

THE household OF God

Carey Sunday 2024: The Household of God Michael Rhodes – Message Transcript

We're making our way through the pastoral epistles and this section we're in today is going to end where we feel right now, with this exhilarating God talk, as beautiful theology as anything in Paul, I think.

But that's not where it begins.

The first line that Paul gives us in this section is going to sound so ridiculous and outrageous and offensive, that I reckon that nobody in here is going to believe it. Here it is.

This saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task.

1 Timothy 3:1

Now I bet nobody in here is, you really think about that, is comfortable with that. Okay, now you, I don't have any problem with bishops myself. I've worked with Anglicans as well as the Baptists, but you might be a little bit comforted to know that the line bishop there probably should be supervisor. There's nothing quite as complex as a bishopry in Ephesus. But you may be less comforted to know that it still, even if it's supervisor, refers to a church role, even a church office.

And Paul has the audacity to say that the person who aspires to a church office desires, and here it gets even worse, that's almost too weak, that's the same Greek word used for lust and coveting. Desires or covets a noble task. A good thing. A beautiful work. I bet nobody here is comfortable with that. We like our leaders reluctant. Thank you very much.

If someone came to you and said, I am zealous, I am coveting a church office, that noble task, you'd probably counsel them far away from here, right? But Paul seems to think we need supervisors and he's going to tell us that he thinks we need deacons. And while we don't know what these leadership roles do as much as we would like, it does seem like they're involved with teaching, like they're involved with overseeing the structure, and like they're involved with serving, maybe particularly in regard to the church's care for the poor.

And Paul's outlandish words about how it's great if people covet such roles, run straight through to the beautiful poetry we're going to get to at the end. And I think the challenge here is for us to try to hear what the spirit is saying to us across the whole.

So let's dive into that.

Right after this outrageous line about how the person who's zealous for being a supervisor desires a noble task, Paul immediately turns, not primarily to focus on what the supervisors do, but on what sort of supervisors the church needs. This is the Common English Bible translation.

The heading here is that the church's supervisor and then the church's deacon must be without fault, or blameless, or irreproachable. That's the heading for all that follows.

So the church's supervisor must be without fault. They should be faithful to their spouse, sober, modest, and honest. They should show hospitality and be skilled at teaching. They shouldn't be addicted to alcohol or be a bully. Instead, they should be gentle, peaceable and not greedy. They should manage their own household well. They should see that their children are obedient with complete respect. Because if they don't know how to manage their own households, how can they take care of God's church? (And at this point, the preacher left the room.) They shouldn't be new believers so that they won't become proud and fall under the devil's spell. They should also have a good reputation with those outside the church so that they won't be embarrassed and fall into the devil's trap.

In the same way, servants in the church, (or deacons) should be dignified, not two-faced, not heavy drinkers, not greedy for money. They should hold on to the faith that's been revealed with a clear conscience. They should also be tested and only then serve if they are without fault. In the same way, women who are servants in the church should be dignified and not gossip. They should be sober and faithful in everything they do. Servants must be faithful to their spouse and manage their children and their own households well. Those who have served well gain a good standing and considerable confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 3:2-13

Here Paul is outlining the virtues supervisors and servants should aspire to, and the vices they must avoid. It's a virtue and a vice list. And I'm betting that if you're honest, some of us find that list pretty ho-hum. Pretty boring.

Now, we can't talk about all of it, but let's talk about a little bit of it. I mean, how about faithful to your spouse? Modest, honest, sober, not addicted to alcohol. Bo-ring. You might even think that sounds like bougie, which is how we say bourgeois where I'm from. Like it's almost offensive.

You know, you can almost hear your kiwi neighbours going, oh, you know Christians, they're always hung up on sex, drugs and rock and roll. Paul could probably hear some of Timothy's neighbours saying that same thing. Heavy drinking was part and parcel of a good old fashioned Greco Roman gathering. And at least if you're a powerful male in Ephesus, they knew all about polygamy, polyamory, sexual exploration, all sorts. That was all well and good.

If you asked Paul, why are you so hung up on sex, drugs and rock and roll, okay, not rock and roll. He might've said, well, I stand in a long line of Israel's story, which sees gifts like

sex and alcohol as given for certain contexts. I already told you about various perversions of this, of the heterosexual and homosexual variety in chapter one. And I'm going to talk about that again before I finish up.

He might've said, sobriety is something I'm going to feel like I have to talk to several times. He also might've said, look around. Have you not seen the damage that infidelity, sexual idolatry, anger, drunkenness, addiction, causes in your neighbourhood? And the houses where you live? Who wouldn't want leaders who help us avoid that?

Or what about this business managing their household well. Anybody get a bit itchy there? Come on man, it's just this is what we're talking about, you know? But I think again, we need to understand the context here a bit. The people, Christa, Jonny, George, who've been opening the word for us, Jonathan, have done such a phenomenal job of reminding us again and again, this is a missionary letter. And good missionaries create organisations, they gather people. But if they're good at what they do, they don't come up with structures out of the air. No. They draw on the structures that are available. They contextualise.

And so, when the early church gathers, they don't come up with a structure that nobody's ever heard of, up on the whiteboard. They draw on the culturally available structures. Those structures were households, extended households, which were the foundation of the economic, social, and political world in Greco Roman life. They drew on associations or clubs that were all over the ancient world, and they seem to have drawn on the synagogue.

Now, each of these structures had some problems and Paul will correct some of the problems that relying on these structures bring in. But here he seems to be saying, if you're going to have a structure that draws on the household, you got to know people who know how to get stuff done in that structure. And that actually makes sense.

Haven't you been a part of a church or an organisation that had wonderful, fabulous values on the wall, but no idea how to bring them to life? I mean, who cares if you believe that every voice matters if nobody in the church can have a community meeting where every voice gets heard. Who cares if you care about the poor, if nobody can administer the community's resources well enough that they actually get there?

Paul seems to think that those administrative gifts that we often neglect, or denigrate, or run right past, or see as ho-hum, that those are important, in fact, essential. So maybe not so ho-hum after all. Some of these virtues are so confronting, yet we probably drove really quickly past them. Like greedy, free from the love of money, mentioned twice.

Now, I'm sure you agree with me that greed is a really big deal and often contributes to injustice. But you probably think that when Paul talks about greed that leads to injustice, he's talking about somebody else, not folks like us. The people up on the hill with the extra houses and whatnot. Those one percenters.

But listen to how Paul unpacks this concern about greed later in the letter. I get so mad at Paul at this point, but if we have food and clothing, we'll be content. Really? I'm not! I've

never been down to just food and clothing myself and I remain pretty discontent most days of the week.

But Paul seems to think that if we can't be content with food and clothing, we might be in danger of wanting to be rich, and falling into a temptation, and be trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. That doesn't sound like a "those people on the hill problem", that sounds like a you and me right here, problem. That sounds like a virtue that might actually be pretty hard to pull off.

What about hospitality? Literally, love of the outsider. It's a beautiful word play. Not lovers of money, lovers of outsiders. And here Paul dips into a deep biblical tradition, that at the heart of the people of God, is sacrificial welcome and enfolding of vulnerable outsiders. Not merely, you know, voting that someone else be nice to. But actually enfolding the most vulnerable into the community. And Paul says, you can't aspire really to be a leader in God's church if you're not oozing with love of the outsider.

I had a conversation recently with a pastor here in New Zealand who told me he'd gone through the paperwork to get his church set up with the New Zealand government. So, churches can apparently do this, they can partner with the New Zealand government to bring a refugee family that otherwise wouldn't be brought. He did the paperwork, but when he came to the church, there weren't enough people interested to actually bring the people in.

Does radical, sacrificial hospitality characterise our churches? Is it one of the questions we ask when people are zealous for the beautiful work of leading in God's church? Maybe not.

How about peacefulness? Gentleness, not being a bully? Sounds easy. Look around, how many of those who occupy offices of various sorts bring lots of gifts but fail the peaceable, gentle, bully test.

So maybe you can begin to get why these characteristics would be attractive in human beings and leaders, but really why does Paul think we need these people? That's what he tells us next.

I hope to come to you quickly, but I'm writing these things to you so that if I'm delayed, you'll know how you should behave in God's household. It is the church of the living God and the backbone and support of the truth.

1 Timothy 3:14-15

That's why, godliness, godly character, the kind that Paul is talking about, is so essential. Because that little ragtag group of nobodies, gathering in some house in Ephesus, or some church hall in your community this Sunday, is the house of the living God. It is the place where the living God dwells. Don't rush too quickly past that language of the living God.

This is the kind of language that in Deuteronomy you use to talk about the God who shows up on Sinai, the holy maunga, with flame and fire and earthquakes. This is the living God,

the creator, the king, the Lord of all the earth. And his home is among these guys, and us who gather. And Paul is reminding them that if we want to dwell near or even in the household of God, you know, you got to live by the householder's rules.

But it's more than that, because the household of God is the church of the living God, and the backbone and support of the truth. The backbone and support of the truth.

And here, what I think Paul's telling us is, we need godliness and therefore we need godly leaders, and the reason why we need both is because we live in God's house, and this is the place where truth can be found. The truth about Jesus, the Saviour, can be found.

In other words, Paul is reminding us that the reason for godliness is mission. That is the point that we've heard again and again in this letter. Paul's deep desire is that when someone in Ephesus has a crisis and goes, where can the truth be found? Where can God be found? That they can look over the fence and see in these little congregations of nobody's. There. There. That's where God lives. That's where truth can be found.

I just wrote down, did you catch what Emma read, a second ago from first Timothy two? I'm off script, it's important. Listen to what, George preached on this a few weeks ago, listen to what it says. It says,

we offer these prayers for everybody so that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God, our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 2:2-3

God wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. But a church that lives out this godliness has the truth in its midst. It becomes a community in which God can be encountered. It makes the truth about God encounterable in its neighbourhood. That's why godliness matters. Nice work, as the old jazz song goes, if you can get it, where does such people come from?

Paul knows this is an issue. So, he tells us, he says, the godliness that he's been talking about comes from a mystery. The mystery from which true godliness springs is great. Paul, been talking about godliness that we need to participate in God's mission, and he says this kind of character, this kind of life, this kind of orientation to God springs from a mystery. And then, Paul says that this mystery from which true godliness springs has a name, and that name is Jesus. He, the mystery,

was revealed as a human, declared righteous by the spirit, seen by angels, preached throughout the nations, believed in around the world and taken up in glory.

1 Timothy 3:16

This is the theological poetry we've been waiting for. This is Paul singing the gospel story. This is the mystery from which the church's life springs up. God in the flesh with us, in Jesus, as a human. The language of human is flesh. So, I don't think it's stretching to see

here a reference to God, in his humble vulnerability, expressed climactically in his dying for us on the cross.

So, the mystery is God with us, in the flesh, dying but not just dying, rising, declared righteous by the spirit. That's how Paul refers to the resurrection. Why declared righteous? Why vindicated by the spirit of the resurrection?

Well, because if Jesus had stayed dead, it would've been Caesar who was vindicated. The crucifixion demonstrated that Rome really did run the universe. It would've been the Jewish leaders who said, not that kind of messiah for us, they would have been vindicated. But when God raises Jesus from the dead with all power in his hands, by the work of the Spirit, Jesus is vindicated, revealed to be the world's rightful Lord, and Israel's messiah. And that is political, public kind of news.

So, it's been preached throughout the nations, seen by angels, whatever that means, believed in around the world. But the story doesn't end there, taken up in glory. Ask Paul, will you? Where is the risen Lord Jesus now? He will tell you, the risen Lord Jesus is ascended to the right hand of the Father, and rules in glory, right now at his right hand.

That's where Jesus is. Where does godliness spring from? From lives that have been shattered and remade by an encounter with the living God. Which living God? This God, in the flesh, crucified, raised, proclaimed to the nations, ascended and ruling in glory. That's where we find our life. It flows out from there. That's the God with whom we must deal.

And the source of the life that the church needs desperately, if we're going to live as a household of the living God, sharing in the mission of God to save the world. And apparently, leaders who you know, boring old leaders, who supervise and teach and make sure that the poor are cared for, are necessary for that task. Apparently that mundane set of characteristics is required by some people who participate in the mission by serving congregations in these ways.

Now, I hope the theology makes you sing, and I hope I've made clear that the office business isn't as bad as you might think it is. But if so, maybe some of you are starting to sweat. After all this is a theological training college.

I don't know when the last time some of you woke up to the realisation that you had embarrassed the gospel by your life. But it's happened to me quite a few times. When I was living as a missionary in Kenya, I was regularly pulled over by police officers who wanted bribes and they would often threaten you with fake traffic charges. So, I got used to that. So, if somebody pulled me over, I assumed it was fake. One time I got pulled over and the police officer said, oh, I'm going to write you a ticket because your tires are worn down. That sounded fake. So, I was like, I'm not, whatever man, you know, I don't pay bribes. And he wrote me a ticket, and I realised I was actually going to have to pay the ticket. And worse than that, I was going to have to go to Kenyan court where they were probably going to ask me for, and I lost my marbles.

I don't remember what I said to that police officer, but it was at this volume and all the words had four letters in them. And I am not joking. And I got home, and I thought, oh

goodness, what have I done? Not for the gospel, but for me. I thought, oh goodness, what have I done? I don't want to end up in a Kenyan court trying to figure out how to pay this ticket. So, I was like, oh man. So, I was like, I'm going to go and plead mercy from the police guy. But then I thought this officer's going to tell him how I behaved. I thought, oh no. So, I wrote out this long letter of apology and I showed up on Monday morning at the police station. I said, officer, I'm really sorry, I thought this was fake. I behaved terribly. I would love to have the opportunity to pay this fine and also to apologise to this police officer.

He said, "Oh, that's great, he's not in, I'll give him the letter." He said, "But sir, I do have to ask, is it possible that when our officer pulled you over, you were driving home from church on Sunday?" And I hung my head and I said, "It's worse than that officer, I was the preacher."

Now that story's funny, but a lot of the times that I've brought shame to the gospel, have not been nearly so amusing. A lot of the times that I've woken up aware of my shortcomings have not felt like the kind of stuff you want to share for a laugh at chapel. I don't know about you. So, what do we do when we start to sweat?

Well, first of all, we probably need to acknowledge that a little bit of sweat is a good thing, right? A little bit of sweat is a good thing. If you aspire to this congregational role, apparently there are some standards. And apparently part of the function of this list is for you to examine yourselves, and for others to examine and test you, and to help some of you out the door of this particular role. Apparently there really are some sort of minimum moral viabilities for those of us who aspire to be supervisors and deacons in God's house.

And I know some of you right now are thinking, that's the least gospely thing I've ever heard, you know? You're so uncomfortable right now, and it sounds moralistic. But all I can say is, first, Paul said it, and then secondly, look around. Look around!

Look at what it has cost the witness of God's people to have tolerated. Bullyingness, is that a word? Bullying behaviour. Greed, sexual insanity, among our leaders. And don't just look at the damage to our witness. Look at the damage done to the flock. Look at the broken, abused folks who have suffered, often in silence, because we have been unwilling to say there are some standards that God has given us that must be upheld.

Also, lest some of you are not sweating, let me point out that the vast majority of the things that Paul is saying about leaders are things he says elsewhere in this very letter to everyday Christians.

I. Howard Marshall says, there's no higher standard here for church leaders, but it is expected that they will actually show the qualities which are desirable for all. Oh, that's painful. And that means that this text reminds us that all, all are called to the journey of godliness, all! But there does seem to be sort of a standard here that's used in this testing kind of way. But I don't want to end there.

Let me remind you, the godliness that we should be looking for, and the godliness that we as Christians should be looking for in our leaders, Paul has told us, is not the result of our

own unaided efforts. It is the gift, the grace of God. Godliness, the kind we need, is not merely the white-knuckle efforts, or the outward performance. No. It is the transformation that springs up from that shattering encounter with this living God.

This living God. Incarnate, crucified, risen, proclaimed, ruling right now. The godliness that God is calling each one of you to, is a gift. And the fact that it's a gift, the fact that the godliness to which God calls us, is a gift that overflows from this encounter with Jesus, does not mean that it is the end of our striving. The end of our efforts to live lives of sobriety and generosity and kindness and hospitality. No.

The fact that our, the character that we need, is a gift from Jesus, is the beginning of our efforts. It is energising for our efforts. It is empowering of our efforts. Listen to what Paul says in the very next chapter to Timothy.

Timothy has presumably passed the minimum standard, and yet Paul says, train yourself to be godly.

Train yourself for godliness. You work out in the gym for godliness. Why? Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. And it's why (listen to this) we labour and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God.

You can labour and strive after godliness, not to earn the hope of the living God, but because you have encountered the living God. Because God is the one who is at work within us. Because the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in you, we can strive after godliness.

As the outflow of our encounter with the living one, incarnate, crucified, raised, preached, ruling in my life, my sinful life, and your sinful life, and in God's sinful church. I hope some of that helps you understand why Paul could say, that aspiring to be a supervisor or a deacon or a servant, the person who aspires to that role, desires a good thing, or perhaps translated, a noble task, or even, a beautiful work.

In fact, maybe we can even look at that phrase again and see something new in it. The one who aspires to the role, the desire isn't for the role, as important as that is, the one who aspires to be a supervisor. What do they desire? They desire the good thing, the noble task, the beautiful work. The beautiful work of helping a community of people come back again and again to Jesus. So that that community might become a people in which your neighbours say, truly God is there.

May the Lord raise up such households of God here in Aotearoa. May the Lord raise up every single believer to live a life of godly participation in God's mission. And, may the Lord give some, even in this room, the zeal and desire to participate in God's mission by leading in congregations, for the sake of God's people, for the joy of participating in God's work, for the glory of the living one and for the salvation of God's world.

Amen.