

“Entrusted With God’s Work,” Titus 1:5-9, Ordination Service for Niles Bartholomew, Kyle Cole, Drew Narmour, Wayne Shinault, and Jared Smith (Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, November 11, 2018)

⁵This 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— ⁶if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷For 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, ⁸but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

PRAY

This is a big day in the life of Grace Bible Church. We are ordaining five men as elders this morning. That just doesn’t happen all that often.

Many, many churches struggle to find two or three men truly qualified to serve as elders. That’s true of churches I’ve pastored before – as great as those churches were, there were times when it would not have been possible to find five men in the entire church who could be elders. We’re ordaining five *in one day*. That is a huge blessing, and I don’t want anyone to take that for granted.

But what does that mean – ordaining a man as an elder? That’s what we’ll talk about this morning before these men take their ordination vows. Two points: *first, we’ll look at Titus 1 and see what an elder is.* *Second, we’ll then see what an elder does.*

First, what an elder is. The apostle Paul tells his associate Titus to travel throughout the island of Crete and appoint elders in every town. Presumably Paul means every town on the island where there is an assembly of believers, or a church.

But what is distinctive about these men? Paul says only appoint a man who “is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷For 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, ⁸but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.” Titus 1:6-8.

Now what do you notice about these characteristics? What I notice is how unremarkable they are. Paul doesn’t say an elder must have impressive spiritual gifts, or skill sets, or degrees from hard-to-get-into graduate schools. He doesn’t say a man must be able to speak well, or be charismatic or smart, or be good at organizing.

Instead, you could sum it up like this: Paul says elders must be good guys. That’s it. It seems to me a pretty minimal list of requirements. Elders must be faithful to their wives, faithful with

their children, not arrogant or prone to anger or money-loving or drunk but hospitable, self-controlled, and kind.

Put another way, they must be men of character. Character matters as much as anything matters when it comes to church leadership.

Now, why is that? If you own your own business or are a manager and you need to hire someone, and you put a job description out there and say, “We’re hiring,” you don’t start with character qualities do you? You start by listing the tasks a prospective employee will be responsible for.

So when Paul describes the job of an elder, why does he start with character qualities? Because *the church is the household of God*. “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Galatians 6:10. Paul in the New Testament uses this metaphor a bunch, over a dozen times. The church is not a business, the church is a family.

Then Paul says in Titus 1:7a: “For an overseer [elder], as God’s steward, must be above reproach.” Do you know what a steward is? A steward in the ancient world was someone who managed the household of a wealthy client. He made sure all the bills were paid, the servants were fed, the house looked after, and, above all, the children cared for.

When you were in that position, it required an enormous amount of trust on behalf of the lord of the estate. Therefore, when it came to being a steward over a household *character was king*. *Character had to be the most important factor determining one’s fitness for the task*.

Think about it like this: imagine you are married, and you have three small children – ages 5, 3, and 1. But a month goes by and you notice you don’t feel good – you ache and are lethargic. Finally, you go with your spouse to see the doctor. She runs some tests, comes back and says, “You need to sit down. I’m so sorry to tell you this – you have cancer. It is a very rare and aggressive form of cancer, and it’s spread to every part of your body. You don’t have long to live.”

You go home in shock. That night, you’re in bed. You’re about to go to sleep. You look at your spouse – your spouse is bright, attractive, godly (that’s why you married your spouse), still very young. You know you need to have this conversation. So you need to tell your spouse it’s ok to get remarried after you die, to find a new partner to have, to hold, to love, and to help raise these children. In fact, they probably need to get remarried for the sake of the kids.

At that point, do you take your spouse’s hand in yours and you say, “All I ask is that you get married to someone who is a really good speaker”? No! “All I ask is that you marry someone who can motivate people.” “All I ask is that you marry someone good at organizing or handling money.” No! Who is it you want your spouse to marry after you die? Someone who has character who can help impart that character to your precious children. ***You are going away***, and nothing is more important to you than someone with character watching over your household.

The church is God's household, and ***right now God is away***. Yes, he's sent his Holy Spirit to minister to us but we don't see God with our eyes right now – we can only see him by faith through the Spirit. He is away. And while he is away Paul tells us that he wants men of character, men who love and serve well, overseeing his household. That's who an elder is.

And friends, you need to know that's who Niles and Kyle and Wayne and Drew and Jared are (and all the other elders). They are men of character, men who, while not perfect at all, want to love and care for God's household in the present age until we see him face to face in the age to come.

Second, what an elder does. Let's carry on the analogy of the church as a household a little longer. When your children are very young, and you are far more mature and wise than they are, as a parent you find you have to step in all the time into their lives *just to keep them from dying*. You've got to make sure they don't drown in the bathtub or run out into the street and get hit by a car or fall out of a tree.

But as they get older, teen years and beyond, you simply can't be all that involved in their lives. You can't directly intervene as much anymore. You don't want to and it doesn't work. They have to live out their own lives. They have to seek out God's call on them and follow it – you can't do it for them.

Your role as a parent at that point becomes one of much more indirect involvement in your child's life. By the time your kids are late teens or, certainly, young adults, you're more of a peer to them than an authority figure.

Therefore, your job as a parent is to bear witness to who God is by how you live, to offer advice and counsel from time to time, but most of all your role is to pray. I find the older my kids get the more I feel the need to pray for them.

That's what it feels like to be an elder of a church. Despite the name, being an elder does not imply being older than everyone in the church. Instead, an elder is someone a little further along in their faith than the average church member, he is there to provide some guidance and counsel when asked, but most of all his job is to pray. In Acts 6, we read there was a dispute between two groups in the church about whose widows were getting more food. Beginning in verse 2 we read this: "And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer ..." Acts 6:2-4a.

Elders, wise elders, know they aren't the Holy Spirit – they can't come into your life and force you to make the changes you need to make. Good elders know they aren't even sure *what* changes need to happen in your life. But good elders know the one who does know those things, and they know they must pray for you to Him.

But there is one last thing, one big thing, Paul wants an elder to do. Titus 1:9: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”

Now, why do we need to know the Bible? Why is that so important? Are we going to have to pass a Bible exam after we die before we can go to heaven? Of course not. Why then is teaching the Bible so important? Because only through the Bible do we learn about the **Real World**. An elder’s job is to make sure the Bible is taught so the people of God can know which way is up and which way is down, what is true about yourself and this world around us and what is a lie.

On October 22, Eugene Peterson died. He was a true pastor-theologian and through his writings he had a profound impact on me. At one point he wrote, “The single most important thing I did for thirty-five years [as a pastor] was stand before a congregation each Sunday and say, ‘Let us worship God’ ... Every call to worship is a call into the Real World. You’d think that by this time in my life I wouldn’t need to be called anymore. But I do. I encounter such constant and widespread lying about reality each day and meet with such skilled and systematic distortion of the truth that I’m always in danger of losing my grip on reality. The reality, of course, is that God is sovereign and Christ is savior. The reality is that prayer is my mother tongue and the eucharist my basic food. The reality is that baptism, not Myers-Briggs [or the Enneagram], defines who I am.

“Very often when I leave a place of worship, the first impression I have of the so-called ‘outside world’ is how small it is – how puny its politics, paltry its appetites, squint-eyed its interests. I have just spent an hour or so with friends reorienting myself in the realities of the world – the huge sweep of salvation and the minute particularities of holiness – and I blink my eyes in disbelief that so many are willing to live in such reduced and cramped conditions. But after a few hours or days, I find *myself* getting used to it[!] and going along with its assumptions, since most of the politicians and journalists, artists and entertainers, stockbrokers and shoppers seem to assume that it’s the real world. And then some [elder] calls me back to reality with ‘Let us worship God,’ and I get it straight again, see it whole.”

Brothers, that’s what we do. We tell our people about the real world with our teaching of the Word. As C.S. Lewis puts it one place, in Jesus Christ God himself has become a man and he lived the life we should have lived and on the cross he died the death we deserve to die. In so doing he has punched a hole in the pitiless walls that surround our world and he bids us to trust him and follow him through to the other side, the Real World, but our people won’t know that unless we hold firm to the trustworthy word and teach it to them.

Speaking of C.S. Lewis, one of my favorite characters from *The Chronicles of Narnia* is Puddleglum. Puddleglum is a great model for an elder. He’s not cool, in fact, he’s kind of ridiculous, he’s funny looking, he’s not all that intelligent, either – but he’s faithful. Being intelligent is overrated when it comes to being an elder, being cool is pretty much no help at all (and these guys aren’t cool), but faithfulness is priceless.

In the book *The Silver Chair*, Puddleglum and the children and Prince Rillian are in a room with the wicked queen in her underground, evil kingdom, and she drops a powder into the fire in the fireplace. The powder fills the room with a sweet smell, which makes everyone drowsy and makes it hard for them to think. The powder casts a spell designed to keep them in her prison world by convincing them that there is no world above ground, that things like trees and grass and even the sun don't exist, and certainly that Aslan the lion (who is a type of Jesus in the story) does not exist. She wants to convince them that the only thing that is real is her dark, dank, underground kingdom, so they will stay there under her control.

But at the last moment, before they fall totally under the power of the spell, Puddleglum steps on the fire with his big Marsh-wiggle foot and puts it out. Everyone wakes up. He says to the queen, "Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things – trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself ... Then all I can say is ... the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live like a Narnian even if there isn't any Narnia."

Puddleglum refused to let go of Aslan. And brothers that's our calling too – do whatever it takes, stick our foot in a fire if need be, so we aren't distracted by the lies of this world and that we hold firm to Jesus and the Word of God. That's what our people need from us, whether they know it or not, whether they will ever admit it or not.

And sometimes they won't know it or admit it. I'll read one last thing from Eugene Peterson. Men, this will be my final charge to you. In another of his books he imagines what a church would include in a job description for an elder if they were really thinking about what they needed from him. He writes that the church would say, "We are going to ordain you to this ministry, and we want your vow that you will stick to it ... We know your emotions are as fickle as ours, and your mind is as tricky as ours. That is why we are going to *ordain* you and why we are going to exact a *vow* from you. We know there will be days and months, maybe even years, when we won't feel like believing anything and won't want to hear it from you. And we know there will be days and weeks and maybe even years when you won't feel like saying it. It doesn't matter. Do it [anyway]. You are ordained to this ministry, vowed to it.

"There may be times when we come to you as a committee or delegation and demand that you tell us something else than what we are telling you now. Promise right now that you won't give in to what we demand of you. You are not the minister of our changing desires, or our time-conditioned understanding of our needs, or our secularized hopes for something better. With these vows of ordination we are lashing you fast to the mast of Word and sacrament so you will be unable to respond to the siren voices.

"There are many other things to be done in this wrecked world, and we are going to be doing at least some of them, but if we don't know the foundational realities with which we are dealing – God, kingdom, gospel – we are going to end up living futile, fantasy lives. Your task is to keep

telling the basic story, representing the presence of the Spirit, insisting on the priority of God, speaking the biblical words of command and promise and invitation.” Brothers, that’s what elders do. AMEN.