

Honour your Leaders

“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour....”

A fortnight ago we looked at Paul’s instruction to Timothy to train himself to be godly. He pointed out that “physical training is some value, but godliness is of value in all things, holding promise for this life and the life to come.” I wonder how much we really take that in. Our training in godliness impacts our life here on earth. We can only find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, the satisfaction that God intended us to have if we take those words seriously and learn to put them into practice. However, there is far more than that. It will have eternal consequences.

I don’t know exactly what that means, but Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians: “For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown up for whatever it is, because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”

Paul is not calling into question their salvation. If they have trusted in Jesus Christ they have the assurance of eternal life, if they haven’t then they are lost. Nothing can destroy that foundation, but how have they built on it? What have they done with what they have been given? Our motivation in serving God should be because he is worthy rather than for what we can get out of it. Nevertheless if we really seek to live for God, it will be to our advantage, both in this earthly life, and for eternity. Paul is approaching it from a different angle when he writes to Timothy, but the message is the same. Use and develop the gifts God has given you. Put your faith into practice. Let it make a difference to the way you live. Work at it!

Last week we saw something of what that meant in practical terms. Paul expressed a concern about how we treat others in the church which I summed up as basically saying the way you would treat your own family. He then expressed his concern about widows. Much of what he had to say was not directly relevant in our own very different time and culture, but the principles of concern for the most vulnerable and needy, the responsibility for caring for our own families, and the prioritisation of the church’s pastoral concerns are applicable in any setting.

In our reading today Paul goes on to say, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” That might seem rather a strange thing to say. What’s so special about the elders? We saw the qualities and attributes that are required for leadership in chapter 2. If our elders are exercising humility and are serving because of a sense of God’s call on their life, surely they shouldn’t be seeking any recognition?

That is true. When Peter addresses the elders in his letter he tells them: “I appeal as a fellow-elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who will

share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”

Some of that is almost contradictory. Peter tells them to serve, not because they must, but because they want to. I didn't really want to serve God in the way that I do now, but I had such a clear call that I couldn't do anything else. I resisted it for a time until I came to the place where I wanted to do it because I knew it was what God wanted. I'm not unique in that. I hesitate to compare myself to godly men like Moses and Jeremiah, but one thing I do have in common with them both is that initial reluctance to respond to God's call.

We are not to be self-seeking in terms of financial gain, or status, or power, or influence and yet we are promised “the crown of glory that will never fade away”. That's good to know. It is something to look forward to, but it should not be our motivation for service. We serve not because of any reward, earthly or heavenly, but out of a response to God's love for us and what he has accomplished for us through Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection.

That sense of call is so important. We can easily become discouraged. We can question our own abilities. We can sometimes wonder if we are really up to it. As we've seen previously Timothy felt like giving up at times. Paul had to reassure him and remind him of God's call on his life. “Keep on in there Timothy! I know it's hard going. I know you're misunderstood and misrepresented. I know not everybody appreciates you as they should, but God appreciates you. He will not put you through more than you take. He will equip you. Minister in his strength, not in your own.”

That doesn't just apply to those in a full time ministry. It seems to me that we often fail to grasp the awesome responsibility that taking on any position of leadership places on us. It perhaps comes out most clearly in Hebrews 13, where the writer urges his readers, and each of us in the church today:

“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith...Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work may be a joy, not a burden, for that would be no advantage to you.” (Heb 13:7,17)

That's addressed to the whole church, but I want to particularly alert the elders and others in positions of leadership. The congregation are being instructed to consider the outcome of your way of life and of mine and to imitate your faith and mine. I don't know about you, but at one level I find that rather scary, especially as he goes on to say: “They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.” You and I will have to give an account to God of how we have exercised our leadership over those whom God has placed in our care. Yes, they will be answerable themselves to God for what they have done with their lives, but have we set them a good example? Have

we encouraged them in their walk with God? Have we been concerned about their spiritual condition?

Paul certainly understood the implications of his leadership. When he met with elders from Ephesus, the church where Timothy was senior pastor, he said: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you... I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you... I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus... Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men.”

Do we take our responsibilities as leaders seriously enough? Do we understand that God will hold us accountable? Perhaps that thought might make us consider just giving up. Perhaps that was at least partly behind Timothy’s difficulties. I suspect that’s why right from the start of the letter Paul puts so much emphasis on the grace of God. “Look Timothy, God didn’t call me because I was a good guy. Quite the reverse! He called me as a demonstration of his grace. He knows your faults, he knows your weaknesses, he knows your inadequacies, but he’s still called you. By his grace he will enable you, he will equip you, he will enable you to grow more Christ-like.”

I believe that’s true for all who have been genuinely called by God into leadership. We will be aware of our own shortcomings, but God’s call and his grace are sufficient. Even so, we have to respond with a determination to walk close with him. That’s why Paul’s instruction to Timothy to train himself in godliness is so important to each of us.

Biblically the elders have a very important place in the church. The church is not a democracy. The elders are not there to represent the congregation. They are not accountable to the congregations as councillors or MPs are to the electorate. The elders are accountable to God and are there to exercise his leadership, to determine his direction for the church. That’s not always easy to discern, and can go disastrously wrong if you have the wrong people in leadership. Paul goes on to say, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others.” In chapter 3 he outlined the attributes that were required for leadership. If we don’t have godly leadership, if we don’t have leaders whose hearts are set on the kingdom of God, if we don’t have leaders who are sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, then we are not going to get very far.

Paul wants Timothy to recognise that, he wants the elders to recognise that, and he wants the members of the church to recognise that, and so he says, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour...” I’ve already quoted from Hebrews where the writer instructs his readers to make the leaders work a joy rather than a burden. Paul goes on to say, “For the scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’ Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”

The first part of that has a specific application to those who are in a paid ministry, whether full time or receiving payment for particular duties. However,

it goes far beyond that in showing that we appreciate and value our leaders. Do we do that in the way that we speak to them? Are we quick to affirm the positive and willing to overlook the faults and mistakes? Do we like to give encouragement or would we rather criticise? Are we looking for faults in certain people so that we put them down? Paul says, "I charge you in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and do nothing out of favouritism."

The first part is to emphasise the seriousness a solemnity of the charge that he is giving to Timothy. There has to be no partiality or favouritism in the way he treats people. No preferential treatment for the ones who have been nice to him, or whose families who have been influential in the church, or those who have the financial means to support the church. He needs to be fair and even handed in all his dealings.

The church today faces many challenges. The way forward is not always easy and straightforward. We need to seek God's face. We need to understand that he is in control. I referred to the Ascension in the Children's Address. I haven't taken it as my main theme for today, but I think it is important that we understand that Christ is still on the throne. He hasn't abdicated. He laughs at the attempts of mortal men and women to overthrow him. He has a purpose for his church, but for us to experience that as a reality we must respond to the challenge he puts before us. As leaders we must accept the responsibilities that he has laid on us who he has called to lead, and all of us must give those who direct the affairs of the church well the honour that Paul points out they deserve.