

Title: To the Elders  
Text: 1 Timothy  
Theme: The centrality of the gospel for leaders and the church  
Occasion: New Years Sunday, 2012  
Prop Stmtnt: The gospel informs and affects the leadership, relationships and goals of the church.  
Aim: I am calling the elders and the church to commit themselves this year to God's agenda for his church.

Read Text: 1 Timothy 3.14 – 4.9

It is both interesting and at times frustrating when I talk with people about the church; meaning, what the church is, what it isn't, what we do, and what we don't do. Honestly, it is usually easier to have these conversations with people who have very little background and experience in church life. In those cases, I tell them about the gospel, which is the good news about Christ, and show them how that informs, affects, governs, and supports everything that we do. That is so much fun because there are not only so many misconceptions about what a church is and what a church should do (misconceptions based upon many, many bad examples), but it opens their eyes to a world that is intriguing, and inviting in such a good way.

On the other hand, there are some people who visit here, who come from a church background and they are church shopping. For them, church is like comparing Kroger to Meijer. Their view is, if I am going to go here, then I want to make sure that you have programs that I want and the variety or brands that I demand.

For example, recently a guest was asking me about a particular children's program called AWANA. Do you have AWANA, I was asked? When I said no, this person was having a difficult time comprehending a church without AWANA. As I reflected on that conversation, I thought of how many things, programs, ceremonies, traditions, and preferences that get added to our views of what a good church must do. If we do not address this from time to time, we can inadvertently add so many things to the life of the church, that will rob valuable time, resources, and focus from what is the most important. My primary responsibility is not to run programs like the activity director of a cruise ship. My primary responsibility is to preach the Word and see to it that the message of the Word is the driving force in all that we do.

This morning, therefore, I want to speak, primarily to the elders, but in your hearing. I want the elders to be reminded of the responsibility that rests upon their shoulders. I do this because it is a needed reminder for them, and it is also instructive to you, so that your expectations of the leadership of the church are formed by the Scriptures.

Timothy was like a son to the apostle Paul. Paul left him in Ephesus (map), in order to address some problems that were threatening to tear the church apart. In 3.14-15, Paul said, "*...I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how*

*one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*" In order to care for the health of the church, Timothy had to confront some difficult situations, meaning that he had to deal with some difficult people. Timothy was probably younger than some of the people that he had to confront, but nevertheless he had to step up to the plate and make some tough calls. This letter, which Paul wrote to Timothy, is part of the Bible to instruct the leaders of the church how we are to lead. It is also informative to the congregation to know what to expect from your leaders. Leadership has many joys, but those joys are earned in the crucible of doing the right thing, even when it is not the popular thing. So brothers...

**I. Leaders must be willing to address problems. (1.3-20; 4.1-5)**

Clearly, there were some people teaching things that were doctrinally incorrect. V.3 says it was "different doctrine", (v4) focused on "myths and endless genealogies" that promote speculation instead of good, helpful instruction. This is the kind of stuff that happens when people become more concerned about looking educated, learned and being interesting instead of being focused on the message of Christ. The result is that people become loyal to a personality within the church instead of the gospel. If this is not addressed, then the church will lose its message. Paul tells Timothy, you have to deal with this.

But notice v.5. "*The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*" Brothers, whenever we are addressing a problem in the church, we must do so with love. But, as this text spells out for us, we cannot love our flock properly unless our hearts are pure before God, our consciences clean and our faith sincere. Since I cannot make my heart pure, nor my conscience clean, nor my faith sincere, I have to rely completely upon Christ for this. In other words, unless we are relying upon Christ we cannot care for this flock as we are called to. Even if we are willing to do the tough job of addressing problems, if we are not doing it in the strength of the Spirit of God, or for the glory of Christ and the health of the church, then we will do it out of anger, or out of fear.

Addressing problems is not like working in a lab, where you are outfitted with a mask, gloves and work in highly controlled and sanitized conditions. We are shepherds who know our sheep, and smell like our sheep and live in the fields with them. That is, we are involved in their lives. One of the greatest sorrows comes from pouring yourself into someone's life with counsel, time, prayer and help, only to have them treat you like a disposable Dixie cup and go to someone else. The temptation is to withdraw, and feel pity on your self. There is a price to pay for being in leadership, and our encouragement does not always come from the people that we lead, but it does come from the gospel that we preach and the Christ whom we serve. At the same time, the most difficult situations are the ones that have the greatest capacity to put the glory of God on display. We serve a God who saves. That is the heart of the message of the gospel. We can address problems, not because we possess all of the answers, but because there is no problem that is too complex or

deep for the gospel. The gospel always has something to say to the heart issues of life. Paul's challenge to Timothy to address these problems in the church is rooted in Paul's concern that the gospel itself not be lost in the church. Paul reminds Timothy in verses 8-11 about the various things that threaten the message of the gospel and in verses 12-20 goes on to recount how precious the pure message of the gospel really is, and why it is worth paying whatever price to defend it.

In this case, Paul goes back and essentially preaches the gospel to himself. He tells Timothy of how wretched his own sin was, and how merciful God was to rescue him from his sin. This personal review of Paul of how his own life was gloriously hijacked by the gospel is what drives this fist-pumping doxology in v.17. All of which means, that we are going to have the courage, the conviction and the compassion to address problems in a manner that reflects Christ, we have to preach the gospel to ourselves.

This also means congregation, that you must desire, pray for, expect and support leaders who are willing to address problems. We are blessed with good leadership. That is why we open up our elders meetings for you to attend, if you want. You can see that what goes on "behind the scenes" is no different than what goes on in front of you. But, neither are we perfect leaders. We care for this church, but we don't care for her perfectly. Christ does, and we seek to follow him, but we need his assistance in order to do that. God uses your prayers as a means to supply us with strength and wisdom to do that.

Later in the book (4.1-5) Paul returns to this. He warns that this issue of false teaching and false teachers is a continual problem and requires continual attention. There are always going to be people who want to add things to the gospel, take things away from the gospel or replace the gospel with other things that look spiritual and righteous. Dealing with these things requires: a) vigilance b) theological exactness c) perseverance. Brothers, here is one of my concerns. I do not want to coast. We have a good ministry here. We are blessed with good people and a good spirit of unity. We hear stories of people who are being redeemed by the gospel of Christ, and who are growing. It would be tempting for us to think that we simply need to put gas in the tank and change the oil, but lose our edge, or lose our urgency, or lose our sense of mission. If we fail to stay aware of the evil that is in our world and that threatens our families, and our theology and the very fabric of our lives and the church, then we will not feel constrained to address problems. Deceitful spirits and teachings of demons abound. I wish it were not so. But it is. We are here, in this position to protect the integrity gospel by ensuring that what is taught, is the gospel, and when other things come in, we address it.

## **II. Leaders must reflect the gospel in their lives. (2.1-3.13; 4.6-16)**

You can see why the church is called to protect the integrity of the message of the gospel because of the power of the gospel message to bring about change. In this section of the book, Paul is writing about what the gospel looks like in the lives of

the church and her leaders. He talks about the church's responsibility to pray for those who are in position of authority. He calls upon the church to pray for the government leaders, so that the believers have the opportunity to live peaceful lives. Peaceful and dignified lives adorn the gospel. Paul asks the church to pray for the leaders, so the believers have a better opportunity to reflect Christ. But, have you ever considered what kind of leaders Paul is asking the church to pray for? Here is an amazing example of the power of the gospel.

Do you remember from the book of Acts, the story of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem? Eventually, Paul was relocated to Caesarea where he was held in jail. His case was heard by the governor named Felix. Felix was one of the most corrupt rulers of the area. The historian Tacitus said that he, "practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with the instincts of a slave." Even his wife was morally corrupt. Felix had basically one goal: he wanted to enrich himself by any possible means. He murdered many Jews, attempted to exploit them for his own pleasure, which fits well with what Luke writes about him in Acts 24. Felix was willing to release Paul from prison, if Paul would simply give him a bribe. For 2 years Paul stayed in prison, but during that time, Felix would send for him and Paul would talk to him about the gospel. (v.26)

How could you stand before such a despicable person like that and treat them with respect? You can only do this if you realize that before God, you are no better. Paul was more concerned with Felix coming to faith in Christ, than Paul was in getting out of prison. Instead of despising people Paul, models and calls the church to pray for people, particularly people who would be easy to despise. In a couple of years, Paul would write a second letter to Timothy and shortly after that would be executed under orders from Nero. So, here in the beginning of chapter 2, Paul reminds Timothy of the priority of the gospel, the call to preach the gospel, the responsibility of the church to reflect the gospel and the call of the church to only select elders whose lives show the priority of the gospel in all aspects.

The qualifications that are spelled out here in chapter 3 for elders have this in common: Elders are men whose lives are characterized by being more concerned for others than they are for themselves. This is put on display by how they treat their wives, children, neighbors, people they do with business with and people in the church. Leadership in the church is not so much a title that you wear, nor a job that you do, but the person that you are. Brothers, we want Christ to be put on display in our congregation. We want our flock to care more about this world, more about missions, more about the gospel, more about the church than they do about their own comforts. We need to show them how to do that. And where do we learn how to do that? We learn that from Christ. We learn that from others who have learned that from Christ. The authority that we are vested with is to be used for the health and good of those who are under our care.

Look at 4.6. Paul says to Timothy that if he puts these things before the brothers (that is, if he teaches the church about these things), then he will be a good servant

of Christ Jesus). He warns him against rabbit trails, hobby horses and being distracted by things that have no eternal value. And then in v.10 he says, "*For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.*"

### **III. The church must honor and care for her elders. (5.17-25)**

These verses are similar to the charge that we studied in the end of Hebrews (13.17) (put on screen), where the congregation is charged with obeying the elders, and the elders are reminded that they will give an account of their leadership before God. In this text, we see both edges of the sword. It reminds us, that we cannot take treat the church lightly.

#### **A. To the Elders**

Look at v.21. Paul is telling Timothy about how you address problems, when the problems involve your elders. He invokes language of the courtroom of God. He tells him that he is calling upon God as a witness to this charge. "*I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging.*" The rules are clear. If someone makes an accusation against an elder, your first response (19) is to protect the elder. Satan delights in using unwitting people to carry out his evil purposes. However, if on the evidence of 2 or 3 witnesses, the charge is found to be true, and, it is found that the elder has disqualified himself from this office, and he persists in this sin, then the elder is to be rebuked before all. The elders are not ever to be a "good ole boys club." The elders are charged with representing Christ himself, the Chief Shepherd of the sheep.

#### **B. To the Congregation**

Why do you think that Paul says (v.17) that the elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor? That, by the way is a reference to how much they are paid for their work. Why are they to be esteemed? Why (19) are they to be protected? Good elders are an incredible gift of grace by God to the church. We must steward them. We must be a people who love them, care for them, provide for them, encourage them, and listen to them. We want to be a church that has elders to whom we can point and say to our young men, love your wives like they do. Raise your children like they do. Be a neighbor, a worker like them. But, in order to have men like that, we need to be a church that is like a greenhouse for godly leadership. We can promote this atmosphere of growing, encouragement by assuming that the leadership loves the flock.

The leadership has the responsibility to communicate to the church so that the trust that you are asked to give to them is earned through information and follow through. But grace and generosity, which are foundational to the gospel, are to be put on display by the congregation to the elders, and by the elders to the congregation.

Cornerstone Baptist Church was His church, before it was our church. It is our church only under His authority and we are temporary stewards, whose responsibility it is to keep her pure and clean for the next elders, or til Christ comes for her. Christ is the rightful owner, and we are the stewards. The church is the household of God. The church is the means that God has raised up to glorify himself by proclaiming the gospel, to putting Christ on display and spreading the news of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth. There is no greater mission. All of our missions in life serve this great eternal purpose. That is why the care of the church is such a critical issue. And that is why our elders are so very important to her health.

Brothers, we our lives must be characterized by a willingness to be involved in the lives and cares of our flock, and addressing her problems, when needed. In order to do that in a way that cares for the flock and loves the flock, our lives must adorn the gospel. The gospel will help us carry out our responsibilities in love instead of harshness, humility instead of arrogance. We must take heed to ourselves by relying upon the grace of God, not relying upon a title, or a history. Christ is our refuge.