

Putting Off And Putting On

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Bible Text: Titus 1:7-8

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We're looking, today, at Titus 1. We will handle verses 7 and 8 this morning and then add to it verse 9 next Lord's Day, if the Lord should tarry. Let me read these three verses together this morning as we come to Christ's word. "For an overseer must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not easily angered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for dishonest gain, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, self-controlled, just, holy, temperate, holding firmly the trustworthy word that is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to convince those who oppose it." The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God stands forever.

As Paul moves on in verses- in verse 6, he begins to lay out these standards for overseers, for elders, for bishops in the house of the Lord. And as he moves on, he gives us this: that an elder must put off the flesh and put on Christ in his inner and outer life as he leads the flock of God to be and do the same. That an elder must put off the flesh and put on Christ in his inner and outer life as he leads the flock of God to be and do the same. Couple of reminders, we've touched on these before. Reminder number one: that elders are a gift to the church. We're not the perfect gift, but there's no place where you can exchange us, I'm sorry. You know, you- I- I always say, you play cards with the flock you're dealt and- and this is true of the eldership, as well. But this office is a gift to the church. And reminder number two: elders are examples in being given God's grace. Again, elders are not qualified for office on their own, without the work of Christ in their life. Don't separate the qualifications of elder from the gracious working of Jesus by His Holy Spirit. And those things need said because we want to so quickly operate in the flesh, we so quickly want to operate as if this is what I can be and become on my own. And that is not the case.

Firstly, we see and hear that elders are blameless. "For an overseer must be blameless, as a steward of God." Now, this CAN'T mean "without sin" because, if it did, well, we're hopeless. Who would EVER be able to fulfill the office of elder, teaching or ruling, in Christ's church? NO ONE would be able to, save our savior Christ. But remember, as we touched on this before from the previous verse, that this points out a reality in the inner man and the outer man. In the inner man, that the work of Christ in justification and adoption, that an overseer, an elder, is known by faith. He trusts Christ for his salvation. And we see that in his outer man through repentance, through the work of the Spirit, in sanctified living. It's not that there will be NO sin, but a general reputation of, and desire for, holiness, with faith and repentance marking that life. It is here that Calvin is helpful, as he says that this basically- this text paints a picture for us and, as we examine these strokes, we want to ask what picture comes into focus as Paul applies these strokes to the canvas of the Cretan church, what Titus should be looking for in men who are to be elected and ordained and installed as elders in Christ's church. And

the first broad stroke, or we might say that- that background layer that a painter will put on the canvas, is one of walking in faith and repentance. Of desiring holiness in his life and seeking to please Christ in his living. So, firstly, elders are to be blameless.

And then, what we will be doing here is looking at verses-- the rest of verse 7 and verse 8 together, because what we will see is Paul establishes, first by the negative list, and then by the positive list, a list of put offs and put ons. What should an elder be seeking to rid himself of, and what should he be seeking to take on, in the power of Christ in his life? And then my main point, I finished it this way: as he leads the flock of God to be and do the same. Now, if you were to see a shepherd out leading some sheep around and you looked over and that shepherd, all of a sudden, was down on all fours eating grass, you would say, "behold, a crazy man." Something ain't right. And yet, the difference here is that the undershepherds of God are sheep, as well. What's good for the sheep is good for the undershepherd and what's good for the undershepherd is good for the sheep. And so there are differences as we look at the office being set apart out of the congregation, but yet there are many similarities, as well. Elders aren't people and you all literal sheep. We're all followers of Christ together, just some of us called to a particular role in that, in the life of the church.

So secondly, we see as these play out, in verse 7 we see "not self-willed." In verse 8 we see "but hospitable." And we see here-- number two-- a life of blatant love for others lived outside of themselves. A life of blatant love for others lived outside of themselves. Nothing is worse than someone who is ALMOST hospitable, or SEEMINGLY gracious. You realize that "almost" and "seemingly" apply when it's a little too late. You're in too deep with that person. I've traveled a lot over the years and relied on the hospitality of others and it becomes clear, as I know many of you have traveled and relied on the hospitality of others, and it becomes clear when you really are seen as an imposition. No matter what is said, no matter what is discussed, it becomes obvious when you are a trouble to their day, when they are put out. You think, "Well, why did you volunteer? Or why did you say 'okay' if it wasn't okay?" Some people can take hospitality, drive it around the block, and park it in their own driveway. I mean, they just- it is all about THEM. Paul here is saying that an elder should go out of their way, an elder should be put out, as it were, that he should spend and be spent for others. Not self-willed, not willing for the self, but hospitable, open, and loving toward others. Calvin helps nuance this. He puts the shoe on the other foot, as it were, when he says that this also means that- that, relationally, an elder should be inviting. To, in a sense, lure into friendship those who are not naturally inclined. To be outgoing and relational. That the sheep of God should never say, "you know what, he's really just all about himself. Why should I waste my time?"

This is what Calvin says, "Fellowship and friendship will not be nurtured where people are not prepared to accommodate themselves to anybody else. This shows just how much a church is damaged by quarreling. With this fault Paul contrasts, first, a willingness to learn, and then kindness and modesty toward everyone. For a bishop will never be able to teach unless he has first been prepared to learn. Augustine highly praised one of Cyprian's sayings, "Let him be patient to learn as he is skillful to teach." Besides, bishops often need counsel and warnings. If they refuse advice, if they reject wise counsel, they will rush in blindly and damage the church. The solution to this is that they should not be wise in their own conceits." Why has Christ established a plurality of elders in the church of Christ? Well, if you ask the elders of YOUR church, we will tell you! Because this place, left to any ONE of us, would be in horrible shape. We need that wisdom, we need that council. But that's also a modeling for you in the congregation. Have you thought about that? That hospitality is not only about food and opening your home. It's about opening your heart and your life, it's about being accommodating to others. Perhaps we're more willing to give someone accommodations than we are to actually accommodate them in our life when we have a difference of opinion in this point or that point of our

theology, or life together. The elders are to lead the way in a life of blatant love for others lived outside of themselves.

Number three. We see a life of keeping the big things big and small things small. Not easily angered, a lover of what is good. David Powlison, the executive director CCEF and a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, defines anger this way: "A sense of opposition to something that is both important and wrong." And when we understand anger that way we see that this is biblically true, that anger, in and of itself, is not necessarily sinful. But what becomes sinful is our understanding of what is both important and wrong. See, an elder will not get angry, generally, over little things. He understands what the little things are and he understands what the big things are. He understand the centrality of Christ, the centrality of biblical worship, he understand the centrality of biblical church government, he understands that- that in this room we have from the most senior of saints to the most baby of saints. That's not necessarily marked out by age. We have people who are growing up in the Lord and- and that- that we will do and say dumb things and WE might get out of whack on certain things, but the session should be leading the way in helping people understand the priorities in the kingdom. That the big things are the big things and the small things are the small things. And if your response to that is, "But, Joel, there are no small things!" then we can talk after the service.

Fourthly, an elder lives a life of moderation, showing maturity. There are a couple of sets here that play off each other: not given to drunkenness, not greedy for dishonest gain, but self-controlled and temperate. These are-- a lot of these are single use words in Scripture. They're used here, they're maybe used here and- and First Timothy 3. And they have similar meanings and- and this is where I think Calvin is wise in saying this paints a picture. We can't hyper-dissect these things. We can separate them out to understand them better, but we see how many of these ideas flow together to give us a picture of an elder. In First Timothy 6, Paul says this: [vs 2-10] "Let those who have believing masters not despise them, because they are brothers. Instead, let them serve as slaves, because those who receive their service are faithful and beloved. Teach and command these things. Anyone who teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to godly doctrine is conceited and knows nothing. He has a morbid disposition for controversy and verbal disputes, from which come envy, strife, blasphemies, evil speculations, constant disputes by men of corrupt minds, being destitute of the truth, and supposing"-- and SUPPOSING-- "that financial gain is godliness. Withdraw yourself from such men. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out. If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with these things. But those who desire to be rich shall fall into temptation and a snare and into many foolish and harmful lusts, which drown men in ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evil. While coveting after money, some have strayed from the faith and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

"But godliness with contentment is great gain." As I- as I come to this, probably the most awkward part of the text for me as a pastor to stand before you and exposit, um, dealing with contentment and not doing what you do for dishonest gain. I'm- I'm reminded of the prayer that I was told about out in the Midwest presbytery. I was told this by my elders in Sterling and they said, "we try not to pray this prayer: Lord, give us a poor, humble pastor. You keep him humble and we'll keep him poor." But here in this text that Paul is intending for slaves, we find that this "godliness with contentment is great gain." And as we lift that up and we look at it in the light, we are reminded, as Paul said, whether I'm broke or have a lot, I've learned to be content. That goal of ALL of it is godliness. That is the goal of ALL of our physical means. In fact, there's a flip side to that coin. Poverty is not necessarily godliness, but neither are riches. Paul calls out those that supposing that financial gain IS godliness. When Paul is calling elders to not be given to drunkenness, or to be self-control; to not be greedy for dishonest gain, but to

be temperate, he's- he's not arguing against a right accommodation for those who make their living from the preaching of the gospel. And I was reminded of a old, dusty set of books in the Sterling College library that are the collected works of Reverend Thomas Smith who was an Irishman, pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, before and after the Civil War. And he wrote a pamphlet one time-- I have a copy of it-- called "Claims of the Christian Ministry to an Adequate and Liberal Support: also a plea for the preaching of the gospel to the poor but not by the poor" Of course, as I mentioned him, I also have to tell you that he tended to preach so long that the congregation had a speaking tube installed from the choir loft to the pulpit so that the assigned person in the church could remind the pastor verbally when he was preaching too long. And it was loud enough that the people in the front pews could hear it, but he kept preaching anyway. What do we learn from this? They had people in the front pews! That's what we learn from it. They also had another means in- in the church: a gentleman would hang his hat on the end of the pew to tell the same man that he was preaching too-- he ignored that, too, ignored every sign they gave him. I like the preacher who apologized at the end of his sermon and said, "I'm sorry, I lost track of time." And somebody yelled, "There's a calendar on the wall next to you!"

Second Thessalonians 3 [vs 6-7a] says, "Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw yourselves from every brother who walks in idleness and not according to the tradition that he received from us. For you know how you should follow us." Again, this- this goes back to the apostolic example that is still present in the life and work of the elders, that the- that we are leading the flock of God, that we should seek to be examples. It doesn't mean we're always going to be perfect in everything that we do but it also leads us to graciousness with one another. "For you know how you should follow us. For we were not idle among you, neither did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but we worked tirelessly and toiled night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you."-- but listen to what Paul says in verse 9-- "We did this, not because we did not have that right, but to make ourselves an example for you to follow. For when we were with you, we commanded you that if any will not work, neither shall he eat." So, Paul here is not calling for a vow of poverty on the part of elders and pastors. No, he's calling for a life of temperance, of- of self-control, that understands ALL means, spiritual and physical, that the goal of ALL of it is godliness in HIS life AND in the life of God's people. That ALL of it should be nudging all of us toward maturity in the faith. As we learn, as we grow, as we become more like Jesus.

Fifthly, a life of Word-centeredness, not autonomy, a life of Word-centeredness not autonomy. In verse 7, the elder is called to put off violence. In verse 8, he is call to put on justice, or righteousness, and holiness. Again, this is like "anger" as we discussed earlier. The root word here that is translated "violence" can mean "to reprove" or "to rebuke." That's part of the work of an elder, whether it's himself, one another, or the congregation. That's part of an elder's work, and yet it can be mishandled when the priorities are out of whack. Violence is seeking to force something from the external. This points to almost a sense of abuse that comes from growing beyond disciplining the outer person for the good of the inner person, to seeking the change of the inner person by way of physical pain to the outer person. An elder is not going to administer violence, real or threatened, because that is rooted in a standard of justice and righteousness of SELF. You're not doing what *I* say to do, therefore I render violence toward you. An elder understands that our ministry is centered in the word of God. THAT is our ultimate book of discipline. THAT is our ultimate way of working among the flock. This comparison of violence and justice and holiness shows that even good desires can be handled in wrong ways. And it shows an idolatry of the heart.

I've noticed a disturbing trend in reformed Christianity and that is: autonomy by way of Presbyterianism. I've probably mentioned this before, I tend to mention things that really frustrate me

numerous times. Those who would say, "oh, I'm Presbyterian. I really wish that there were somebody as Presbyterian as I am so that I could be Presbyterian with them." And it's not necessarily marked by the narrowness or conservative nature of their theology, it can run the spectrum. "If only I had more Presbyterians just like me." We had a- we had a particular case where it was blatantly said that, "you're not godly because you don't submit to the Westminster Directory of Church Discipline and Worship and so I don't have to submit to you." I said, "well, last time I checked we're North American covenantors and we have a book of discipline, we have a book of worship, and that's what we've all vowed to." But we need to guard ourselves against this, brothers and sisters. The church in every age is more or less pure. I love- I love the vagueness of that, I gotta be honest. I love that the divines didn't say, "okay, and a more pure church looks exactly like this and a less pure church looks exactly like this." It helped us-- they helped us realize that the Spirit of God is working in His church and there is an ebb and flow in the life of the church as the Gospel is worked out in the world and, brothers and sisters, we CANNOT be autonomous. Even if we try to park it under the umbrella of Presbyterianism. We will submit to imperfect people. Your session is NOT perfect, your elders are NOT perfect, your overseers are NOT perfect, in who we are or in how we do the job that we are called to do among you. Now, if that's really hard for you to believe, just come to a session meeting and you can watch us try to herd cats and keep ducks lined up and all sorts of weird pictures could be put in here. But brothers and sisters, I can stand here with joy and tell you that your elders understand that their ministry among you is rooted in and center on Christ and His word. That it is not about them. That they submit to the law of Christ among us. Do we do it perfectly? Of course not. But we seek to do it with joy.

The question here becomes: who, or what, is the standard? Brothers and sisters, when you meet those who are so PERFECTLY following the way of Westminster that they can't associate with ANYBODY ELSE, Scripture is no longer the standard. Westminster isn't even the standard. THEY are the standard. When every Puritan who ever wrote anything ALWAYS agrees with THEM, they are the standard. Brothers and sisters, guard your hearts against being like that and guard your bodies from hanging out with people like that. They will chew you up and spit you out. And when they say, "oh, I'm so glad I found YOU because no one else lives the faith like we do," be careful. It's not that your head isn't on the chopping block, it's just that neither of you realize it yet. You will at some point disappoint them and they will annihilate you. An elder understands the word of God drives, it is the engine for, our ministry. That is where we understand our justice, our holiness. And so therefore, we don't have to exact violence. Because we let Christ be king, we let His rule stand. We just work with His law, His word. Therefore, we can dwell in justice and holiness, not violence.

Well, as we work our way through these verses, we see that there is much to put off in the life of an elder and there's much to put on. That there's much that must be done in our inner life and in our outer life, in our inner spirituality and in our public spirituality. But remember, brothers and sisters, you aren't free to sit here today and go "*WHOO* I'm glad I'm off the hook!" Because we are called to minister and live this way in leading YOU. YOU are called to follow and to be and do as you are led. So brothers and sisters, pray. Pray for your local pastor and elders. Pray for your local teaching elder and ruling elders. Pray for those who are preparing for the ministry, both in seminary and in congregations. Pray for those who are being raised up in the church of Christ. We do not want to see those who dwell in the "put off" category as if that's the "put on" category. We want to see them put off these things. We want to see that in ourselves. We want to see these things put off and we want to put on Christ and HIS way of leading, HIS way of serving, HIS way of ministering. An elder must put off the flesh and put on Christ in his inner and outer life as he leads the flock of God to be and do the same.

Stand with me as we pray.