

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

GODLY LEADERSHIP

Acts 20:17-21

By

Steven J. Cole

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Acts Lesson 51

Godly Leadership Acts 20:17-21

When Satan wants to attack the church, he usually goes after the leadership. If he can bring down a prominent leader, or at least get people to slander him, he can discredit the entire gospel. Imagine the criticisms that could be brought against the apostle Paul if he were a modern missionary candidate! Here is how the mission board might respond to his application (I have modified this from several sources):

Dear Dr. Paul,

We have received your application to serve with our mission. Unfortunately, the board was unanimous in deciding not to accept you as a candidate with our mission. We want to be as honest as possible, so that you can address what we see as some serious deficiencies in your character and past service.

First, we understand that you have never had sufficient financial support in your missionary labors. Working on the side to support yourself is unacceptable to this board. If a man does not have the faith to trust God for full support, we think that he is not qualified to serve on the mission field.

Second, we have heard that you have been brash and outspoken about your own views. Specifically, we heard that you publicly criticized Dr. Simon Peter and that you contended so strongly with some of our ministers that a special council had to be convened at Jerusalem to prevent a church split. We cannot condone such radicalism. We are enclosing a copy of Darius Carnegie's book, "How to Win Jews and Influence Greeks." We encourage you to read it.

Also, we understand that you have not graduated from an accredited seminary. We are glad that you learned a lot during your three years in Arabia, but that does not count. Also, in our background check, we discovered that you used to be a violent man to the point of persecuting the church. Even since your conversion, you have been in jail on more than one

occasion. You caused so much trouble for the businessmen of Ephesus that it led to a riot. If it were an isolated incident, that might be one thing. But a pattern of causing enough trouble to lead to your being beaten on several occasions and even being stoned once shows an underlying problem on your part. We would advise a counseling program where you could learn some basic relational skills.

Our background check further revealed that you have numerous critics and enemies, even in some of the churches that you supposedly founded. Some of those critics in Corinth challenge whether it was you or Apollos who had the most influence there. We also learned the details about your falling out with the fine young minister, John Mark, and your refusal to cooperate with Barnabas. We have talked with Hymenaeus and Alexander, who said that you delivered them over to Satan! We believe that such extreme measures are uncalled for! A more tolerant and less judgmental approach would be more in the spirit of our gentle Savior.

Apart from these serious flaws, we have heard that you are prone to preach too long, not being sensitive to your audience. We heard that one young man actually fell to his death while you droned on and on! You need to get in tune with the younger generation that has been raised on TV. Fifteen-minute sermons are the maximum that they can endure. We advise you to use more stories and less doctrine in your messages. Have you considered using a drama team instead of a sermon once in a while?

You admit on your application that you cannot remember those whom you have baptized. A good record-keeping system would help you to be more organized. Also, your resume shows that you have never ministered in one place longer than three years. This pattern of moving on to new works shows that you lack perseverance. Our staff psychologist also suggests that it may reflect a pattern of running from your problems rather than a commitment to work through them.

We share all of these things out of love and concern for you. We want you to succeed in whatever the Lord has for you. But we strongly believe that you would do best in some-

thing other than missions. The stresses of the mission field could lead to a complete nervous breakdown. Perhaps a good Christian counselor could help you begin to work through some of these problems. We wish you God's best.

Sincerely, The Antioch Mission Board

Our text records Paul's last encounter with the Ephesian elders. He wanted to get to Jerusalem by the Day of Pentecost, so he did not stop in Ephesus, which would have delayed him too long. So he sent and had the Ephesian elders come to him while his ship was in port at Miletus, about 30 miles south as the crow flies, but longer on the road. The elders were probably the pastors of the numerous house churches that met all over Ephesus. Probably many of them were the original twelve men that he met with in the school of Tyrannus (19:1-10) The title "elder" describes the maturity required for the office. In 20:28, Paul calls these same men "overseers" (bishops), which focuses on their main task, to superintend matters in the church.

This is our only example in Acts of a sermon addressed to Christians, or more specifically, to church leaders. Apparently, some of Paul's critics had been at work in Ephesus, trying to undermine him as a man of God and leader. This comes through in his repeatedly saying, "you yourselves know" (20:18, 34), and his reminding them of his character and way of life when he had been with them. He is clearly defending himself and at the same time showing us some qualities of godly church leadership. In a day when many church leaders have fallen into serious sin, the vitality of the church depends on our recovering these godly leadership qualities. Even if you are not a church leader, every fruitful Christian should be growing in these four qualities seen in our text:

A godly leader is marked by a servant attitude, transparent integrity, godly character, and faithful biblical teaching.

1. A godly leader is marked by a servant attitude.

Paul's servant attitude flavors this entire message, but he mentions specifically that he was "serving the Lord" (20:19). The word "serving" is the verb related to the noun "bond-servant" or slave. Paul often referred to himself as a bond-servant of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Col. 1:7; 4:7; Titus 1:1). It was the way

he viewed himself, and the way that every Christian should view himself. We do not belong to ourselves; we are slaves of Jesus Christ. We should do all that we do to please Him. If we have a sphere of service, we received it from Him (Acts 20:24).

This means that a leader primarily serves the Lord, and only secondarily serves the church. He will answer to God someday for how he fulfilled the stewardship entrusted to Him. I realize that sometimes a self-willed man will use that as an excuse for being unaccountable to anyone. If his board questions his behavior, he piously answers, "I don't need to answer to you; I answer to God!" That is a cop out. Everyone needs to be accountable.

But there is a legitimate sense in which a godly leader realizes that he will answer to God, and it keeps him from becoming a man-pleaser. As Paul said (Gal. 1:10), "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (see also, 1 Thess. 2:4). This sense of pleasing God rather than men allows a godly leader to confront sin when necessary, and to preach difficult truth when necessary (more on this in a moment).

When a man truly sees himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, he will take up the towel and basin as Jesus did (John 13:1-17), and serve others out of love. Lording it over others is the world's way. Christ's way is that the greatest among us should be the servant of all (Mark 10:42-45).

2. A godly leader is marked by transparent integrity.

Paul said, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time" (20:18). He later mentions that he was with them "night and day for a period of three years" (20:31). He was referring to spending a lot of time with these men, but I think that he was also referring to living his life openly before them. They had seen how he lived. He didn't put on a front when he was with them, but then live differently when he was away from them. He had nothing to hide.

Integrity means that what you are in private or at home is the same as what you are in public. Your life is a single fabric. This stems from the first quality, that you are aware that you are serving the Lord, who knows every thought and motive of the heart.

In the 1940's, a preacher named Will Houghton served as the President of Moody Bible Institute. An agnostic man, who was contemplating suicide, decided that if he could find a minister who lived his faith, he would listen to him. So he hired a private detective to watch Houghton. When the investigator's report came back, it revealed that this preacher's life was above reproach. He was for real. The agnostic went to Houghton's church, trusted in Christ, and later sent his daughter to Moody Bible Institute ("Our Daily Bread," 11/83). Leaders must be men of godly integrity.

3. A godly leader is marked by godly character.

Many godly character qualities could be listed, such as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). But three qualities stand out here:

A. Godly character includes humility.

You have probably heard it said that as soon as you think that you've attained humility, you've lost it. But that's not true. Paul here mentions his own humility. Jesus described Himself as gentle and humble in heart (Matt. 11:29). Moses described himself as the most humble man on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3)! So apparently, you can know when you are humble without being proud of it. What does it mean to be humble?

In a nutshell, biblical humility is a conscious awareness of your utter dependence on Jesus Christ. We see it in Paul when he explains, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5). We see it when he says, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:4). He confronts the pride of the Corinthians when he asks, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). A humble person is continually aware that all that he is stems from God's grace. His confidence is not in himself, but in the Lord, so that he is quick to give the glory to God in every situation.

I recently received a promotional letter from some folks in the church growth movement that reported a study that reveals "that although successful leaders have many strengths and various factors in common, there is only one factor that *all* successful leaders

have in common—*self-confidence*” (emphasis in original). Having concluded that self-confidence is an essential quality for successful leaders, they proceeded to develop a tool that would help pastors develop confidence in themselves (I’m not making this up!).

But in the context of warning us about the deceitfulness of the heart, the Bible strongly warns against self-confidence (Jer. 17:5-9). True, we can do all things *through Christ* who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13). But there is a huge difference between confidence in *Christ in us* and confidence in *ourselves*. A godly leader depends on Christ and is quick to share his own weaknesses (2 Chron. 20:12; 2 Cor. 12:5-10). That is the essence of biblical humility.

B. Godly character includes love, concern, and compassion.

These qualities are behind the word “tears” (20:19). He again mentions his tears in 20:31, in the context of admonishing these elders, especially with regard to false teaching. There are more tears, both on Paul’s and the elders’ part, when they accompany Paul to the ship for their final goodbye (20:37). Paul’s tears showed how much he cared about these men, and the feelings were mutual. As the old saying goes, “People don’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care.”

Paul was moved to tears when he heard of Christians who were not walking obediently to Christ. He wrote to the Corinthians, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you” (2 Cor. 2:4). If you need to correct someone who has fallen into sin or serious error, make sure that the person senses your genuine love and concern.

C. Godly character includes steadfastness in trials.

The Ephesian elders had seen Paul go through the trials that came upon him through the plots of the Jews (20:19). The Book of Acts does not record any such plots in Ephesus, although it does report several other such plots of the Jews in other cities (9:23; 20:3; 23:12), and so it is not difficult to assume that the same thing had happened in Ephesus. The Ephesian elders had also seen Paul’s behavior when the Gentiles rioted against him. In all of these situations, they saw Paul, even though he despaired of life

itself, trust all the more in God (2 Cor. 1:8-10). He didn't grow bitter and rage against God that He wasn't being fair. He didn't lash out at the Jews in vengeance. He submitted to God's mighty hand and cast his cares upon Him (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

Thus a godly leader is marked by a servant attitude, by transparent integrity, and by godly character that includes humility, love, and steadfastness in trials. Finally,

4. A godly leader is marked by faithful biblical teaching.

Verses 20 & 21 reveal five aspects of faithful teaching:

A. Faithful biblical teaching requires not dodging difficult truths.

"I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable." This implies that some things that are profitable are difficult to receive, and thus difficult to teach. If Paul had been seeking to please men, he would have dodged these truths. If he had wanted to be a popular speaker, he would have chosen other subjects. But because he sought to please God, and because he knew that these truths were profitable for spiritual growth and health, he plainly taught what God wanted him to teach.

What were some of these truths? I think that we can surmise a few of them by reading Ephesians, which he later wrote to this church. He begins by talking about the doctrines of God's sovereign election and predestination (1:4-5). He goes on to talk about human depravity, that we were all dead in our trespasses and sins (2:1). Because of this, salvation is totally from God's grace, not from our merit or works (2:5-9). He shows how the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles is broken down in Christ (2:11-22). All of these doctrines level human pride and exalt the cross of Jesus Christ. Because they rob man of any basis for pride, people stumble over these truths. But like health food, they are profitable for spiritual health, and so Paul taught them, and so should we.

B. Faithful biblical teaching requires practical application that helps people to grow in their faith.

Paul taught what was profitable or helpful for spiritual growth and health. He warns Timothy about those who teach things that lead to mere speculation and fruitless discussion, rather than fur-

thering God's provision which is by faith (1 Tim. 1:4-7). As he studies the Bible, a faithful Bible teacher always asks, "So what? What difference should this Scripture make in my life (first), and in the lives of those whom I teach?" Sound application always comes out of sound interpretation of a biblical text in its context. You should be able to look at your Bible and say, "Yes, I see that this is what God wants me to do."

- C. Faithful biblical teaching should take place both in formal and informal settings.

Paul taught these men publicly and from house to house. Paul taught these men in the school of Tyrannus, in the house church meetings, when they heard him preach in the Jewish synagogues, and in their various homes as they shared meals or got together socially. Sometimes it was the entire group at once. At other times, he met individually with one man to help him understand some doctrine or work through a personal problem biblically. The informal times reveal that Paul always loved to talk about the things of God with these men. He was constantly interacting with them about Scripture because it was central in his life.

- D. Faithful biblical teaching reflects a seriousness about eternal truths.

Paul "solemnly testified" both to Jews and Greeks about repentance and faith. The word pictures a person under oath in a courtroom, solemnly swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Paul realized that the eternal destiny of souls was at stake, and he didn't take his preaching assignment lightly.

There is a place for some humor in the pulpit, but it is easy to abuse humor so as to convey that we are not in dead earnest about eternal issues. I recently heard a sermon on a cassette, and I came away thinking that the preacher came across like a stand up comedian. His content would have been fine if he had conveyed it in earnest, but his repeated humor made it seem like a light-hearted, don't take it too seriously, kind of message. A faithful biblical teacher should convey the seriousness of the gospel.

- E. Faithful biblical teaching proclaims repentance and faith as the core requirements for those who want to be right with God.

Some say that repentance toward God applies to the Gentiles, and faith in our Lord Jesus to the Jews. But there is no grammatical reason to take it that way, and the fact is, both groups need both qualities. Repentance and faith are the flip sides of the same coin. They are different ways of looking at the requirement for salvation, but you can't separate them from one another. Repentance means turning from our sin toward God. It is impossible to turn toward the holy God and at the same time consciously holding on to your sin. Repentance is the heart-felt cry, "O God, I have sinned against You, but I don't want to live that way any longer. Have mercy on me, the sinner!"

Faith is the hand that lays hold of God's provision in Christ. Faith looks to Christ as the righteousness that I need to stand before a holy God. Faith looks to Christ as the pardon for all my sins through His shed blood. Faith in the Lord Jesus means that I am not trusting in my own righteousness in any way, but only in Jesus as my mediator and advocate. Both faith and repentance are God's gifts, not a matter of human merit (Acts 11:18; Eph. 2:8-9).

And just as we begin the Christian life through repentance and faith, so we should go on living daily by repentance and faith (Col. 2:6). As God's Word shines into the dark areas of our lives, we turn from our sins and we trust in all that Christ is for us and in us. That is the Christian walk, repenting and believing, repenting and believing. Christ Himself is the object and sum of our faith.

Conclusion

Whether you are in an official leadership position or not, you should be growing in these four areas. Are you just living for yourself, or are you developing a servant's attitude? Are you living a double life, or are you growing in godly integrity? What about your character? Are you growing in humility, in love and concern for others, and in steadfastness in trials? And, while you may not have the gift of teaching, you should be growing in understanding and applying all of God's Word to all of your life and then sharing what you are learning with others. Congressman J. C. Watts said, "To say America can have strong leadership without strong character is to say we can get water without the wet" (*Reader's Digest* [12/98], p. 39). The same is true for the church!

Discussion Questions

1. How does a servant know when to say no to demands that people make on him?
2. How open should a leader be regarding his personal weaknesses and failures? Does transparency mean baring all?
3. What practical steps can we take to grow in humility?
4. Can love and kindness be joined with uncompromising faithfulness to God's truth? How? Where is the biblical balance?

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