

A Model of Godly Leadership

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as Phil mentioned today, we're continuing our study on 1 Timothy as we think through what it means to be a healthy gospel church.

And we are going to study chapter 3, which is where we've reached today. Let me read again the first verse, but we're going to be looking at more broadly at verses 1 to 15. Paul begins the chapter by saying, the saying is trustworthy.

If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. And what I hope we're going to see today is that a healthy gospel church is a model of godly leadership.

Some of you may have seen the TV program, Dogs Behaving Badly. If you've not seen it before, it's a very entertaining program. There's this dog expert called Graham Hall, I think, and he goes to houses where you have dogs that basically behave badly.

And he's an expert in how to train dogs. And the show is really interesting to watch, and you see how he deals with this dog that's disruptive or uncontrollable.

[1 : 1 1] So it's a very watchable program, and it's sometimes very often, it's very funny, Dogs Behaving Badly. I don't know what channel it's on, but you'll find it somewhere. Our Annie loves it, so I've seen it a few times.

It's also a fascinating program to watch. The whole program is about dogs behaving badly. And yet in all the episodes that I've seen, the expert, Graham Hall, doesn't do anything to the dogs.

He spends the whole time changing the owners. In other words, the problem is not with the dog. It's with the master.

It's their leadership that needs to change. Another good example is football. If a team is struggling, I've never seen the whole squad sacked and a new set of players brought in.

The person who gets sacked is the manager. And all of that highlights that leadership is incredibly important, it's incredibly powerful, and it's incredibly easy to do it badly.

[2 : 2 3] And that applies to all areas of life, work, school, sport, dogs, and it definitely applies in the life of the church as well. Now, as we've seen already in our study, many of the problems that Timothy was facing are related to leadership.

So we've been highlighting the fact that his congregation is being disrupted by false teachers. And chapters one and six give us some insight into what's going on.

You can see in chapter one the kind of thing that they were doing. Timothy's urged to stay at Ephesus, to charge certain persons not to teach different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which provoke speculations rather than stewardship from God that's by faith.

Down to verse six, certain persons have wandered into vain discussions, desiring to be teachers of the law without understanding either what they're saying or the things about which they're making confident assertions.

So here you've got people, they want to be teachers, they want to be in a position of leadership and importance, and yet they're obsessed with pointless speculations.

[3 : 32] And they're leading people astray by confidently talking rubbish. Going to the end of the chapter, end of the letter in chapter six, we learn a little bit about their character and motivation.

So again, Paul takes up the subject of the false teachers, those who teach a different doctrine, you can see it there. And he talks about their mindset, they're puffed up with conceit, they understand nothing, and unhealthy craving for controversy, for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

So these people are attracted to controversy, they want to stir up disruption and confrontation, and their primary motivation is for their own gain. And that word gain basically means to make a way of making money.

So there seems to be perhaps, it seems to be the case that a key part of the reason they wanted this position of authority was that they thought that it would make them better off in the process.

And the result is that the church family has been unsettled. There's tension, confrontation, people are being led astray, and as we saw last week in particular, it looks as though certain women were being influenced and stirred up, and they were becoming domineering and disruptive.

[5 : 01] And all of this is incredibly relevant to the kind of stuff that we experience today, whether that's at work, or on committees, at school, even within our families. Paul here is describing leaders who confidently talk rubbish in order to get the outcome that they want.

And they're quite willing to stir up controversy by talking about people behind their back, by fueling the fires of tension and suspicion, by pitting groups against one another.

Now, there's two massive questions for us all to ask here. One is, have you ever seen that sort of thing? So whether it's at work or involvement with other people and whatever it may be, have you seen someone confidently asserting something that isn't true, or something that's only half true, and at the same time, they're kind of whispering about other people, they're stirring up tension?

You see this kind of thing quite often, and people use various tools in order to do it. One of the recent, most favorite tools that people use for this kind of thing is GDPR. So occasionally I've been in committee meetings where we said, well, you know, we should discuss this, and somebody will say, oh, no, no, no, we can't because of GDPR.

And they're actually just talking rubbish. It's not relevant to GDPR, but they just kind of use it as this excuse to be like, I don't want to talk about that. Health and safety is probably another one.

[6 : 29] Health and safety can't do this, can't do that. It happens in loads of different ways. People will assert stuff confidently, and it sounds so plausible, but if you actually look into it, they're either stretching the truth, or maybe even talking complete nonsense.

So often we experience people making these kind of statements, and they're using them to either get what they want, or to avoid the kind of thing that they don't want to talk about it.

So good question to ask yourself is, have you ever seen this sort of thing? Because it's the kind of thing that we do come across regularly. The second question is even more important.

Have you ever done this sort of thing? All of it's highlighting the fact that in every part of life, leadership is something that's easy to get wrong.

And that's true in the church as well. That's why leadership is so important to the health of our church. And that's something that we must never, ever forget, that the health of our leadership will always have a direct effect on the health of our church.

[7 : 46] Good leadership is such an incredible thing, because it can help nurture and build up a congregation so that it will thrive.

But bad leadership can infect a congregation with all sorts of issues that are going to be damaging to our health.

Today I want us to highlight three ways in which we can get this issue wrong. You can see them there. We can have the wrong understanding of leadership, the wrong qualifications for leadership, the wrong expectations of leadership.

And we'll just unpack these a little bit. Before we do so, I want to just say a couple of things. One, I want to say how incredibly thankful I am for the leadership we have in our congregation here.

We are so blessed with our elders and our deacons. And it's a massive privilege for me to work alongside all of you who are elders and deacons in this congregation.

[8 : 47] And we are so thankful for those that we have. Also I want to just say that as I stand here and talk about leadership, I am doing so as a leader who has mucked it up so many times.

And I've made many mistakes, many mistakes in terms of leadership, so many things that I wish I'd done differently or that I could have done better. And so if I sound like I'm rebuking anyone in this sermon, the person I'm rebuking is myself.

And we are looking first and foremost to see what God is teaching us all from His word in regarding leadership. So I'm so aware that I have so much to learn.

There's many ways that I need to change. There's many ways that I want to change. So please, please don't think I'm standing up here as though I'm the expert leader and that I'm everything that this chapter describes.

What this chapter describes is what I long to be. So let's unpack these a wee bit together. First of all, we can easily have the wrong understanding of leadership in our church.

[9 : 54] Number three of 1 Timothy talks about overseers and deacons. You can see the key word there. It's in verse one as well. Later on, deacons are mentioned.

If you've got a King James version in front of you, that word will be the word bishop. Elsewhere, the New Testament talks about elders in regard to describing leaders.

Now, throughout the history of the Christian church, there's been lots of different opinions on how these leadership roles should be understood, particularly in regard to how we should understand elders and overseers.

Now, I find all of this so fascinating. I could spend a good two or three hours digging through churches just now, but I don't want to inflict that upon you. But we will touch on this briefly because it's important that we understand it.

And in order to understand it better, it's helpful for us to learn a couple of Greek words. They always say never, ever introduce Greek words into a sermon, but you guys are all very intelligent, so I know I can make an exception for you.

[10 : 57] The word for elder in the New Testament is the word presbuteros. Those of you who did maths will remember that that's the symbol for pi. That's the Greek word pi. It's very confusing because the R in Greek looks like a pi in English, but anyway, I won't bore you with all that.

Presbuteros have put the English transliteration beside it. Elder presbuteros. The first here is the word episcopos, and you can see the transliteration beside it there.

Now, these are two key words. Straight away, you will all have recognized that these two words form the basis of two of the main systems for understanding church leadership or church government, as we tend to call it, the episcopalian system and the presbyterian system.

Now, there's lots that we could say about both of these, and there's other approaches to church government as well. What I simply want to highlight is that the key difference between episcopalianism and presbyterianism is that episcopalianism sees the overseer and the presbyter as two different things.

So here you have, so in the episcopalian system, you would say that the elder, the presbyter, that's like the minister, the priest, the pastor, whatever you call them, and the overseer, the episcopos, is the bishop, and these are two different things.

[12 : 19] The bishop has authority over the others. That would be the episcopalian system, and that's a very widespread, common system. The presbyterian system argues that these two words refer to the same thing.

They're two different ways of describing the same thing. So in other words, a presbyter, an elder, is an overseer. It's two words describing the same role.

One of the main reasons we presbyterians interpreted that way is because in Acts chapter 20, you can read about Paul when he meets the Ephesian elders, and at one point he describes them as elders, and then later on he describes them as overseers, as bishops.

So he uses the two words interchangeably. So that's one of the key arguments that we would use to say, well, they're actually referring to the same thing. Now, as I say, this is a fascinating subject, and it's fascinating to look at the way these different approaches have developed over history.

But what I want us to focus on, because if I go into this too much, we'll run out of time, what I want us to focus on is that we need to make sure that we understand our own. So rather than picking holes in different systems of church government, we need to make sure that we understand our own system, and we are a presbyterian church.

[13 : 37] That means that leadership is centered on the presbyterge, or the elders, as we tend to call them. Now, the word presbyter basically means old man.

And so in regard to leadership, it's emphasizing seniority and maturity. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that someone has to be elderly. You've got to remember that Paul would have written his first letter, probably when he was in his early 40s.

And when he's writing this letter to Timothy, he would have been in his late 50s. And it was not long after the 60th birthday that he would have been killed as far as we know.

So our understanding of elderly and the biblical understanding of being an old man is probably not quite the same. Often, I think that it would be clearer if we, instead of calling ourselves a presbyterian church, if we called ourselves an elder-Irian church, it would make more sense for us.

But that's a terrible word, isn't it? Elder-Irian just doesn't work at all. So presbyterian is the one that we go with. But the key point is that the focus in terms of leadership is on elders primarily, but also on deacons.

[14 : 48] Leadership is invested in elders and deacons. However, even if you know that, it's very easy for us to have a misunderstanding in regard to how it works.

So here is a pyramid at the bottom. You've got members. Above them you have deacons. Above them you have elders. And above them you have the minister, correct?

No. No. No. No. No. No, this is not how presbyterianism works.

Now this is really important to say because people tend to think that is how it works. We tend to think in terms of promotion. You get promoted from being an elder to being a deacon. And then you get promoted from being a deacon to being an elder.

And if you're really, really elite, then you're a minister. And that's not how it works. And it's absolutely not what Paul describes in this chapter or in the rest of the New Testament.

[15 : 51] So I want a big cross. If you think in those terms, that has never been that, except when it's misunderstood. So that is not how presbyterianism works.

In presbyterianism you have elders who exercise spiritual authority and you have deacons who care for the material needs of the church.

And in particular, they are to care for the poor. They are separate offices. They're different. They work side by side and they have different areas of responsibility.

It's not one over the other. It's just two different departments. Among the elders, however, there's a distinction.

You can see, I don't know if you can see it very clearly, but we have a distinction between ruling elders and teaching elders. And that arises from a comment that comes later in 1 Timothy, where Paul talks about elders who rule well and then especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

[16 : 58] So a ruling elder is what we would tend to call an elder and a teaching elder is what we tend to call a minister. Both are elders.

They have different roles, but in terms of leadership, all are equal. And this is why, and I don't think everybody would agree with me, but so this is just my opinion, but I would argue it strongly that in a presbyterian church, you should never have somebody calling themselves the senior minister or the senior elder or anything that implies that one person has got more clout than another.

Parity of elders, equality of elders is a fundamental principle in our church. Now this all might sound a bit boring and please forgive me if it is boring.

You can start listening again in a moment when we move on. But I do think that this is really important for us to make sure that we understand how our church works. It also emphasizes that when decisions are taken in our church, they are taken together.

They're taken by a group of elders together. They're taken by a group of deacons together. So last week we were discussing the role of women. When we introduced open prayer in our prayer meetings last summer, when we allowed women to pray as part of that open prayer, we did that because together as elders, we believe that that's scriptural and beneficial.

[18 : 30] And as deacons, we are pressing on together with a renovation of our building because together we've agreed that this is going to help our mission as a church.

We take these decisions together. It also means that if I stood up here one week and I said, okay, as senior minister, I've decided that we're going to do this, that and the next thing, what would I be doing?

I would be making a confident assertion when in actual fact, I would be talking rubbish. Just like the teachers here in 1 Timothy.

Leadership in a Presbyterian church is collective. It's invested in elders for spiritual matters, in deacons for material needs, especially for the poor. It's all very easy for us to get our understanding of leadership wrong.

But we can also misunderstand the qualifications for leadership. I'm sure that everybody would agree that even though we live in an increasingly post-Christian society, there's still several parts, many parts of the Bible's teaching that pretty much everybody agrees with.

[19 : 47] So things like helping the poor, showing people respect, the fact that men and women are equal, the fact that we should love our neighbor, the fact that we should welcome refugees.

All of these are key biblical principles and they're all things that everybody in the UK today would agree with. And so there's a lot of areas where there's still correspondence.

But one area, there's one area where the Bible says pretty much the opposite of what the culture around us is saying.

And that one area is in regard to the qualifications for leadership. In terms of our culture, whether it's to get a job or to be successful in any activity really in fame or power or whatever it may be, to be a good leader in our culture, you need to be strong, tough, driven, assertive, confident, determined, able to hit targets, able to get the most out of the people under you, thick-skinned, hungry for success, ready to conquer everything before you and achieve your goals.

And you can look at TV programs like The Apprentice or Dragon's Den and you see the example of what I mean. The Bible has no interest in that at all.

[21 : 20] Biblical qualifications for leadership are totally different. Many of them are listed in this chapter, verses 1 to 7, are for elders, so forgive the typo at the top, 8 to 13 are for deacons.

Now, I would love for us to have time to go through all of these one by one. I think each of these qualifications is worthy of a sermon on its own, so we're not going to be able to go in through them in detail.

I want to just highlight a couple of points. First, it's absolutely fascinating to see how these qualifications stand in contrast to what we've learned about the false teachers that were causing so much problems in Timothy's church.

We've seen that they loved controversy. They were disrupting church and family relations. They're full of ridiculous speculations. They're looking for gain.

And in contrast, Paul is saying that a leader must not be quarrelsome. They must look after their household well.

[22 : 27] They must think wisely, be sober-minded. They must be able to teach accurately. They mustn't be lovers of money. And you think, oh, it makes so much sense. The fact that Paul is highlighting all of these things.

The false teachers in Ephesus would have looked great in the eyes of the world around them. Some of them might even have been among the most influential people in the city. Paul is saying that is not the kind of leadership that impresses God.

So it's really interesting to see the contrast between what Paul highlights and what the false teachers were doing. Secondly, and I want to spend just a couple of extra minutes on this one.

One of the crucial points being highlighted in these verses is that they emphasize that the qualifications for godly leadership encompass every aspect of somebody's life.

So we see that in various ways. Some of the qualifications refer to how an individual deals with themselves. So talks about being sober-minded, self-controlled, not a drunkard, not a lover of money.

[23 : 39] And so the way that someone thinks, the way they react, the way that they are careful about their behavior, the way that they look after themselves, their motivation in life, all of these are crucial.

So this is emphasis on how somebody, how they deal with themselves as an individual. So also an emphasis on how they deal with friends and family.

They need to be hospitable, able to teach. They mustn't, they've got to be careful about how they react to situations. They've got to be gentle, able to lead their family, not quarrelsome, not violent.

That word violent is a really interesting word because it could also be translated bully. And I think that's important because it shows that it's not just physical violence that's in view.

There's lots of ways in which someone can be a bully and yet never lift a finger on someone. The emphasis here is that a godly leader is somebody who treats other people really well.

[24 : 54] And that makes perfect sense when you think of an overseer. An overseer is not an inspector. An overseer is a looker afterer.

But the third thing we also see, which I think is maybe the most fascinating of all, is that there's an emphasis on how somebody deals with people who aren't part of the church.

They're to be well thought of by outsiders. Now, literally, the Greek says it is necessary to have a good testimony from those outside.

Necessary to have a good testimony from those outside. In other words, for someone to be a leader in the church, we need to be able to go to the people who don't come to church and say, what do you think of them?

Now, in emphasis, because of this, as I think you know, I'm on the board of ministry and we've spent lots of time over the past year updating the application form for ministry for people who want to apply for ministry.

[25 : 59] And one of the things that we've done is we've introduced an insistence that one of the references that comes for somebody applying for ministry has to come from somebody who doesn't go to church.

So it has to be from somebody that they work with or somebody who's a friend or someone that they know who doesn't go to church so that we can make sure that they're well thought of by outsiders.

So think of somebody who never comes to church, someone you know, someone in our community. God is saying to us here that their opinion matters.

Their opinion matters when it comes to the leadership of God's church. An elder must be well thought of by outsiders. That means by non-church-goers, by atheists, by backsliders, by people who want nothing to do with the church.

And you think, why? But I think it's because these people are the reason God has a church in this village.

[27 : 02] They are a key part of the Great Commission. They're the ones that God wants us to reach out to. They're the ones that we need to welcome into our church family.

They are the ones who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. This is so important because this whole area is a place where the devil sets a trap.

You can see the language of a snare being used. The devil wants to trap the church of Jesus Christ by making the leaders behave badly towards outsiders.

Now, I'm just talking in general terms. I'm not in any way referring to anything specific here. I'm talking in general terms throughout the whole history of the church. This is a trap that the devil has used again and again to keep outsiders out.

And it all makes perfect sense. If someone like me, a minister behaves badly towards somebody outside, my whole life is kind of based around the fact that I'm a Christian, my job, my house, where I live, what I do, it's all based around that.

[28 : 07] If I go to somebody who doesn't go to church and I behave badly towards them, what are they going to say? They're going to say, why would I want to be a Christian? If that's what they're like?

And if we ever think to ourselves, ah, we don't care what the world thinks. We're just in the church. You know, we'll focus on this. We don't care what people think.

If we think like that, we're falling into the devil's trap. All of this highlights the importance of the whole person and the whole of their life in regard to leadership in the church.

This again is where we see such a contrast between what God is saying here and what the world around us says. Because more and more today, it's the case in the world around us that you can have somebody who's in a very prominent position of leadership.

But their private life can be a complete mess. And yet it's all kept very separate. So you can have a politician who is successful and inspiring.

[29 : 18] And yet they've left a string of women pregnant over the years. And they're not caring for their families at all. You can have a counselor or a doctor or a teacher or a head teacher who's brilliant at their job, but is a horrible person to live with.

You can have someone who Monday to Friday goes to work diligently. They're efficient and responsible. And yet when they're off work at the weekend, they're just out of it.

And in a mess. And that kind of separation between different spheres of our lives, work life here, kind of social life here, private life here, that separation is becoming more and more common in the world around us.

It's becoming more and more acceptable in our society. It's totally unacceptable to God.

And that makes perfect sense because God can see it all. We can't be one thing at work, another thing at home and another thing in the community and expect God not to notice.

[30 : 27] And that highlights the fact that in terms of leadership, there's one type of person that's excluded from leadership by these verses.

And that's the kind of person who would come to church on a Sunday and put on a show of godliness and yet for the rest of the week, they're harsh, cruel, difficult and horrible to live with.

That kind of, well, basically that kind of hypocrisy is not what God is looking for in terms of leadership.

One last point to note in terms of this heading is to say that it's really easy to look at these biblical qualifications for leadership and to think, well, that all sounds a wee bit kind of soft.

And it can seem kind of, all this can seem a bit weak in comparison to kind of the leadership qualities that the world around us admires.

[31 : 40] To be gentle, respectable, self-controlled, that just all sounds, that can easily sound timid or weak or even pathetic compared to being dynamic, assertive, ready to put yourself out there.

But is that true? When someone pushes your buttons, what takes more strength, snapping back at them or holding your tongue?

When you've had a really long day at work, what takes more effort, kind of pretty much ignoring your wife and children or playing with them and spending time with them?

When someone disagrees with you, what takes more skill, a sharp argument or a gentle reasoned discussion?

When something disappoints you in life, what takes more intelligence, stewing over it or having the clarity of thought to leave it in God's hands?

[33 : 02] None of what Paul describes here is soft, weak or timid. The kind of leadership that we see in the world around us, that's the easy option.

Total leadership requires huge strength, courage and discipline and that's why it can only be done in total dependence on God.

The last mistake we can make is that we can have the wrong expectations of leadership in the church. When it comes to leadership, so often our expectations are almost entirely focused on results.

So a politician has got to get elected, don't they? A football manager has got to win if they're at the top of the league, they've got to avoid relegation if they're at the bottom.

At work, I'm sure you all have to hit targets, you have to achieve results, you have to make a profit, you've got to get the results that your superiors are looking for and if you're at school or somebody who's maybe studying, you've got to get the grades, don't you?

[34 : 23] You've got to get the results that you're looking for. Expectations in regard to leadership is so often results driven, it's so easy to think the same way in regard to the church.

We look at the church around us and we think, oh, that one's big, it must be good. We look at ministers and we think, loads of people are going to listen to him, he must be one of the better ones.

Attendance is what matters, whether it's Sunday or Thursday at our midweek meeting and the goal is new people, new members, more numbers and that's not unimportant.

We absolutely want our church to grow numerically. But there's a really, really important point for us to notice here that our expectations for leadership must not be judged by numerical growth.

Scan through 1st Timothy chapter 3 and look for where Paul talks about numbers. It's not there.

[35 : 34] It's not even on his horizon. And it's probably the case that the false teachers had plenty numbers following them.

The priority in terms of leadership is not numbers. The priority is not results. The priority is not even our decisions or our knowledge or our gifts.

So in terms of leadership, what is the priority? The priority is our behavior.

And that's proved by verse 15. Paul says, I'm writing these things to you so that if I delay in coming, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.

All of these qualifications for elders and deacons, they're focused on shaping the way that we behave. And again, that makes perfect sense because in terms of leadership, the most powerful way of leading others is not by what we tell them to do.

[36 : 49] It's by the example that we set. That's why leaders behavior is to be above reproach so that people can look at the elders and deacons in our church and say, I've never seen him lose the rag.

I've never heard him gossip. I've never known them to be rude. They've always been clearheaded. They're always loving, wise, humble and gentle.

Now I failed in that. I have failed in that. But that's what God wants us to aim for. It's all about shaping our behavior.

And you know that that's true. You think of the people that you admire most in life. You think of the people who've been most influential. The people, in other words, who've been your best leaders. Have they led you well because of the stuff they've told you or because of the way they've lived their lives?

Because of the example of behavior that they have set. And this is where we see a final and crucial lesson about biblical leadership.

[37 : 52] When it comes to leadership, it's so easy to think that leadership is about getting others to behave in a way that helps you.

To think it's about getting others to behave in a way that helps you. So you think of the boss who's got a team and it's like, well, I want to get them to do everything that I want them to do so that we can achieve our target so I can get the results that I want.

That can happen in loads of different ways. It's about getting others to behave in a way that's going to help you accomplish what you want to do. It's so easy to think that leadership looks like that and you can find dozens of examples of leadership that does look exactly like that.

That it's about getting others to behave in a way that helps you. That is not biblical leadership. Biblical leadership is not about getting others to behave in a way that helps you.

Biblical leadership is about you behaving in a way that helps them. And the greatest example of that is Jesus Christ.

[39 : 06] The greatest example of godly leadership is Jesus Christ. The leader who washed his disciples' feet, who welcomed the outcast, who taught people who were confused, who healed those who were suffering, who comforted those who were broken-hearted, who sought out those who were lost or wandering, and who laid down his life for you.

He is the ultimate model of godly leadership, the ultimate example of somebody who behaved in a way that benefited so many others.

And the more we are like him, the healthier our church will be. My final question is this.

If Jesus isn't your model of leadership, who is?

Amen, let's pray.

[40 : 38] Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have set such a perfect example for us in leadership. We thank you so much for the leaders that you've provided for us here in our congregation.

We pray for our elders and deacons, and we thank you for them so much. We pray that you would raise up others to join them and to continue that work.

And we pray that for all of us, whether it's in the church or whether it's in our work or our homes, in the community, or whatever part of our lives, it may be we pray that our leadership would not be according to the world standards, but our leadership would be the kind of leadership that you are looking for.