

## Shepherding The Church – Part One

### **Aspire To Be Blameless**

1 Timothy 3: 1-2

September 22, 2024

Pastor Francis Bezzam

*<sup>1</sup> The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach..*

Do you have aspirations? How do you know if your aspiration is noble, honorable and good?

Answer: The object of that desire is the key.

There is *one* overarching quality that all believers should aspire to have. It is the quality of blamelessness or being above reproach. All believers should want to live in a way that is blameless before God and others. And for church leaders this quality of blamelessness is a necessity. Church leaders are required to be above reproach if they are to lead the church of God.

We have been in Paul's letter to Timothy for a few weeks now. Starting today, for the next few Sundays, we will be looking at the subject of Shepherding the Church.

This letter from Paul to Timothy along with 2 Timothy and Titus, is the playbook for how a church, God's house is to function. No other books in the Bible offer a more comprehensive blueprint on how a church ought to conduct its affairs.

When these pastoral letters are heeded and applied, there is much blessing and approval from God. One of our core values at Bethel is *biblical truth*. Which means we take pains to teach, preach, expound, understand and apply Biblical instructions for conducting the business of the church. It would be very unwise to ignore these pastoral letters. They are written for the benefit and profit of churches.

Let's look at verse one from chapter three.

<sup>1</sup> *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*

Paul says “the saying is trustworthy”. This phrase is intended to communicate something of significance. In chapter one verse fifteen, we saw Paul uses the same phrase to tell us why Jesus came into this world. “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*”. 1 Timothy 1:15

Notice the two words in verse one – *aspire* and *desire*.

Here the object of the aspiration or goal is the office of the overseer.

To aspire is to stretch yourself, to extend yourself, to long after or have an ambition.

Hebrews chapter eleven tells us the Old Testament heroes of faith *aspired* (same word) for a better place, for heaven (Hebrews 11:16).

To aspire to church leadership is a good aspiration. When you aspire to spiritual leadership, the assumption is that you would already have been a committed *follower* of Jesus Christ. J. Oswald Sanders author of the book *Spiritual Leadership* says “*Many who aspire to leadership fail because they have never learned to follow. They are boys playing (a game of) war in the street, but all is quiet. When you ask, “Is there a truce?” they respond, “No, we are generals. No one will obey the command to charge*”.

Many times, there are people unqualified, untrained, unvetted and untested and who are put into positions of leadership. And, sadly, a few people who have been in ministry for years have fallen prey to a scandal or two. Of course, nobody desires such a thing but when leaders fail, the name of Christ is tainted, the whole church suffers and there is usually much grief, sorrow and shame. It may take years to repair the damage. In some cases where there is grievous sin, a return to public ministry is unwarranted.

Going back to verse one, the word *desire* that Paul uses in verse one can be used positively or negatively.

In 1 Timothy 6, Paul says, “*But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction*”. 1 Timothy 6:9

If the object of your desire is more getting more stuff and more money, Paul says that will lead you into many senseless and harmful desires. And eventually that leads into ruin.

Godliness is not a means of gain. So whether people use their big platforms to seek money

using ministry as a front or whether someone wants to begin ministry because there is money to be made – it’s all going to end in ruin. And who aspire to be in ministry because they desire acclaim, praise, affirmation or the respect of others aspire wrongly. When you examine the early apostles, they counted it worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of Christ – “*when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.*”<sup>41</sup> *Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name*”. So a good diagnostic question for checking proper motivation before aspiring to spiritual leadership would be - when you suffer loss, would you still be willing to work for Christ?

Paul says those who aspire to the role of *overseeing* desire a noble task. A good work. A beautiful undertaking. A fine task. Paul has used this word “good” in *noble* task a few times before. In chapter one and two Paul says “the law is good”, “praying is good” and “fight the good fight of faith” and so on.

*Who is an overseer?*

Paul tells us that an *overseer* is *God’s steward* (Titus 1:7). Meaning an overseer is the manager or the caretaker of God’s household – the church.

The New Testament uses the term *overseer* (some Bible translations say *bishop* instead of *overseer*) interchangeably with *shepherd* (*pastor*) or *elder* (*presbyter*).

The word *elder* is used much more than the other two words. So I am going to use the word *elder* than *overseer* or *shepherd*.

The apostolic mandate was to appoint overseers or elders for local churches.

In the first century church in Jerusalem, elders served alongside the apostles. However, after all the apostles died, you could say the apostolic ministry has been succeeded by elders. Unlike the prophets or apostles, who received direct revelation from God and wrote Scripture, overseers, elders or pastors submit to what the apostles wrote.

New Testament churches had a plurality of elders and deacons.

- In Acts chapter fourteen, the first church elders were appointed in churches by the apostles – “*they had appointed elders for them in every church*” Acts 14:23.
- The early church in Jerusalem had elders – “*When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders*” Acts 15:4,6.
- Paul writes to the church in Philippi and addresses “*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons*” Philippians 1:1

- Paul calls more than one leader of the church in Ephesus – *“Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him”* Acts 20:17
- In Acts 20:28, Paul tells the elders of Ephesus that the “Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God”. So, elders are appointed by the Holy Spirit and affirmed by the whole church.

### *What do elders do?*

Elders provide spiritual oversight. Spiritual oversight includes the responsibility to determine church policy, provide doctrinal clarity, teach, preach, feed, exhort, refute error, nurture and shepherd the flock of God.

- The ministry of elders is distinct from that of deacons. When the practical needs of the people grew in the first century church, the apostles took notice and appointed deacons for practical needs and they said *“we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word”* Acts 6:4.
- *“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching”* 1 Timothy 5:17
- Elders are to pray publicly – *“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”* James 5:14. There are many online ministries these days. Some good, some questionable. If you are in the habit of watching messages online, do any of those online ministers know you by name and pray for you and your family? Online ministry is never meant to substitute the local church.
- Elders are to shepherd the people of God. *“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight”*. 1 Peter 5:1-2. Shepherd the flock of God. *Shepherd* is the key verb. Overseers, elders or pastors ought to feed the flock with a steady diet from the word of God. Peter knows this very well. He received this command from the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ. After his resurrection, Jesus meets his disciples and tells him three times. Peter “Feed my sheep”. (John 21:17).

And the overarching quality that an overseer must possess is listed in verse two.

<sup>2</sup> *Therefore an overseer must be above reproach,*

A parallel to this text is found in Titus chapter 1 verse 6 – *“appoint elders in every town as I directed you— <sup>6</sup> if anyone is above reproach”*

What does Paul mean by “above reproach”?

To be above reproach is to be blameless. Not sinless but beyond accusation.

The elder, overseer or pastor is to be the kind of man where any grounds for any accusation against him will not stand. It means this man has an untainted reputation. It does not mean the man never sins. No one sinless exists except Jesus Christ. The church is to affirm such a man whose behavior, conduct and demeanor have captured the respect of others for his character. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 5:7 that widows are to be blameless. In 1 Timothy 6:14, Paul tells Timothy to be blameless. Titus 1:6 uses a different word for *blameless* and this word is used in 1 Corinthians 1:8, Colossians 1:22, 1 Timothy 3:10 (for deacons).

If you are hearing and thinking, well this is for elders, I can live any way I want, the Bible reminds why every Christian must aspire to live this way -

- In the Old Testament God commanded the people of Israel this way, “*You shall be blameless before the Lord your God*” (Deuteronomy 18:13).

As Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ, you are *positionally* blameless because of what Jesus has done – his death and resurrection and what you received when you were born again. Your sins are wiped clean the moment you trust in Jesus. You are positionally blameless because of Jesus Christ. And from then on, you ought to progressively live a life that is holy and blameless – “*And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,* <sup>22</sup> *he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him*” Colossians 1:21-22.

There was a time you were under condemnation and blameworthy for your sin. But when you repented of your sin and believed that Jesus made the payment for the penalty of your sin, you were justified. Because you are justified, now be sanctified (live blamelessly). And one day you will be glorified.

- And you know there is a great incentive to living your life blamelessly. Here is the incentive. God has your back. A then thousand people may oppose you but when God is on your side, He is all your will ever need.

- “*For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him*” (2 Chronicles 16:9).

- “*The way of the Lord is a stronghold to the blameless*”. (Proverbs 10:29). You want God’s support? Walk blamelessly before God. Daniel was thrown in the lion’s den and no harm came to him. You know what he says to the king? “*My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him*” Daniel 6:22

- Noah was blameless before God. His life was a blessing to others.

- Job lived a blameless before God. He was tested and tried. His later life was much more blessed than his former life.
- Psalm 92:14 tells us that the righteous bear fruit even in their old age. They are full of sap and vitality.

The world is a needy world and you are to do good. But God doesn't need your good deeds at the expense of your godliness and holiness.

*“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, <sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation”.* (Philippians 2:14-15)

*“The Kingdom of God is not going to be advanced by our churches becoming filled with men, but by men in our churches becoming filled with God.” —Duncan Campbell*

When the household of God has people filled with God, they begin to shine as lights. This is the beautiful task God has assigned you for you. To live blamelessly before God.

## ----- Discipleship Questions-----

MESSAGE SUMMARY: Aspire To Be Blameless. 1 Timothy 3:1-2

HEAD: These questions help you examine the truth of God's Word.

1. What is the one overarching quality that all Christians should aspire to have and leaders of the church (overseers, elders, pastors or deacons) must have? How should we understand this character quality? Ephesians 1:3-4, 1 Timothy 6:13-14, 1 Corinthians 1:8, Titus 1:6

HEART: These questions help you wrestle with what you believe.

2. As a believer, how have you been declared blameless or guiltless in God's sight?  
Colossians 1:21-24

3. What is God convicting you of and to believe in light of this message?

HANDS/HABITS: These questions help you bring the truth into your everyday life and develop behaviors that change your habits.

4. For personal reflection: Are there areas in your life that need conformity with Christ?  
What needs to change?