leaders who are shaped by the gospel. That our churches should not prioritize the things that our world and our culture so often prioritize in terms of leadership, but we should look for gospel shaped leaders.

Because what we are doing and putting those people in the position of leadership is we are saying, this is what matters to us. This is what we want to promote. This is what we value as a culture. If we as a church really value the gospel, if we really value godliness, those are the people that we should seek to follow. Those are the people that we should allow to be in positions of authority. This is what Paul is laying forth here for Titus, as he has given him this instruction and this calling to see a whole community shaped by the gospel. He says first, it starts with godly leaders. This is where I just want to begin our sermon as we think about this passage that Paul lays out for us. It speaks about the importance of godly leadership.

Paul here begins this whole section, this whole letter to Timothy about having a community and a people shaped by the gospel, doing what God has called them to do by beginning to talk about the leaders that Titus is supposed to appoint. And by beginning with the leaders, I think it reminds us that there is an importance of godly leaders in the church. Notice what Paul says here in verse five. He says, well, this is why I left you in Crete. So I gave you some context last week about why Paul is writing to Titus, but we get more context here. He says, this is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remains into order. You might appoint elders in every town as I directed you. You see, Paul had been on the island of Crete and he had shared the gospel and he had seen churches begin to form. These are probably small house churches in the different towns around the island of Crete. And as he goes to leave the island of Crete, he knows that there are false teachers, there are unbelievers, there are people disguising themselves as Christians who are going to try to lead the church astray. And so he leaves Titus there to do what he says to put what remains in order. He wants Titus to help establish and strengthen the churches. We could say the church there on Crete.

The first thing that he does is he tells them he needs to appoint elders. In other words, there is something very important about the church having order and structure, and it begins with godly leadership. There's something that's important for us to consider as we just think about being a church. It does seem really clear in scripture that there is meant to be some order. There's meant to be some governance. There's meant to be some structure within a local church. You know, if you read the Bible and you look for a really clear prescription of how a church is supposed to be and function, you really won't find a lot of details. There's a lot of openness in the New Testament about how churches are supposed to be. And I think that's intentional. God's church has existed for the last 2000 years in so many different contexts and cultures. Churches might be big or small. They might meet in buildings or in homes or outside.

So many different ways that the church might gather, might be together as God's people. But one thing is clear is that there is supposed to be some order. There is supposed to be some structure. And it begins with having godly leadership. So the first thing that Titus is supposed to do to make sure that the church is strengthened in an order is to appoint elders.

Now there's this word that is used here as elder. In the Greek, this word is presbuteros. It's where we get the word presbyterian from.

Paul says that you're supposed to appoint these elders, these leaders in the church.

Now, what's interesting is that you'll find this word elder used throughout the New Testament

on the just kind of general surface. It really just means an older man, but it seems to be pretty clear in the New Testament. It doesn't just mean about age, but it's about a position of authority or leadership within the church. What's also interesting is it's not the only title that is used. Do you notice here that Paul says in verse five, I want you to appoint elders. But if you go to verse seven, he describes the elder and he says an overseer. It's the same word that Paul will use when he writes to Timothy in first Timothy chapter three. He gets a very similar description, but he describes an overseer. That's the word for the Greek word episcopos. It's where we get the word episcopalian from. You see all these other denominations get their names from church leaders. We get ours from Baptist. Isn't that so good? Right? Do you have these titles that are being used, right? You have this idea that there are going to be leaders. Sometimes they're called elders.

Sometimes they're called overseers. I think in other places of the New Testament, what you'll find is that they're called shepherds or pastors.

Peter writes that those who are in authority in the church are supposed to shepherd as under shepherds, the people that God has given them. That's where we get the term pastor from.

And what I just want to do this morning is I just want to show you that I think these titles are used so interchangeably because it's not so much about a title. It's not so much about a specific position as it is about the need for godly leadership within the people of God.

What Paul writes here with the New Testament affirms time and time again is that there needs to be an order and a structure and it begins with having godly leaders in the church.

Now what's interesting is it's not always just one position. It might be elder, overseer, pastor that's used in different ways, but there's also other leaders that are mentioned in the New Testament.

In 1 Timothy 3, right after Paul writes about the overseers and the description of them, he then goes on to describe deacons.

We have deacons in our church, men and women who seek to fill this role that scripture has laid. That is a role of leadership. We have other forms of leadership within our church. We have a leadership team,

six men and women, and then the senior pastor who is meant to give leadership oversight to our whole churches functioning, the organization of our church to make sure we are doing what God has called us to do. We have people who lead ministries,

children and youth.

We have community group leaders.

We have leaders who lead up front. We have leaders who lead behind the scenes.

What I want to see this morning is it's not just about a particular few who are supposed to lead, but there's an importance of godly leadership. Now you won't find anybody in our church that goes by the title of elder.

I think when you read this description of what is being called to hear for the elders, if you read the rest of the New Testament, I would say that I think our pastors, myself and Clark and David are meant to fill this role of elder within our church and what we're being called to. But what I want you to see this morning is that it's more than just about a few people.

It's about the importance of godly leadership throughout a church.

We have so many different ways that people lead in our church and we need to make sure that those who are leading are leading in a godly way. Now we'll talk about godly leadership and what that looks like in just a minute based on the description here. I just want to share a little bit from my heart with you as your pastor.

It's on my heart, I was sharing this with our leadership team yesterday, that we as a church would be a little bit more intentional in 2026 to raise up godly leaders.

I think we need more godly leaders to lead in our church. Also think we need more godly leaders to lead outside the laws of our church. Maybe it just means leading in your home.

Maybe it means leading in your workplace.

Maybe it means if you're a student leading on your campus. We have students who lead Christian clubs on their high school campus and I love that. I want us to see more students do that. I want to be more intentional about raising up leaders because if you think about it,

the mission of First SF we often say is leading people to love and live for Jesus.

And sometimes I think the way that we hear that is we think the mission of the big church, maybe you can say the mission of Pastor Ben is to lead you all to love and live for Jesus.

And that's kind of true. We as a church, we do want to lead you to love and live for Jesus, but don't miss this this morning.

I think the call to lead people to love and live for Jesus is actually the mission of every member of our church.

It's not just about our church leading you to love and live for Jesus, it's about you.

Considering who does God have around you that you have an influence over.

Who do you have the opportunity to lead?

Are you able to lead them to love and live for Jesus? I want us to be a church that is equipping people, encouraging people to be godly leaders wherever he has placed them. Now what we see here is a description for elders or pastors particular. And what you could do is you could just kind of check out and say, well, I'm not an elder or pastor. I hope our pastors meet this description, but this doesn't really apply to me. This is what I want to tell you this morning. I think what's being described here because it is a description of a leader is actually telling us what we as a church, what we as a community should prioritize.

What should we value? What should we champion and encourage? Why would we put certain people into positions of leadership and authority? It's gonna be based on what we think is important. And Paul lays out some very important things here that should be part of just our whole church culture. So how are godly leaders described? Well, there's a great emphasis on godly character.

It's the second part if you fill in in blanks, you like to follow along.

The Paul gives an importance. He speaks about the need for godly leaders. And then as he goes to describe godly leaders, he really puts a great emphasis on godly character.

Now these few verses probably shouldn't be viewed as exhaustive, meaning they cover everything that a godly leader should be. But I do think that they are comprehensive,

meaning they cover the main things that we should look for in a godly leader.

What's interesting is there's no mention here of being strong administratively,

or being a gifted visionary leader, or being a compelling communicator, or being able to draw a crowd, or be able to influence people. Really, there's a description of character. What you'll see here in this description of leaders is really nothing fancy. It's just very foundational.

What Paul is saying is, there is something that is so important for your godly leaders and it all has to do with their godly character. Notice what he says in verse six. He says, if anyone is above reproach,

the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. We'll just pause there. Notice this phrase. He says, if anyone is above reproach,

this is a phrase that's used here. It's used in verse seven, verse eight. I can't remember right off the top of my head. It's used in first Timothy chapter three. It's a word or phrase that sometimes is translated as blameless.

It says, the leaders of a church should be blameless. Now here's the thing. Sometimes when you hear above reproach, or you hear the

what we can think is perfect without fault.

I mean, if you can't blame anybody for anything, then they must not do anything wrong.

If you can't bring any reproach on someone, then they must not be doing anything that you would ever think is wrong. And so sometimes we think that godly leaders should be perfect. That's actually a really dangerous standard to set.

Because the reality is nobody is perfect.

And when you put that expectation on people, what just happens is more things get covered up instead of being brought into the light.

What I think above reproach means is not so much about being perfect. It's about living in integrity.

It's about living in the light. You might remember that we walked through the book of First John, not too long ago. It's actually First John's going to be the guide for our discipleship groups this spring. And one of the phrases that we find in First John is walking in the light. You might remember that one of the things I said then was that to walk in the light is to walk in obedience and walk in repentance.

To walk in the light is a striving to follow God's commands and a quick confession to admit when you have it.

I think this is what godly leaders are called to. Not called to be perfect, but they should walk in integrity. They should walk in the light.

Godly leaders should strive to follow God's commands and they should be quick to confess and repent when they don't. But remember, this isn't just some list that you're supposed to say, well, I hope the pastors are doing this. The question is, do we value this together as a church culture?

Do we expect each other to be perfect and to never sin? Or do we expect each other to walk in the light?

Do we expect each other to walk in obedience and repentance?

Do we make space for that in our church to make sure that we know how people are actually living and they have a space to confess when they're not living as God wants them to?

This is why we've started discipleship groups. We want to create a space for people to have those types of deep, authentic relationships where people can walk together in obedience and repentance.

So he says they should be above reproach. And then he starts to describe some different areas where they should be above reproach. And he starts in the home. Verse six, he says, "The elder, the pastor is to be the husband of one wife and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination."

Now, just a couple of things I think is worth clarifying. Sometimes people will read this and they will say, well, this means that for someone to be an elder or pastor, that means they need to be married and they need to have children.

I don't think that's the case at all. But then what Paul is saying is,

what happens in a pastor's life or an elder's life should be true, not just publicly in the church, but also privately in the home.

That above reproach should be reflected in the way that he treats his family. He should be faithful to his wife.

Godly leaders should be faithful to their spouses.

Again, we as a church need to value this on the whole. We need to value healthy marriages. This is why we're having a marriage conference next month. We need to value that in our lives.

It says that he is supposed to lead his children to be believers.

Now again, some people will take this and say, well, if a pastor's child grows up and doesn't follow Jesus and that pastor is disqualified,

I don't think that's what Paul is saying at all. Every person has to respond to God's work of salvation their own way, as we saw in that greeting.

What Paul is saying here is, if a leader in the church has children, he should lead them to follow the Lord.

If someone can't lead their own children, their own house well, how could they manage the Lord's house well?

So the call is not for a pastor's children to be perfect. Please don't ever think that about my boys.

But it is a call for a leader to be a leader publicly, but also privately to lead his children well. And again, this is something we've got to value as a church as a whole. It's not just about my kids or a pastor's kids or leader's kids. It's about the next generation. Do we value this in our homes? Do we value this as a church? Are we partnering together with our children and youth ministries? Are we working with parents to raise up the next generation? Are we reaching other families so they might be a part of this community?

Says that this is supposed to start in the home, but then there's this broader way that a leader is supposed to exhibit godly character in his life and in public.

What he does is he gives a list of five things that leaders shouldn't do and six that they should. And we won't go into great detail, but I just want you to notice them real briefly. It says in verse seven, for an overseer as God's steward must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain.

So these things should not mark the leaders of God's people.

Then I won't take the time to parse out each one, but just one thing that stands out to me is think about how that description matches so many people who are in leadership in our world, in our culture.

Is it not the arrogant who so often get into positions of leadership?

Because they're bold enough and brash enough to market themselves and promote themselves so they get to the position of leadership.

Is it not those who are violent, who are willing to step on people and use people to get to the position that they want? Is it not the greedy for gain who would sell their souls so that they might get more money or power or whatever they're after?

The things that a godly leader should not be are so often the people that get into leadership in our world. Why? Because this is what the kingdoms of this earth value.

The question is, what do we value as the people of God?

As people of the kingdom of God, we're supposed to have values that are upside down from the world.

We should not look to people who are promoting themselves or willing to do whatever it takes to get into a leadership role, but we should be looking for people as Paul says here in verse eight, who are hospitable,

a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.

It says godly leaders should love people,

should be hospitable, should not be about them. They should be about the people that they have the opportunity to lead.

They should love good.

They should love what God calls them to, and they should have the ability to seek to live it out in their own lives by being disciplined and self-controlled, upright and holy.

Again, this is a call for leaders, but it is something we should value as a church, godly character.

Should all strive to live in such a way.

But I do want to remind you what I said earlier is that the expectation should not be perfection.

Because if you're waiting to find a pastor, a deacon, an LT member who is always upright, who is perfectly holy, who is always self-controlled in every way, you'll be looking for a long time.

None of us as leaders or as members of a church could ever perfectly meet this. And this is why I say we've got to walk in obedience, but also repentance.

This is not why we come to the table so regularly.

For us to be reminded that whether you're a leader or not, you should not put your hope in your own ability to be upright and holy. But the fact that Jesus accomplished this work on your behalf.

That we can be quick to repent because our Lord and Savior laid down his life to save us from our sins, to bring forgiveness, to bring covering to those things that we've done wrong so we can bring them out into the light.

Every elder of every church needs to be under the eldership of Jesus.

Every pastor who is shepherding the people of God needs to be under the greater shepherd Jesus Christ.

Every overseer of a church needs to be oversaw by the one true Lord and Savior Jesus.

We as a church, no matter what leadership we have, what role we have, even myself as a pastor, we need to make sure that we are truly led by the only one who is perfect.

The only one who is worthy of us to follow.

The question is, well, how do we know if we're doing that?

Yes, we want to have godly leaders, but godly leaders aren't perfect. How do we know how to hold people accountable?

How do we know if we're really being shaped by the gospel?

This is where we come to our last point, which is what are the needed godly competencies?

I use that word competency one because it just starts with a C so it's easy to remember with character, but it just means like skills, giftings. What should a leader actually be able to do?

I mean, most of what again Paul has described so far is just a leader's character, the way that they are, the way that they act. But does a leader in the church need to be able to do anything? Well, there is a needed godly competency, a skill, a gifting that the leaders of the church should have.

Again, remember, this is not just about setting a standard for leaders as important as that is, but it is also about what do we value? What do we celebrate as a church culture? It says here in verse nine, he must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction and sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

When Paul says here's what a godly leader needs to be able to do, he doesn't actually say they need to be great at organizing lots of people.

He doesn't say they need to be administratively gifted, although those things are very important, I think, especially in people who have oversight and leadership.

It's not that other giftings don't matter, but what he says is really central. What is the needed godly competency is that they would be able to hold on fast to the truth. They'd be able to hold on fast to God's word, to the gospel. They'd be able to teach it. They'd be able to correct those who are misleading from it. This is really in line with what Paul writes to Timothy in first Timothy three. He gives us a description of overseers and the only thing that he says they should be able to do is they should be able to teach.

In fact, it's one of the main differences, it seems, between the elder, the pastor, and the deacon. That both are supposed to be people of godly character, but they're supposed to be something uniquely called to for the leader of the church, and that is the competency of being able to hold on to the truth,

teach the truth, correct with the truth.

Why would that be the needed competency?

Well, how are we going to have a gospel shaped church if we don't know what the gospel says? How can we have gospel shaped lives? How are we going to live in love for Jesus if we don't know what that looks like from God's word?

So those people who are instructing the people,

those leaders who are setting the tone, who are creating that culture, they need to be guided and influenced by God's word, and they need to influence with God's word to make sure the whole community is being shaped by the gospel.

But remember what I said earlier,

I don't think this is just a calling for me or for our church to lead people to love and live for Jesus. I think that's a calling on your life.

I think that every person in our church should lead others to love and live for Jesus.

How will you do that if you don't know what it means to love and live for Jesus?

It's something we've got to value as a church as a whole to know the word, to be able to communicate the word, to be able to recognize what false teachings are out there. That's the focus of next week.

Paul is going to speak about those false teachings that were there on Crete and we need to consider the ways that we need to be guarded against us in our own culture. But here we see this is what is needed amongst godly leaders and this is what is needed amongst the people of God,

is to know what the gospel really says so that we can walk in obedience,

we can walk in repentance,

so that we can truly be a church that is shaped by the gospel.

Listen, I tell you just as a pastor, as a leader in your church, to consider these words, to preach these words, it's humbling and convicting for me to recognize the ways that I strive for this and the ways that I fall short.

But one thing that I just wanted to do throughout this is not just put an expectation on myself or on leaders, but for us as a church to say, do we really value the things that God values?

Do we really promote them within our church and look for them in the leadership of our church? Are we really seeking to be shaped by the gospel? That is a community project. It's one for us to do together. Let's together walk in obedience and repentance.

Let's together walk in the light that we might have lives and might have a whole church that is shaped by the good news of Jesus Christ.