

What is the Character of a Biblical Leader?

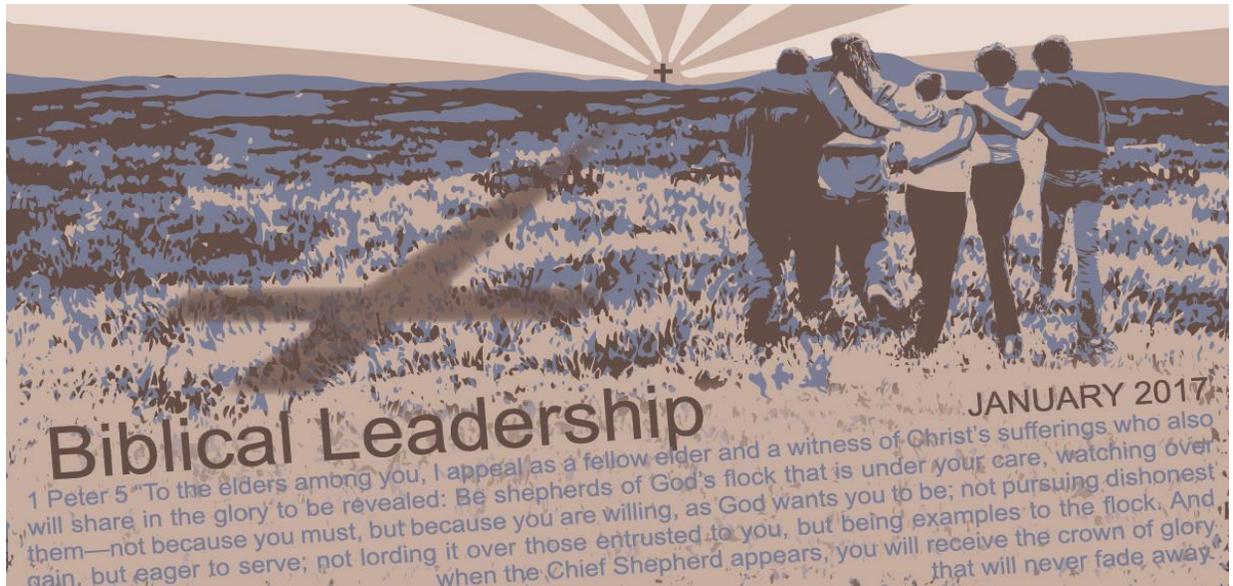
January Sermon Series on Biblical Leadership

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXT: 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:1-9



We have been looking at a series on Biblical Leadership. We started with the church, the lofty view of the church that is given to us in Scripture. We looked the second week at how the church is led. We saw from Scripture this regular pattern that the church is led by a plurality of elders. It is not led by a single person. It is not led by everyone. It is led by a consecrated group. This morning, we want to look at what type of person in Scripture is an elder. What defines the character of a biblical leader? When we look for an answer to this question, the Scripture speaks to this directly, and we want to focus on two key passages: the passages in the letter that we know as 1 Timothy and in Titus. I think it is significant that the description of what kind of a person a biblical leader is finds its clearest expression in letters that are to young, growing Christian leaders, Timothy and Titus. Paul writes these letters near the end of his ministry. These are co-laborers with him in the gospel. These are younger man whom Paul has mentored, which in and of itself is a very beautiful picture of leadership transition and growth for the body of Christ. These letters come towards the end of Paul's ministry, and that means that they are some of the most mature reflections he has about ministry. In both of these letters, 1 Timothy and Titus, a major section of each letter is about what kind of person should be entrusted with leadership in the church. This is a vitally important question for both of them. There is significant overlap in these passages, and that in and of itself gives us a strong indication of the importance of these qualities. What distinguishes the Bible's vision of leadership at its core is that leadership in Scripture is character-based. Leadership in Scripture is dependent on godliness. Leadership in Scripture is determined more by what kind of person you are than

about your marketable skills or what is on your ministry résumé. Failure of leadership is often a crisis of character. I am sure that many of you have experienced that or seen that in your church experience. We want to heed God's Word on this subject. It is vitally important, so let's look first at 1 Timothy.

Paul begins and speaks to his dear friend, as he calls Timothy—his child in the faith, who is like a son to him. He speaks with tender affection. He tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:1:

“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.”

It is a noble task. Literally, it's a good work. Leadership involves responsibility, and that can be perceived as a burden. Yet, Paul wants to remind Timothy that leadership is something noble, a good thing. Notice that it is aspirational—if you desire that, it is a good thing. Now he describes the qualities or characteristics of someone serving in leadership in 1 Timothy 3:2-5:

“Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?”

He says first that they must be “above reproach.” That's a powerful word. *Reproach* is something that you may not use in your daily vocabulary, but it means *being susceptible to accusation, obvious character flaws*. It's a language that echoes the sacrificial terminology in the Old Testament about the animals that are offered. They are without defect; they are blameless; they are without reproach. This general heading means that character is of primary importance, that if you are going to serve in leadership among the people of God, then you should be the kind of person that is exemplary in your conduct. This is then described in detail, first positively. The first quality that is said of a biblical leader is that a biblical leader is to be a one-wife man. That is what the text says. These descriptions of leadership are expressed, as biblical roles are, in the masculine, but I don't believe that excludes others from serving. It doesn't exclude women in this office. A description is listed, but that doesn't mean that just the husband has to be faithful. I just want to be clear about that. But, he says that first of all he has to be faithful and loyal. He says that you have to be sober-minded, someone that is wise in decision-making, someone who is self-controlled, restrained in his desires. He is to be someone who is respectable, carries himself with a certain dignity; someone who is hospitable, whose life is open in such a way that as others come near, they are welcomed into that sphere of influence. The last positive quality is that they are someone who is able to teach, has a firm grasp of the Word of God and is able to communicate that to others. It is really a beautiful picture. Some of us, when we read those descriptions, feel overwhelmed by that. We think there is no one like that. But I want to suggest to you that Paul's description is the criterion of godly character, and it is aspirational for the community. It is setting out a broad vision and saying: “This is the place to which we are all striving.” Do godly leaders fulfill all of these qualities perfectly, without exception? No, none of us is without sin, and yet it is marking out a space that says this is the kind of person that we are all trying to become. The person that you mark out as a leader defines where you are headed. It also registers for the community our

aspiration, and that should be our great aspiration that we should be more like Christ as a community. So, positively stated, you have to be a one-wife person, faithful in your marriage. Being faithful doesn't mean everyone has to be married by the way. It carries the image of being faithful, sober, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.

Then, Paul gets to some negative examples or what you should not be. He says that a biblical leader should not be a drunk. Heavy drinking impairs your judgment; it impedes your hospitality; it renders you vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy. Paul says a leader should not be someone who has an *excessive interest* in wine. It is not to say that drinking wine or any alcohol is forbidden. Jesus turned water into wine, and the Scriptures say that wine brings joy to the heart. I don't want to make a major focus on that, but the point is that he says that persons in leadership should not have an excessive interest in wine or any addictive substance for that matter. They should not be violent, but gentle in their leadership, not quarrelsome, and not greedy—a lover of money. The biblical leader must be someone who manages their own home well; literally, leads their own family well. This is a powerful image because leadership in the family of God is an extension of the leadership that you exercise in your own home. We miss the Rutemillers deeply as they moved to a different state. One of the things Annette used to say repeatedly while we were doing various searches for new hires at Kenwood was: "Past performance is the best indicator of future performance." She drilled that into our minds. The way someone conducts themselves and the way that you observe that, is the way they will conduct themselves, and so you should evaluate that closely. The way that you lead in one sphere, you will bring that same leadership into another. And so Paul says to look at how someone lives at home. You don't want radical discontinuity between the way someone acts at home and the way they act in the house of the Lord. There should not be a radical break between our public conduct or public responsibilities and our private ones. Integrity is a unity of these two spheres. The Bible does not imagine that you can conduct yourself publicly in a way that has fruit and humility and integrity if that's not taking place privately. So, Paul wisely tells to his young heirs to leadership: "Just look at how someone acts in their own home. It's a great indication of leadership." If their home is chaotic, if their children don't care for spiritual things, they are probably not able to lead the church in that type of direction.

Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:6:

"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil."

The Greek word that Paul uses here is a *neophyte*, which is literally a *young plant*. You can't be a young shoot coming up out of the ground of that seed of the Kingdom and then be entrusted with huge responsibility. Young people given huge responsibility will be tempted with pride, and Paul knows that. He says: "Don't put a new convert in charge of the community. He may be puffed up with conceit, and the result of that is that he will fall into the very same condemnation of the devil himself, inflated with pride." The devil said: "I should be in charge," and he fell.

Paul says lastly to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:7:

“Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”

It is so important that a biblical leader should be well thought of by outsiders. What does the perception of the world have to do with the church? Actually, it has everything to do with biblical leadership in the church, because the mission of the church is to carry the good news of the Kingdom into the world. So, biblical leaders should be those that are well thought of by members of the surrounding community so that they would not discredit the community or fall into disgrace and into the snare or trap of the devil. This is a very high and lofty view of the character that is required of a biblical leader. I asked the staff on Monday morning: “Where have you seen failure in leadership in a church?” It was really a sobering conversation around our staff table disaggregating the experiences that we have walked through together. Those around our staff have seen moral failure in biblical leadership; they have seen financial failure; they have seen those entrusted with spiritual responsibility drunk on the job. That should not be. I praise God that Kenwood has not experienced a moral failure in its spiritual leadership, and that is amazing. It is nothing to take for granted, but we say “Praise God!” with humility and trepidation. We say that because we are desiring to set people in leadership that exhibit these qualities. There are rival paradigms of who should lead. You could say: “This person should lead because they are a person of high social status. That's the criterion.” You could say: “This person should lead because of their giftedness and their character doesn't really matter, but their gifts qualify them for service.” That is more of a pragmatic view. Sometimes the church imagines that leaders are a kind of tenured servants. If you have been around long enough, you just lead. In fact, the Bible's view is that it is really the most godly people among you who should be entrusted with leadership, and it shouldn't be just one. It should be a group.

There is tremendous wisdom in the Bible's vision. It is a wisdom that is echoed then to Titus in very similar categories. In Titus, Paul says nearly the same thing. Paul identifies himself as a servant of God, an apostle. He writes in Titus 1:4:

“To Titus, my true child in a common faith:”

Notice again that Paul's ministry vision means that he is intensely mentoring and training those who will take leadership after him, and that is important. You always have to be thinking about who is coming up behind you to serve and what they need to know to be prepared. Paul says to Titus in Titus 1:5:

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.”

Crete is an amazing place, a huge island. It is almost like a country. It takes several hours to drive across Crete. It is a place of spectacular beauty and a place where the early church grew and extended through Paul's missionary labors. Yet he leaves Titus there after the gospel had been proclaimed in Crete, and he puts Titus in charge. As we saw last week, after you preach the gospel, people are converted, disciples are made, and they are encouraged. What does the church need next? The church needs a group of consecrated leaders, and so he tells Titus: “I

sent you there to appoint elders in every town as I directed you,” and he begins again to highlight the character required.

The list is very similar to what is in Timothy. He starts in Titus 1:6 with the general heading that a biblical leader should be above reproach:

“ . . . the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.”

I love that. If you are faithful, you will present the church, the Bride of Christ, as a faithful bride to her husband. Again, Paul says to look at the family life. Is the gospel taught at home? Are the children seeking after the Lord? The ESV renders this *debauchery*. The term that Paul uses is the same term that Jesus uses in Luke 15 for the prodigal son: prodigal living, wild living, no care for the things of God. That doesn't mean that just because a son or daughter has a season of life when they are not walking closely with the Lord that that disqualifies anyone from serving. But what you do want to see is the spiritual interest. You want to see that someone who would lead the family of God is seeking to lead even in their own home. Faithfulness. Committed. He says it again in Titus 1:7-8:

“For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.”

He says to conduct yourself in a way that is transparent: godliness and character, easy to see. And again he has these negatives: not arrogant, not quick-tempered, not an excess of interest in wine, not greedy for gain or violent. Instead, positively, to be hospitable, a lover of good, self-control, upright, holy and disciplined. He continues in Titus 1:9:

“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”

It should be someone who was able to teach the Scriptures, to understand the gospel well, so that you positively give instruction in sound doctrine but also rebuke those that contradict it. The church of Jesus Christ needs to be shepherded well by people like this.

This is a lofty vision of what it means to be a leader. It is a very lofty vision, and when you see this and hear this, I hope that your first reaction is that it is profoundly humbling. It is also profoundly Christ-exalting, because it says leadership among us is linked directly with Christ-likeness. For some of us, we read these lists and think that it is overwhelming. We think to ourselves: “I could never be that.” Well, that is kind of the point. This vision of leadership becomes aspirational and defines the fruit of who we are and who we want to be becoming. What does this mean for Kenwood? I want to apply this in a couple of ways for all of us.

Number one: I want to challenge us to lift up this standard of godliness. This is a high standard, and if that is the standard of godliness required of leaders, that becomes aspirational for all of us. Who do I want to become as I grow in this life? I want to become someone that's moving toward this description. I want that for all of us, and that comes first by lifting up that standard of godliness.

Number two: As a church family, as a community, it is right for us to ask who displays this kind of character among us. It is a work of grace. It is a byproduct of the Holy Spirit, and it is right for us to ask who are people at Kenwood that look like this. We need to identify and recognize them.

Number three: We need to seek to emulate and move in this direction, and as leaders define the direction of the standard in which we all desire to move, then that gives a due north, a direction in which to go to emulate, to seek to be examples to the flock, an aspirational target toward which we might move together. The absence of godly leadership wreaks havoc on the church. It really does. It is devastating inside the church, and it brings the church into disrepute in the society around us. I am sure that all of us in this room have seen examples of that. Maybe you have even been really close to it. Maybe you have seen it from a distance. Maybe it has just broken your heart to think how someone who is standing up publicly to represent Christ could conduct themselves in that way. Lord, have mercy on your beloved Bride.

I want to end this morning with two contrasting stories, the two stories of two different families. They are images, both of them, of fathers. Both of the stories are true, and even though the analogy is beginning inside of two very different homes, they highlight for us that the church is the family of God, the house of God, and that part of what you look at is that what is going on in your home helps you see how a person will conduct himself leading the *big house* of the Lord. The first story is a very sad one. It comes from Robert Lewis who describes his father as the *invisible dad*. Robert Lewis writes:

“I remember my wedding day vividly. Our immediate family had been summoned for the reception, pictures were taken, and everyone looks pleasant enough in the photographs. But, something is definitely wrong in the pictures. Half of my family was feeling it on that winter afternoon. When I look at all the pictures of our wedding, there is one conspicuous absence: my father does not appear in any of the wedding photos. Where was he on his son's wedding day, or the night before at the rehearsal dinner? My father was home; he was drunk. The pressure of the celebration was too much for him, and whenever the pressure of a social moment built up, my dad took his fears, his responsibilities, and his self-respect to alcohol.

“I was 10 years old when I became aware that something was terribly wrong with my dad. I can count the number of times when my brothers watched my inebriated father stumble through the house, my mother reciting his failures at the top of her lungs. Every time this happened, something inside of me would die. It was a terrible thing for a young boy. My father literally drank himself through the holiday seasons.

“As I moved into my teenage years, my father's drinking became worse; I became the in-house mediator trying to keep the peace. I would go back and forth between my parents, trying to help them understand each other. You swallow a lot of pain when you're 15 years old and you have to tell your father not to come out of his room until your friends are gone. You swallow a lot of pain hiding the car keys and disposing of whiskey bottles before the weekend comes.

“As I grew, the worst part was not the alcohol. The worst part was that we missed my dad. We missed him. We missed feeling his heart, his closeness, his affirmation. We missed hearing his teaching. We missed seeing his conviction. We missed experiencing his leadership. We rarely played together. He never told me, ‘Son, I love you.’ I never prayed with him or talked with him about spiritual things. I never knew what he believed. We never sat together and talked about life or girls or school or the future. There was no fatherly preparation for the things ahead. I never heard him say, ‘I’m proud of you.’ I never experienced a moment when he shared with me what he thought I would be good at or what my responsibilities were as a man. He offered to me no measuring sticks for my life.”

This is a tragic picture, a picture of an invisible dad, an invisible leader, a leadership vacuum.

I want to end with a contrasting picture. It is a picture that I have shared part of before, and it is a one of my most endearing pictures of what it means to be a biblical leader. Again, you look inside the home. It is the story of John G. Patton who grew to be a missionary in the New Hebrides, near Australia. John G. Patton's father was a biblical leader in his home. John G. Patton writes in his autobiography:

“Though everything else in religion by some unthinkable catastrophe would be swept of my memory, my soul would wander back to my earliest scenes. I would remember hearing my father pray. He had a closet of prayer that we called the Sanctuary Closet, and all of us children revered the spot. My father walked with God before us.

“How much my father's prayers at this time impressed me I can never explain, nor could any stranger understand. When, on his knees and all of us kneeling around him in Family Worship, he poured out his whole soul with tears for the conversion of the Heathen world to the service of Jesus, and for every personal and domestic need, we all felt as if in the presence of the living Savior, and learned to know and love him as our Divine friend.”

John Patton grew up in a home where his father was present, prayerful, helping lead his family towards godliness, not perfectly, but moving in that direction. Paton learned to love Christ by watching his father, and as he grew, he felt God's call to go overseas to an utterly unreached people. The time had come for him to depart. He was going to unreached people groups of cannibalistic tribes. The first two missionaries who had arrived in this place had been killed and eaten, and John Patton was preparing to go to this utterly unreached people group. He had to go a forty-mile walk to begin his ocean journey. Years later, Patton described it this way:

“My dear father walked with me the first six miles of the way. His counsels and tears and heavenly conversation on that parting journey are as fresh in my heart as if it had been but yesterday; and tears are on my cheeks as freely now as then, whenever memory steals me away to the scene. For the last half mile or so we walked on together in almost unbroken silence – my father, as was often his custom, carrying hat in hand, while his long flowing yellow hair streamed like a girl's down his shoulders. His lips kept moving in silent prayers for me; and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other in looks for which all speech was in vain! We halted on reaching the appointed parting place; he grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence, and then solemnly and affectionately looked at me and said: ‘God bless you, my son! Your father's God prosper you, and keep you from all evil!’

“Unable to say more, his lips kept moving in silent prayer; in tears we embraced, and parted. I ran off as fast as I could; and, when about to turn a corner in the road where he would lose sight of me, I looked back and saw him still standing with head uncovered where I had left him – gazing after me. Waving my hat in adieu, I rounded the corner and out of sight in an instant. But my heart was too full and sore to carry me further, so I darted into the side of the road and wept for a time. Then, rising up cautiously, I climbed the dike to see if he yet stood where I had left him; and just at that moment I caught a glimpse of him climbing the dyke and looking out for me! He did not see me, and after he gazed eagerly in my direction for a while, he got down, set his face toward home.”

We need to mark in our souls the difference between these two fathers, these two leaders. Godly character points us forward to Christ-likeness that we might move forward and flourish together as God's people. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we extol You this morning. We magnify You. Lord, we honor You. We delight in You. Lord, it is our earnest prayer this morning to embrace a biblical vision of leadership defined by godliness and character. Lord, we pray that such a vision would be not crushing overwhelming but mark out our highest aspiration. We seek Your blessing on Kenwood this morning, and we honor You.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.