

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
God's stewards for life and ministry

The reason I left you in Crete was so that you would set in order the things that were left unfinished and appoint elders in every city, as I directed you. ⁶ Such a man is to be blameless, the husband of only one wife, and to have believing children who are not open to a charge of wild living or disobedience. ⁷ Indeed an overseer, since he is God's steward, must be blameless, not arrogant, not quick-tempered, not a drunkard, not violent, not eager for dishonest gain. ⁸ Instead, he must be hospitable, loving what is good, self-controlled, upright, devout, and disciplined. ⁹ He must cling to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he will be able both to encourage people by the sound teaching and also to correct those who oppose him.

—Titus 1:5-9

Every single one of us here today is a steward. A steward is a person who is authorized to take care of something that is owned by someone else. You are a steward. God is the one who owns everything, but he places you and me in positions of stewardship to manage those things he has given us. And there are several things you and I take care of. We are stewards of the finances God has given us. We manage ourselves in time; what do we do with the time God has given us? We take care of our families. We provide for them and make sure they are doing well. We take care of our bodies, supplying enough nutrients, getting enough exercise and rest. We are stewards of the talents and abilities God has given us. We use our talents for the glory of God and the benefit of others.

We understand this, right? As a steward, you take care of something that is owned by God. Well, today I want to talk with you about another aspect of stewardship which we find in the church. You see, God has sent people out with his authority for a specific purpose. As leaders in the church, **God wants us to be stewards for life and ministry.** God sends out leaders in his church with his authority.

I suppose it might not be a surprise to you that many people in our world are apprehensive when it comes to authority. Questions come into the minds of individuals, "Can I trust this person who has authority? Will they use the authority in the right way? What happens if they abuse their authority? Is this authority good for me?"

And it may even happen that people in the church are apprehensive about the authority given to leaders in the church. That may especially be true when a pastor, for example, needs to confront someone in the church about a sin. Pastors have the authority to confront people about their sins. In fact, we are called by God to do that. Of course, the whole reason for this is to lead people to repentance and the forgiveness that Jesus offers. But it is still a difficult task to approach someone regarding sin. The response of an individual might be, "What authority do you have to tell me how to live?"

Well, in our text for today, we see who gives that authority. Jesus, the one with absolute authority, makes pastors and elders and leaders in the church his stewards. When your pastors went to Seminary school, they studied these words from the book of Titus diligently. Whoever serves in the public ministry, or the representative ministry, of the church ought to read this letter at frequent intervals. Pastors, teachers, lay leaders should keep these words in their hearts and minds. At the same time, every Christian ought to listen to these words as valuable instruction and encouragement. What Paul tells Titus is applicable for all of us as followers of Christ. So, it's important for us to contemplate these words.

I actually would like to first point you to the first words of the book of Titus. I know these words aren't included as part of the reading for today, but I think the first four verses of this letter are important. In Titus 1:1-4, Paul writes:

"Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God's elect people and the knowledge of the truth that conforms to godliness, ² based on the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began. ³ At the proper time he revealed this in his word, in the preaching that was entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior, ⁴ To Titus, my true child in our common faith: Grace and peace from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Savior."

Paul lays out his qualifications as he writes this letter. He is a servant of God. He is sent to do the will of his master, Jesus Christ. His entire ministry was to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to people so that they could be built up in faith for eternity. God's plan extended from before time began. His plan was to bring his truth to people so that they would be saved. God's plan to do that was by sending people with his authority to teach and preach his truth. And that's what Paul is doing with Titus.

Paul had most likely met Titus in the city of Antioch years earlier, where Paul worked for an entire year before his missionary journeys. Titus was a convert to Christianity through Paul's ministry. If you recall, when the whole

circumcision debate was going on, Paul used Titus as a test case and reports in Galatians 2:3, *“Not even, Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.”*

Paul was teaching an important truth about the Old Testament laws of God. We are no longer bound by the Old Testament laws because Jesus has fulfilled all of them perfectly for us. Christ came to fulfill all of God’s laws in our place. Paul stressed that in his ministry, and Titus believed that truth about Jesus. So, Titus became a gospel partner with Paul.

In fact, Titus was a valuable and trusted associate to the apostle Paul. When there were problems and troubles going on in the city of Corinth, Paul sent Titus to iron them out. And he did. Titus proved to be an evangelical, trusted, and respected *troubleshooter* in the Corinthian congregation.

Well, years later, after Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome, Paul sent Titus to the island of Crete to do gospel ministry. Crete had a number of cities all across the island. So, Paul writes this letter to pastor Titus as a way of encouraging him to place qualified individuals as elders or pastors in these churches. God was giving his authority to Titus and these elders throughout the island of Crete. And this is what Paul writes:

“The reason I left you in Crete was so that you would set in order the things that were left unfinished and appoint elders in every city, as I directed you. ⁶ Such a man is to be blameless, the husband of only one wife, and to have believing children who are not open to a charge of wild living or disobedience. ⁷ Indeed an overseer, since he is God’s steward, must be blameless, not arrogant, not quick-tempered, not a drunkard, not violent, not eager for dishonest gain. ⁸ Instead, he must be hospitable, loving what is good, self-controlled, upright, devout, and disciplined. ⁹ He must cling to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he will be able both to encourage people by the sound teaching and also to correct those who oppose him.”

We aren’t told how Titus was to go about putting these men into these positions. We have a lot of freedom when it comes to the process of placing or calling people to these positions of authority. But Paul does stress the qualifications of these men.

The overarching quality is a person who reflects Jesus. Certainly, these church leaders were not perfect. Nobody is. Only Jesus is perfect. But covered by Christ’s righteousness, these leaders are to be blameless. In other words, they were to be people where no public disgrace could stick to them. They should be the kind of people who cannot be accused openly and publicly. And that blameless quality ought to be first seen among his *family*.

Cretans, those who lived on that island of Crete, were known as *“liars, vicious beasts, and lazy gluttons”* (Titus 1:12). That’s not very flattering, is it? But Christ changes people. He changes people for lives that are different from the culture around them. If these elders or pastors are going to serve in a church, they need to have the ability to confront sin and call people to repentance. If they could not properly carry out Christian discipline in their own homes, they should not be chosen to lead a congregation as elders.

Now of all the qualities that Paul lists here, which are good qualities to emulate in our lives, of all the qualities listed, Paul reveals the most important quality with the last phrase of our text. He says: *“He must cling to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he will be able both to encourage people by the sound teaching and also to correct those who oppose him.”*

As God’s stewards, leaders in the church must be sure of their doctrine, of the message they proclaim. We must be certain of what God teaches for life and ministry. In another letter written to a pastor, in 1 Timothy 4:16, Paul writes, *“Pay close attention to yourself and to the doctrine. Persevere in them, because by doing this you will save both yourself and those who listen to you.”* So, behavior and doctrine are important for those sent out with God’s own authority.

This is why God sends his stewards with his authority in the church. Pastors, teachers, leaders are sent by God for the benefit of God’s people. You see, the devil loves to deceive us into thinking that we can decide what is right and wrong. The devil wants us to justify our sins, to make our lives be whatever we want them to be.

God sends his stewards with his authoritative Word. God is clear on what is sin. The goal is to lead people to repent in sorrow over their sin and to find relief in Christ’s forgiveness.

You know how the devil works. He loves to bring shame and guilt to us. He wants us to question God’s forgiveness, *“How could God ever forgive your sin?”* So, God sends his stewards to encourage his people with sound teaching. Just think about some of these beautiful trustworthy sayings that are meant to comfort God’s people.

Just take one example later in this same letter, in chapter 3, where Paul writes, *“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵ he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life. ⁸ This saying is trustworthy. And I want you to insist on these things, so that those*

who believe in God are intent on keeping busy with good works. These things are honorable and useful for the people.”

You see, that’s what stewards do. They comfort God’s people who are struck with God’s law. God wants us *“to encourage people by sound teaching.”*

But as God’s stewards we also warn. Pastors and elders and leaders of the church need to defend the flock against those who oppose sound doctrine. Because of the many false religions and false teachings that threaten Christ’s flock, the leaders of the church must hold tightly to the trustworthy message. That’s why Paul writes in verse 9 of our text, *“He must cling to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he will be able both to encourage people by the sound teaching and also to correct those who oppose him.”*

My friends, you will find false teachers and false teachings even coming from the church. Any time that someone defends his or her own sin, that person is portraying a false teaching. Therefore, it is important that God’s stewards preach, teach, and proclaim God’s sound teaching. The message is critical for you and for me. God wants us to use his law to convict people of sin so that the sweet salve of the gospel can heal a guilty conscience. The message is critical.

But the messenger is also very important. Hence all these qualifications for leaders. I mean, just think about your own life. We all are sent by God to share the truth of God’s Word with the people in our lives, right? How would your message be received if you were constantly intoxicated? Do you think people would listen? Or how do you think they would receive the message of Jesus’ love if you constantly complained about your spouse? Do you think they would believe you?

How much more is this true for those who are called into the public, or representative, ministry? This is why God through Paul stresses these qualities. The message is so important that it requires lives that reflect and mirror the one and only Savior.

So, yes, God’s sends us out with his own authority. He does that because he wants blessings to come to you as his people. But as those who are sent with God’s own authority, we recognize that we are **God’s stewards for life and ministry**. Both the message and the messenger are important for God’s plan of salvation. Amen.