

How Do We Follow Imperfect People?

Under the Hood #3 | July 14, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Steve Howell

Opening

Good morning. I'm excited to continue our sermon series ("Under the Hood") with you today. We've had a couple of weeks to start looking at areas that are important to our faith, and we've tried to identify some *real-world, specific* actions we can take to gain practical power in those areas. *Listening to God* and *building unity* have been our first two issues, and my prayer is that you are starting to see some results as you put those tips into practice.

Today, I'd like to take that second issue – building unity – and explore a related topic. Unity is a great goal for the church, and it is important to build unity with the *entire* congregation. But for full unity to happen, it must involve the leaders of the church.

And you and I have a hard time with leaders.

A History of Bad Leadership

Recent surveys confirm that opinion. It hurts to see the results, but fewer and fewer people find ministers to be trustworthy. The Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index last year showed that across 31 different countries, religious leaders/clergy were only viewed as "trustworthy" by 27% of the population.¹ That view is international, but the results here at home are similar. Gallup polls in the past five years show ministers dropping below other professions.

Pastors are now seen as less trustworthy than judges (43%), day care providers (46%), police officers (56%), pharmacists (62%), medical doctors (65%), grade school teachers (66%), military officers (71%), and nurses (82%).²

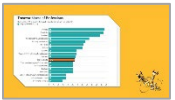
It's easy to see why. Stories of failure abound!

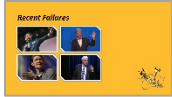
Recent Failures

Look at the headlines and you'll see plenty of stories that cause our trust to plummet. Well-known ministry figures – who have written books that educated us, created studies that challenged us, composed songs that moved us, and spoken words that inspired us – have had their secret deeds and attitudes exposed. At best, they are forced to take a

¹ [Politicians the least trusted profession, while doctors the most trustworthy | Ipsos](#)

² [The 8 People Americans Trust More Than Their Local Pastor | News & Reporting | Christianity Today](#)





pause from leadership responsibilities; at worst, they step down in disgrace and alienate large numbers of the faithful.

- Last month, the passionate preacher and author **Tony Evans** announced that he was stepping away from his role for a season of “repentance and restoration” in response to an unspecified sin from years past.
- Also last month, megachurch pastor and spiritual advisor to politicians **Robert Morris** resigned after admitting to past “inappropriate sexual behavior” with a 12-year old girl.
- **Matt Chandler**, leader of churches and church-planting networks, took time off for messages that were “too familiar” with another woman.
- **Mark Driscoll**, preacher and author and advocate for strong husbands and fathers, was fired for being too aggressive in his treatment of staff.
- Hillsong’s **Brian Houston** was charged and then acquitted of covering up his father’s child sex abuse. But he was then fired after violating the church’s code of conduct in his behavior with two other women.
- **Ravi Zacharias** died as a well-known and respected apologist for the gospel, only to have reports surface after his death that showed a pattern of abuse and unwanted touching (and worse) at day spas.

And that’s not including any of the horrific sexual abuse that has been committed by **Catholic priests**, or the lesser-known stories of infidelity and moral failure that have been committed by **preachers** without a major platform, or the whispers and rumors that swirl whenever a minister or church leader steps down without explanation...in this church or any other.

Historical Failures



The failures are all too apparent in the present, but failure goes deeper than recent memory. If you look at church behavior across the centuries, you will find echoes of the same behaviors.

“For example, in the 4th century, St. Basil of Caesarea set up a detailed system of punishment to deal with clerics at his monastery who molested boys. Perpetrators were to be flogged and put in chains for six months; they were never again allowed unsupervised interaction with minors.

In the 13th century, Pope Gregory IX added to church law a declaration that sexual abuse demanded expulsion from the priesthood and that perpetrators would be turned over to secular authorities.”³

Such abuse has often been overlooked, covered up, or avoided. But it is not isolated. Instead, sinful attitudes of *all* types actively and passively grew in secret and in public, undermining the church and its mission.

³ [Centuries-Old Knowledge of Church Sex Abuse | History News Network](#)

Biblical Failures

Has it been any different, ever? Of course not.

Before there was a Christian Church, whether you look in the Old Testament or the New Testament, religious leaders have failed to live up to their own standards, regardless of the century or the letters that follow the numbers (AD or BC).

Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day.



"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are!" (Matthew 23:15, NLT)

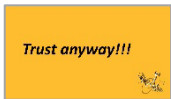
The Old Testament prophet Malachi rebuked the religious leaders of his day, on God's behalf.



"The words of a priest's lips should preserve knowledge of God, and people should go to him for instruction, for the priest is the messenger of the LORD of Heaven's Armies. But you priests have left God's paths. Your instructions have caused many to stumble into sin. You have corrupted the covenant I made with the Levites," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies." (Malachi 2:7-8, NLT)

We can see stories of abuse and failure in the life of kings, in the tales involving the high priests and their families, in the actions of the patriarchs, and more.

Stories of failure have been following God's leaders since day one, so it makes sense not to trust us.



But here is my challenge to you: **trust anyway!**

God Uses the Broken



Unmet Standards

God does have high, clear standards for his leaders. Character and integrity matter! When qualifications for spiritual leadership are spelled out in the Bible, they always focus on integrity, character, and depth.



"So a church leader must be a man whose life is above reproach. He must be faithful to his wife. He must exercise self-control, live wisely, and have a good reputation. He must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must be able to teach. He must not be a heavy drinker or be violent. He must be gentle, not quarrelsome, and not love money. He must manage his own family well, having children who respect and obey him. For if a man cannot manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? A church leader must not be a new believer, because he might become proud, and the devil would cause him to

fall. Also, people outside the church must speak well of him so that he will not be disgraced and fall into the devil's trap.” (1 Timothy 3:2–7, NLT)

Those are high standards; they are good standards. But the reality is that no church leader perfectly lives up to those standards. At least not all the time.



In Scripture, we find an example of unmet standards. One of the most honored church leaders in the Bible is the apostle Peter. He was a close companion of Jesus and a key figure in the early church. His life and his letters helped shape the Christian faith. Yet even he failed to meet God's standards.

In Paul's letter to the Galatian church, Paul takes Peter to task for his hypocrisy.

“But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong.” (Galatians 2:11, NLT)

Peter was showing favoritism and neglect, and he was worrying more about his reputation than his flock. It wasn't murder, but it wasn't right. It was bad enough that Paul was compelled to rebuke him.

If this had happened today in our church, how would it have played out? Would there have been a bold conversation? Maybe. Maybe not. More likely, I'm guessing, would be side conversations and whispers about Peter's bad behavior. His failures would cause a group to plot a change in leadership. People might share knowing glances and eye rolls behind his back or make snarky comments to friends.

The gossip from the challengers would be wrong. The grumbling would not be helpful. The likely responses would be wrong in their *style*, but they wouldn't be wrong about the *substance* of Peter's failure.

Whenever we look close enough, we can always seek and find evidence of our leaders' insufficiencies. None is perfectly godly; none meet God's standards every time. Our leaders are all failures.

Yet, failures are the only ones available for God to use.

Fragile Jars of Clay



*“We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are **like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure**. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.” (2 Corinthians 4:7, NLT)*

Your spiritual leaders are like fragile clay jars, easily broken and shattered. And if God didn't use them, he would have no replacement, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

The beautiful lyrics of the Psalms were penned by an adulterous killer (David). The man whose faith was counted as righteousness (Abraham) was at times a lying coward. The

treasures of wisdom in Proverbs were composed by a man who regularly violated God's instructions (Solomon).

Their jars were fractured and weak. At the same time, their ministry was powerful. It was not of their own power; it was the work of God in them that produced the powerful results.

And so it is with us. This is the miracle of mercy! The same leaders who fall to sin are the ones that God raises up to proclaim His truth and His gospel.

When I was in high school, our youth minister moved away to take a position at another church. His departure left us searching for a replacement. In a move that not every church chooses, the leaders put together a search committee that included a couple of young, stupid students (yes, I'm talking about myself).

We evaluated several candidates, and I still remember a serious conversation we had about one candidate. We were sitting around the cushioned chairs in our church foyer with the search team when someone dropped a bombshell. This guy had a blemish on his record – a youthful indiscretion that was known by some committee members as well as the leaders of the Bible college he had attended. And now we knew it, too.

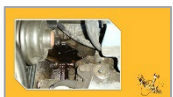
There were serious questions about whether such an act disqualified him from serving. I remember some of the murmurs from the team. They didn't want to make a mistake for the church. Yet a plea for mercy from one of his Bible college leaders convinced us to take a chance on this man and his family.

That minister went on to serve our church for years. He did well and even became a mentor to me, helping me grow closer to Jesus and preparing me for service to God.

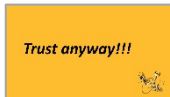
Was he perfect? No. Was he a fragile jar of clay with a couple cracks? Yes. But was he a vessel filled with God's Spirit and used by Him? Absolutely!

Broken youth ministers can still produce Christ-following disciples. Broken men can still be husbands worthy of Christ-like submission. Broken women can still be wives worthy of Christ-like love. Broken preachers can still proclaim Christ-honoring truth. Broken elders can still provide Christ-loving care.

This is not an excuse to overlook leadership failures. Cracks in the pottery must be fixed quickly and properly. But don't be hasty. Don't trash the jar because it has weakness.

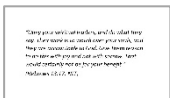


If Paul had used an engine metaphor, he might point out that when you go "under the hood" you might find some oil leaks in a few places. Some leaks are serious enough to give up on the engine and require a full rebuild, but most are the kind where you could tighten a connection or replace a gasket...or just keep topping off the oil every couple weeks so it doesn't get too low. You shouldn't ignore it, but you don't have to immediately sell the car for scrap metal or parts!



Church leaders may not *always* be trustworthy, but here is my challenge to you: **trust anyway!**

We still can - we still **MUST** - entrust broken leaders with spiritual responsibility. If God continues to be at work in their lives, they can be tolerated, corrected, restored, and forgiven. They can be redeemed by Jesus...Not because they are worthy, but because a worthy God chooses to use them.



“Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit.”

(Hebrews 13:17, NLT)



Practical Ways to Follow Imperfect People

How do you follow imperfect people?

In this series, we’ve been looking at practical ways that we can improve. We’ve been looking at *specific, real-world* steps we can take to gain practical power in our faith.

So, what about this issue? How can we **practically** and **biblically** follow the imperfect people (myself included) who lead our church?

I’ve got a few thoughts. Let’s go “under the hood” together and find **five practical actions** to help us follow imperfect people well.



1. Take them out for pizza.

Polls show that people have greater levels of trust with a leader they know than a leader they don’t.

“According to Barna research, nearly two-thirds of Americans have a ‘very positive’ opinion of a pastor they have a personal connection with, compared to a quarter who said the same about pastors in general.”⁴

Scriptural Foundation: *“Wounds from a **friend** can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”* (Proverbs 27:6, NIV)

Why it Works: When we spend time with people in a more personal setting (such as over pizza), we get to know them and understand them. When we eat together, we see each other as humans. By building personal connections, we lay the groundwork for honesty. We can **encourage** the type of leadership that God wants and **challenge** any behaviors or attitudes that run counter to His plan. Pizza can pave the way for relational strength and trust (...unless it has pineapple as a topping! Gross!).

⁴ [Above Reproach? Fewer Americans See Pastors as Ethical | News & Reporting | Christianity Today](#)



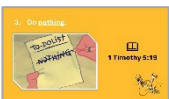
2. Ask for accountability structures.

Failures by church leaders can have devastating consequences, so try to avert them before they happen. Accountability is simply a way to act *before* problems develop. If we ask our church to improve its structures (its policies and practices), we are taking the initiative to care for our leaders and support their integrity in following Jesus.

Scriptural Foundation: *“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?”* (2 Corinthians 13:5, NIV)

Why it Works: When there are situations where we don’t know all the details or decisions we don’t understand, accountability structures (like periodic reviews or weekly phone calls) can enable us to trust that the leader’s godly character has already been established and protected. You don’t need to know all the details of a situation; if someone else is checking, you can extend trust.

Touch base with the leaders if you are curious what kinds of accountability structures are in place. And if you think more accountability or a different kind of accountability would be helpful, then lovingly encourage the leaders to consider changes. Together, we can implement structures that will help current and future leaders of the church grow!



3. Do nothing (Don’t jump to conclusions).

If you suspect an issue, or even if you have a bad gut feeling, wait. Don’t accuse. Don’t gossip. Wait. Don’t question their motives or their actions (especially not publicly!) until you have firm evidence to do so.

Scriptural Foundation: *“Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”* (1 Timothy 5:19, NIV)

Why it Works: Playing “gotcha” hurts everyone more than it helps. If you’re wrong, you’ve hurt your own reputation as well as the reputation of an innocent person. Even if your hunch is right, acting before all the facts are in creates a culture in which “serious” accusations carry more weight than truth. Innocent ministers have been fired because of a malicious claim; churches have split over baseless allegations. TCC should never find itself among those ranks!

Truth will make itself known...in due time. Until then, give each other grace. Assume the best (*ex: they are working on it, they are trying to honor Jesus, they have more information than I do, they have the best interest of the whole church in mind*) until you know differently.



4. **Make them look better than they are.**

Let me give you two scenarios. Tell me which one is better for the church.

- *The leaders of a church struggle to set direction and lead. So, the congregation sits on their hands when it comes to evangelism and holds back from serving in key ministries. “We’ll jump back in once better leaders are in place.” The leaders are clearly identified as a problem and the church flounders.*

OR...

- *The leaders of a church struggle to set direction and lead. So, the congregation pushes forward and leads by their own example. Individuals develop a deeper love of Jesus on their own, and they encourage others in the church to follow. They initiate ideas. They form their own study groups. “We’ll follow Jesus regardless.” The leaders’ shortcomings aren’t allowed to be a roadblock to spiritual vitality, and the church flourishes.*

Isn’t the second scenario better?

Scriptural Foundation: *“Don’t speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God’s law. But **your job is to obey the law**, not to judge whether it applies to you.” (James 4:11, NLT)*

Why it Works: At the end of the day, the church’s success matters more than who gets the credit. As much as you can, do the things that will make your leaders look like they have produced spiritual giants! And if you do, you’ve assured that the *next* generation of leaders will be far stronger and better equipped to lead!



5. **Encourage the good you see.**

Positive reinforcement is a great tool for coaches, parents, and dog trainers. It’s good to use on your church leaders, too. Speak up when you see spiritual success. Send a card congratulating them on church victories. Tell others when you see or hear them modeling a Christ-like attitude.

Scriptural Foundation: *“Dear brothers and sisters, honor those who are your leaders in the Lord’s work. They work hard among you and give you spiritual guidance. Show them great respect and wholehearted love because of their work. And live peacefully with each other.” (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, NLT)*

Why it works: Until you’ve been in their shoes, you don’t fully understand the pressure and responsibility that comes from leading a congregation. It can be emotionally draining and spiritually dangerous. Satan’s attacks come in ways that you wouldn’t even dream!

That’s why encouragement matters. Kindness matters. Reinforcing good decisions matters. Such support will prompt the leaders to stay on the right path! You can steer the

church toward greater faithfulness with a word, a hug, a handshake, a comment, or a cheer!

Closing

I know that this message is hard.



We don't want to be naïve, "good little soldiers." Our culture celebrates the mavericks, the ones who buck the system and call out the incompetent leaders above us. Whether it's Detective Axel Foley in *Beverly Hills Cop*, or Wally in the *Dilbert* cartoon strips, or the whistleblowers in corporate America, we have a cultural sweet spot for those who take down the leaders, not build them up. We're ready to see the powerful fall.

But that's following society, not following your Savior. Jesus calls us to live differently. He values submission and humility.

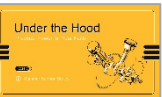
"And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."
(Ephesians 5:21, NLT)

When we find ourselves under the leadership of an imperfect jar of clay, the temptation will be to throw off their guidance. The inclination will be to revolt at any sign of weakness and failing.

But that won't build the church. It will break it.

- Leaders might not always deserve your trust. **Trust anyway.**
- Leaders might make mistakes. **Trust anyway.**
- Leaders might move too slowly. **Trust anyway.**
- Leaders might need forgiveness. **Trust anyway.**

Do your part to encourage, build up, strengthen, and...yes...*follow* the imperfect people who serve you in the church. Help them develop into examples worth imitating and following!



Prayer

Pastoral Prayer

For our time of invitation, I would like to do it a little differently today. Normally, I invite anyone to come forward to share a prayer request or a first-time decision to follow Jesus. Today, I want to invite any church leaders present to come forward and stand up here (elders, deacons, teachers, staff).

Rather than me pray for you, during the song, I want to invite you to come up and pray for them. It can be aloud, or it can be silent. But if I'm asking you to trust these people as leaders, they need your prayers.

We'll sing, you can pray, and then I'll pray to close out our service.

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Notes

A History of Bad Leadership

Recent Failures

Historical Failures

Biblical Failures (Matthew 23:15; Malachi 2:7-8)

God Uses the Broken

Unmet Standards (1 Timothy 3:2-7; Galatians 2:11)

Fragile Jars of Clay (2 Corinthians 4:7; Hebrews 13:17)

Practical Ways to Follow Imperfect People

- 1. Take them out for pizza. (Proverbs 27:6)***
- 2. Ask for accountability structures. (2 Corinthians 13:5)***
- 3. Do nothing. (1 Timothy 5:19)***
- 4. Make them look better than they are. (James 4:11)***
- 5. Encourage the good you see. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)***

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Think of the best leader you've ever followed and the worst you've ever had to follow. What character traits separated the two?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- What spiritual leadership do you currently exercise? (Church, parenting, group leader, etc). How effective do you think your leadership is? How effective do you think others would say you are?
- Read Malachi 2:7–8. What leadership failures were pointed out regarding these priests? Why does a leader bear such a high responsibility for his or her followers' actions?
- Read 1 Timothy 3:2–7. List the spiritual qualities that leaders of the church should possess. Do you think this list is comprehensive? Why or why not?
- What does it mean when Scripture says we are “fragile jars of clay?” (2 Corinthians 4:7)
- How do you reconcile your leaders' brokenness with the statement of Hebrews 13:17?
- In what ways have you seen strong leadership at TCC? How could you encourage more of it?
- Why does improving your personal relationship with a leader help you be a better follower?
- Why should we be careful before making accusations against church leaders? (1 Timothy 5:19)
- What is your biggest obstacle to trusting church leaders? How can you overcome that obstacle Scripturally?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Pray for the leaders of TCC (elders, deacons, staff, teachers). Pray for protection from Satan's attacks and for empowerment by the Holy Spirit!