

Raising the Bar

The Shepherd's Mantle-Part 2

Titus 1:6

A church leader by the name of Jerome wrote a letter to a younger elder in the church and in his letter, dated A.D. 394, he bemoaned the lack of qualified leadership in the church. In his letter he went on to include some rather scathing remarks for his own generation of church leaders who were more interested in the beauty of the cathedrals than they were in the character of her leaders. He wrote, and I quote, "Many build churches nowadays; their walls and pillars of glowing marble, their ceilings glittering with gold, and their altars studded with jewels. Yet to the choice of Christ's minister's in the church, no heed is [given]."¹

This isn't a new problem.

Church offices have often been given to the wealthy, the well connected, the winsome and the handsome. They've been granted to the faithfully attending, positively supporting church members regardless of character and calling.

Which is all the more tragic when you consider the role of church leaders; they are the under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ – and Jesus Christ has literally entrusted into the care of men His dearest and most costly possession – His own bride – redeemed by His own blood.

How priceless is that?

Men who lead in the church are literally shepherding the bride of Christ who just so happens to be on her way to the marriage feast.

Elders are entrusted by God with the care of God's own children to guide them and correct them and teach them and love them and help them and encourage them along the way.

Listen, the more value you place on the Body of Christ, the more value you will place on the leadership in the Body of Christ.

Can you imagine any mother or father going up to some random person on the street and saying, "Listen, for 20 bucks an hour would you mind watching our kids . . . we just wanna get out for a couple of hours. We don't care who you are – we don't care what you're gonna be like around our kids . . . we really don't care what you're like, we just need a break."

What would that tell you? That would inform you of the low level of value placed on the lives of those children.

You see, the higher the value, the greater the concern for those entrusted to care for them.

If you had come over to babysit our twin sons when they were a year old – if you really thought you were up to the challenge – you'd only be there because my wife trusted you and knew something about you.

And you'd also discover that she had the whole evening mapped out for you. When bath time was; then after bath time what they would get to drink – in fact, more than likely, their sippy cups would already be in the refrigerator with just the right blend of juice and Benadryl.

Then after juice time it was story time – and by the way, this is the Bible story book to read out of – and then after that there's prayer time and then bed time and this boy gets his white blanket and that boy gets his green blanket – this one gets his little stuffed Barry Beaver and the other boy gets Michael Monkey . . . whatever you do, don't get that wrong.

The entire evening would be mapped out for the babysitter.

Listen, it had taken my wife months to get those boys on a schedule and she wasn't about to let it get ruined by one night of riotous living.

But there's more to it than that – these are our precious children and we aren't about to hand them off to just anybody, to do anything they good and well please.

And do you think God cares any less about His children than we do about ours?

God also desires to entrust His precious children to those who love the flock and want to guard the flock and feed the flock and guide the flock; who are willing to lay down their lives for the good of the flock.

In one passage where Christ tells the church to follow their leaders – an interesting nuance of leadership – like parenting – comes to the surface. The writer of Hebrews instructs the believers *to obey your leaders and submit to them for they keep watch over your souls . . . (Hebrews 13:17a).*

That word translated to “keep watch” literally refers to someone going without sleep.ⁱⁱ

What loving mother or father hasn't lost sleep over the care of their little child, or even over concern for an older child?

Losing sleep is part of being a parent.

I don't know about you, but I have had a hard time falling asleep while my children were still out at night. Our two daughters were the last to leave the nest – our last child – our youngest daughter is about to launch into college this fall. And she knows, poor thing, that Saturday night's curfew is just about like any other night, because until she's safely home, I have a hard time falling asleep.

And I really need to sleep on Saturday night, because Sunday's coming – it's the only day I work. I need some sleep.

How many parents – especially of older children – have stayed awake at night, praying not only for the physical, but for the spiritual well being of their children?

That's the role of a loving, caring, spiritually minded parent.

It's as if God is saying, “I want that for my children too. I want to entrust my children to leaders who are willing to lose sleep over them - to care that much for the flock.”

That's how much God values you.

So it should come as no surprise that God has delivered to the church a list of some 20 standards for church leaders.

Unless somebody is somewhat adamant about suppressing the obvious truth of God's word, it's pretty clear to the Bible student that God isn't about to entrust the well being of His church to just anybody to do whatever they wanna do.

In our last session we discussed the Biblical roles of the elder/pastor/bishop – the three Biblical terms used in reference to the same man/office – as that of guarding and protecting and feeding and leading. That's what he does, among a list of other things, as a loving, caring, spiritually minded shepherd.

Beyond that, we're not told much more about what an elder does. But we are told a lot more about who an elder is.

There are two lists in the Bible which give us the qualifications of these servant leaders.

The longer list is in First Timothy chapter 3 and the shorter list is here in Titus chapter 1 which basically repeats much of Timothy's list.

Turn to the list of qualifications as Paul writes to ***Titus in chapter 1 and verse 5; For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, 6 namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe not accused of dissipation or rebellion. 7 For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, 8. But hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, 9 Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.***

You get to the end of a list like that and every church leader feels something stirring in his soul that sounds like, “I resign.”

If you compare the list in 1 Timothy with this list in Titus, you come up with 23 standards or qualifications. If you include aspiration or the desiring of the office as another qualification, you're at 24.

Who can possibly meet these standards? Especially when the first qualification so clearly says, “above reproach”

You really don't need to read any further beyond that one, right? That one phrase alone is a show stopper.

The word Paul uses here, translated "above reproach" is a word that does not refer to perfection, but to a pattern.ⁱⁱⁱ

It's a word that refers to a man being without a handle – without an obvious issue in his life or character that becomes a hindrance to his credibility.

But keep in mind that an elder, like any other member of the flock, is a fallen sinner; and sinners do what? They sin.

But here's the key difference: the elder, while not having attained godly perfection – is committed to demonstrating a godly pattern in living.

An elder cannot lay claim to flawless perfection, but he can demonstrate faithful progression.

And here's the pattern of that progression in Titus chapter 1.

Now you need to know that the words, 'above reproach' serve as a categorical heading to which all the following qualifications are hinged.

In other words, he's to be pursuing an 'above reproach' – pattern of faithful, biblical, godly living as it relates to his marriage, his children, his character and his public lifestyle.

And why must he pursue this pattern? Because his life is a pattern for all who follow him. Leadership is influence. Leadership is endorsement.

The very nature of leadership invites imitation. And you need to know that the New Testament not only acknowledges this fact, it unashamedly encourages it.

Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi, ***Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. (Philippians 3:17).***

Another text encourages the believer to, ***"Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith."*** (Hebrews 13:7)

Peter tells the elders to ***be an example – a tupos – literally, a pattern – for the flock to follow (1 Peter 5:4).***

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, ***"Be imitators of me, just as I also imitate Christ."*** (1 Corinthians 11:1)

Paul didn't tell them to imitate him just because he was their leader – he said to imitate him as he

imitated Christ. They couldn't see Christ, but they could see him.

Titus 1 is really the pattern put into print of the character of Jesus Christ.

The reason a leader must pursue this pattern of living is because he is setting the standard for all those who follow him to pattern after him their own lives and their own conduct – and oh it must do nothing less than lead people to wanna live like Jesus Christ.

You see this kind of imitation in the world, don't you? It's everywhere. We are by nature copycats.

Madison Avenue has built a billion dollar industry on the fact that we all basically wanna fit in.

I read a couple of days ago about riot police having to be called out to a mall in Orlando, Florida to make sure nothing bad happened while a crowd gathered and waited. They were waiting to have a chance to buy a pair of Nike tennis shoes. The shoes were a limited edition, going on sale at the moment the NBA All-Star Game started in Orlando; and only then. And when the shoes were gone, they were gone.

These were the shoes worn by athletes they looked up to . . . and because their models wore them, they wanted to wear them too.

And there's really nothing wrong with that. Humans wanna be like the people they admire.

But with that comes the downside . . . people we admire may not be worth admiring.

Imitation is not all bad . . . just make sure people are imitating something worth imitating.

No wonder James the Apostle said, "Let me recommend that not many of you become teachers – leaders in the assembly – knowing that you're gonna receive a stricter judgment.

Why? Because your life was multiplied many times over in the lives of those who patterned their lives after yours.

For that reason, Paul begins with this qualification – an elder must be above reproach.

One author wrote that this word does not denote sinless perfection or a pristine past, but it refers to a general assessment of a man's maturity and reputation.^{iv}

It's actually a compound Greek word; the first part means up and the second word means, "to call", which together means, literally, to call up.^v

It has the idea of not only a high calling, but a high standard of living.

What came to my mind was the phrase, “raising the bar” – as one high jumper excelled still higher and higher.

To call up can refer to simply raising the standard.

And in a world where the standard has all but disappeared, it is desperately needed.

Eugene Peterson writes these challenging words, “There is little to admire and less to imitate in the people who are prominent in our culture. We have celebrities but not saints. If we look around for what it means to be a mature, whole, blessed person, we don’t find much. These people are around, but they aren’t easy to pick out. No journalist interviews them. No talk show features them. They do not set trends. There is no cash value in them. No Oscars are given for integrity. At year’s end [when the lists of the ten best dressed or the ten best looking, is compiled], no one compiles a list of the ten best-lived lives. Our society today is devoid of models. Neither the adventure of goodness nor the pursuit of righteousness gets headlines [anymore].^{vi}

The question isn’t, where are the perfect people, but where are the patterns for people . . . where is the demonstration of progression.

Beloved, the church is the answer to that. Every Christian is to be an example – even the younger believers are implicitly challenged by Paul to young Timothy to ***be an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity (I Timothy 4:12).***

Listen, if the leaders are to be godly because they are being imitated, then that means the ones who are following have the same goal in mind – and the same calling from God – to live godly lives.

That’s why the Apostle Peter could write that every Christian needs to apply with all diligence in adding to his faith, ***moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love for if these qualities are yours and are increasing they render you neither useless nor unfruitful . . . (2 Peter 1:5-8)***

Here’s the challenge, beloved . . . it’s time for us all to raise the bar.

Every Christian is to be an example to his world and every Christian leader is to provide the pattern for the Christian.

And the pattern continues with the next phrase in ***Titus chapter 1 and verse 6. If any man is above reproach, now note, the husband of one wife . . .***

You could understand this to mean, the elder is to provide a pattern for living as it relates to his commitment to his wife.

He is the husband of one wife.

Now this does not mean that a single man or a widow cannot be an elder . . . you might notice that Paul doesn’t say that an elder has to have a wife – Paul writes, he’s to have *one* wife.^{vii}

Literally translated, he is to be a “one-woman man” – sounds like a country and western song, doesn’t it? He’s a one-woman man.

The truth is, not many people in the first century were singing this tune.

First century immorality was acceptable among married men. Men in the Roman world kept a legal wife for inheritance issues and the bearing of children, but were openly involved with mistresses, slaves and temple prostitutes as religious practices allowed.^{viii}

Divorce was also rampant. One man who lived in the first century left documents revealing he had been legally married and divorced 27 times. Roman women were said to have dated the years with the names of their husbands and to have been married so many times they wore out their bridal veils.

So I don’t believe Paul is meaning to write here that an elder is to be married to one woman *at a time*, but to *one* living woman.

He’s to be a one-woman man.

By the way, the idea of a ***one-woman man*** would have been as radical to the first century world as it has become in this 21st century world.

We happen to live in a culture where 24 million Americans will have been involved with someone other than their wife or husband this past week. That’s right – this past week, 24 million married people were involved with someone other than their spouse.

One article I read recently highlighted one particular website designed for people willing, quote, “to kick their vows to the curb.” They recently released a cell phone version of the site so no one would leave a trail of evidence on their computer at home or work. In just one month – 679,000 men and women used that one website alone to start an affair. The CEO of the site, shrugged off any criticism during an interview saying, “We’re just a platform. People cheat

because their lives aren't working for them." And then he made this chilling comment that I have actually heard twice in the last few months – and I quote, "humans aren't meant to be monogamous."^x

Monogamy, one woman said in an interview, is unnatural.

And in a twisted sort of way she's right.

Committed, faithful, covenant love to one person goes against our sinful nature. It runs contrary to selfishness and pride.

Faithful commitment to loving your spouse requires dying to self . . . and self does not naturally lie down and die.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, he left no potential for natural success.

Love your wife as Christ loves the church? Are you kidding?

- He died for the church.
- He sacrificed His personal comfort for the church.
- He suffered humiliation for the church.
- He gave up His future for the church.
- He took on the sufferings and sin of the church and made them His own.
- He intercedes for the church.
- He loves the church regardless of affection or understanding in return;
- He longs to be in the presence of the church as she finds her final satisfaction and glory in His coming kingdom.

So then we are called to die for our wives;

- to sacrifice ourselves for her;
- to take on her sufferings as our own;
- to remain faithfully committed regardless of any affection or understanding in return;
- to suffer humiliation for her;
- to give up our personal comfort and rights for her;
- to maintain intercession for her benefit above and beyond our own;
- to long for her final glory and satisfaction in the coming kingdom;

And if that isn't convicting enough – here's the amazing thing about Christ's love for the church – even while we were sinners, Christ died for us.

You want to raise the bar?

Loving your spouse is not loving them as saints, but loving them as sinners – for that's exactly how Jesus loves us. ^x

And that's just not natural.

Can I tell you something? The elder should be leading the way in this regard – it's one of the qualifications, in fact, it's listed first in both Titus and First Timothy.

Perhaps this is why the marriages of pastors and elders are such a target of the enemy. If you survey the divorce rates in the United States, you'll discover that according to one article, pastors had the third highest divorce rate – exceeded only by that of medical doctors and policeman.^{xi}

So more than ever, this kind of qualified man is harder and harder to find, right?

The reason we have applied this qualification to require that an elder not be divorced, but actively and presently demonstrating commitment to his wife is simply because his relationship with her is intended to illustrate the faithfulness of Christ to His Bride, the church.

We believe that God has called the leaders of the church to live out the union of Christ and His church with an unbroken vow to love their wives for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.

For those of you who've experienced the agony and pain of divorce – perhaps you were the innocent party and you were abandoned; perhaps you were away from the Lord and you left your wife or husband but you've since repented – you of all people know how and why to pray for the leaders in this church and their wives – to stay true to their marriage vows, "till death do us part."

I have many dear friends in this church who can't meet this qualification – they understand that while they can't fill this particular role at Colonial, there are so many other ministry roles they can fill and they do so with faithfulness and joy.

And they know perhaps as well as anybody knows, the bar must not be lowered; the pattern must be demonstrated – it must be modeled for this generation – by those who lead the church.

And I'll add one more comment before we go on – the issue of monogamy is becoming all the more confusing within mainline denominationalism.

Now the debates are rewriting even further what Paul must have meant when he said that an elder must be a one-woman man. Did he really mean a one-woman man? Couldn't that just be a reference to marital fidelity so that it could refer to a one-man man or a one-woman woman?

Surely Paul wasn't implying within this qualification the parameters of a heterosexual marriage? I believe that's exactly what Paul means.

Even Time Magazine caught on to the irony of the debate within the church when it reported, and I quote, "Denominations that once would not tolerate divorced ministers now debate whether or not to accept lesbian [ministers]."^{xii}

How did we get from there to here . . . by lowering the bar.

Frankly, more than ever, it's time to raise the bar all over again.

And you're doing that, by the way – one marriage at a time; one self-sacrificing spouse at a time; one praying wife at a time; one committed to the word husband at a time.

One couple at a time, committed to loving and serving one another as a living demonstration of Christ's love and service to the church.

It's time to raise the bar.

Men especially, it's time to reinvest in your marriage – raising the bar in every aspect possible as you pattern your life after the character of Christ.

In Kent Hughes wonderful book, *The Disciplines of a Godly Man*, he's encouraging men to spend time with their wives. To not take them for granted. He wrote, "Years ago in the Midwest, a farmer and his wife were lying in bed during a storm when the funnel of a tornado suddenly lifted the roof right off the house and sucked their bed away with them still in it and they just sort of floated around in a big circle. The wife began to cry, and the farmer called out to her that this was no time to cry. She called back that she couldn't help it – she was so happy – it was the first time they'd been out together in 20 years."^{xiii}

Paul goes on to end *verse 6 by adding that an elder also must have children who believe not accused of dissipation or rebellion.*

This verb, "having children" implies that these children are under the authority of the father. In every culture the conditions of this parental authority may change – in Rome it could last a lifetime – for us in this country it typically ends when a child leaves home for college or a career.

The additional description of these children as *believing* has certainly created quite a bit of debate over the centuries, as you can well imagine.

The problem lies in the fact that the adjective, "pista" (πιστα) can be translated actively as believe or passively as faithful.^{xiv}

And it's used both ways in the Pastoral Epistles.

The word can certainly refer to a believer or a Christian. In fact, Paul uses it this way *in First Timothy 6:2 for masters who are believers* – or believing masters.

But Paul also uses the word to refer to *faithful* men (same word) in *Second Timothy 2:2*.

The Gospel of Matthew uses it this way as well to refer to an obedient servant who carries out the request of his master (Matthew 24:45).^{xv}

So which is it? Is Paul saying that an elder's children have to be Christians or that they have to be under control?

Frankly, the only way to determine the meaning of this adjective, as either passively or actively translated, is the context. And I believe the context here is clearly one of submission, not salvation.

In fact, throughout this entire list of qualification, every other one of them is under the power of the elder candidate to achieve.

The salvation of his children is not under his power. Even though every leader in the church would desperately long for and pray for the salvation of his children that ultimately rests in the sovereign grace of God.

Like godly Samuel in the Old Testament, an elder in the New Testament cannot make his children Christians – either by command or by example.

So the issue at stake here as it relates to an elders qualification is not the belief of his children, but their behavior – and that fits perfectly with First Timothy 3 where the elder is to manage his household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity.

You might write into the margin of your Bible, as I have done, next to the phrase, having children who believe – I've written – having children who behave.

Furthermore, if they were genuinely Christians, if that was the qualification Paul had in mind, the following explanatory clause would be unnecessary – notice, Paul clarifies what, I believe, he means, these children – *verse 6 – are not accused of dissipation or rebellion.*

Dissipation was a word used of drunken revelry at pagan festivals.^{xvi}

If Paul means to say here that an elder's children have to be Christians, then that's all he needs to say. He can put a period there. To go on to say they can't be guilty of pagan, ritualistic drunkenness would be unnecessary.

That would be like saying, "Your children must be nice to people and they can't be cannibals."

Well, if they're nice to people they won't need to be told, now make sure you don't kill and eat any of your classmates today.

In other words, that clarifying phrase at the end of *verse 6*, further explains that Paul has conduct in mind, not conversion – and whether they are saved or not does not eliminate the father's responsibility to maintain order in the home.

By the way, this text implies these children are old enough to go to a drunken festival. They are old enough now to resist their father's authority and discredit his reputation.

They can't be – as a pattern, I believe – *accused of dissipation*.

Let's not lower the bar and say it doesn't matter. It does. And it ought to be dealt with.

Further, Paul writes, these children can't be accused of *rebellion*. The word Paul uses for rebellion in this verse is a word used for someone entirely unable to be ruled.^{xvii}

It's a word used of someone who refuses to submit to the law of God. It's not a brief period of rebellion, but a child now old enough to now openly rebel against the standards of morality and civility represented by their father, thus discrediting his reputation.

Again, the context is pointing to behavior – and primarily to the father's authority being exercised in the home. The conduct of the child should be under the dignified control of the father, who by virtue of that control in the home is qualified to lead the church.

I remember serving part time in a church while in Bible College – it was during my senior year. I was leading the choir and working with the youth group. I remember not long after taking the job that I learned one of the young women in the choir was openly involved with a married man in the community. To make matters worse, I found out she was the daughter of one of the leaders in the church. When he was eventually confronted, he not only refused to confront his daughter, he got onto the other leaders for exposing the issue.

It all sort of fell apart when I left that summer . . . but in the words of Paul to Titus, this man would have been unqualified to lead. He refused to exercise his authority in even challenging his daughter's lifestyle of sin; he refused to compel her by virtue of his understanding of scripture to repent; he even refused to offer any rebuke which might have brought her to her senses. And in so doing, this man failed to demonstrate pattern of leadership for those who followed him.

He lowered the bar.

Beloved, it's time to raise the bar all over again. It's time for the church to represent holy living in an unholy world.

May we all, in our marriages and in our homes, resist the natural pull of our flesh and our culture to lower the bar and instead, keep it high and raise it even higher.

Christ is deserving of nothing less – as we sing often – His amazing love for us is so amazing, so divine, it demands our soul, our life . . . our all.^{xviii}

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