

Sermon Draft

Text: 1 Timothy 3:1–13

Sermon: “Rules”

God’s Word calls people from death to life and gathers them together in community. Sometimes that community is wayward but other times it follows the way of the Lord.

In the readings from Amos and Luke, we have painful visions of wayward communities. The people of Israel are “*at ease in Zion*” (Amos 6:1). They recline luxuriously, feast sumptuously, and sing beautifully. But they are far from the kingdom of God and, therefore, merit God’s word of judgment and, thus, his call to repentance.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man also lives extravagantly, which is all the more offensive because it happens in the sight of the poor. Through the parable, Jesus judges this way of life, warning his people to live in communities of faith, not finery.

Paul’s First Letter to Timothy offers a different vision of community. Paul lays out the qualifications for those who serve as pastors and deacons.

Contrasting this description of faithful church leaders with the warnings upon wayward communities in the Old Testament Reading and Gospel leads us to pray that God would “*grant us,*” congregations and, especially, pastors, “*the help of Your grace that we may please You in both will and deed*” (Collect).

Having seen how sin can corrupt the community of faith, Paul writes to Timothy, offering a glimpse of how God would provide leadership for wholesome communities of faith.

Remember playing games as a child, board games? Playing games teach us about rules and regulations. Although I’m sure we read the rules at the beginning of the game, we usually didn’t attend to them until something was wrong. Something had to be at stake before we would consult the rules.

We all know about rules, we live with them every day. People have chosen sides for or against and the rules will be used to arbitrate the dispute. Rules rule. And those who can make their case on the basis of the rules will win the game.

In a way, this is how many approach this section from Paul’s letter to Timothy. Paul is offering Timothy a description of the qualities that should be possessed by pastors and deacons.

How easy it would be to read through this list and do a mental evaluation of your pastor and determine whether he should be in or out. If things are tough, if congregational life is not going the way you desire, how easy it would be to turn to 1 Timothy 3 and begin to make an argument either for or against your pastor.

While there certainly are situations where such things need to be attended to, and this list of qualifications certainly can prevent a person from entering the ministry or remove a person from it, that is not the only function for this list of qualifications. This morning, I would like to consider this list of qualifications as you would a list of rules at the beginning of a game . . . before fights have started, before feelings have been hurt, before something has happened that needs to be judged. I would like to consider this list of qualities as a picture of the kind of community that a church will become. When a church has leaders like this, what does it look like? What is it like to live in such a community? In this list of qualifications, God offers us a helpful vision of the ministry and of life in the community of faith.

God offers us a vision of a community that works for others. In our readings this morning, we have a contrast of two kinds of community, one that is wayward and one that follows the way of the Lord. The wayward communities are concerned only about themselves.

In Amos, they have surrounded themselves with beautiful music and luxurious furnishings to celebrate their faith. Even though there is grave injustice in the world, they close their doors to the world and celebrate being at “ease in Zion.”

In Jesus’ parable in Luke, the rich man reclines at a feast while God has placed the poor man at his door. The rich man’s self-indulgence blinds him to an opportunity for charity. It is more important to care for himself than others.

In his First Letter to Timothy, Paul offers a different vision for the Church in Ephesus (vs 1–3). In a community that follows the way of the Lord, the leader of that community will not be a lover of money, not be drawn to excess, but live in moderation and conduct himself with self-control. He will control his concerns for himself and cultivate his concern for others.

As Paul notes, he will be hospitable, caring for God's Church, and have a good reputation among those outside the faith.

The difference between the two communities is the difference between a life of self-service and a life of self-sacrifice. Communities can focus on their needs and attend to their own desires, or they can focus on their Lord and his desire for the Church. Christ created his Church through his act of self-sacrificial love. Although he had no sin, he bore the punishment for sin on our behalf that we might become children of God. He forgives our selfish struggle to care for ourselves and reveals that not only are we cared for by God, but we are also gifted by God to care for others.

Our Lord raises among us pastors, who control concerns for the self and cultivate concerns for others, to lead us into acts of self-sacrificial love. In some major cities, there have been churches that form partnerships in the Gospel. A wealthy suburban church forms a partnership with an under-resourced urban congregation. Rather than living "at ease in Zion," congregations are drawn to sharing the life of Christ with others.

God's vision for his church leaders and for his churches is that they be communities of self-sacrifice that work for others. God offers us a vision of a community that grows through care and gracious conversation.

Almost at the center of Paul's list of qualities is the ability to teach (v 2). God desires that his communities of faith be led by pastors who are able to teach. False teaching was a problem for the Church in Ephesus. Paul warns Timothy several times about false teachers (1:3–7; 6:3–5) and offers clear directions on how to teach (4:6–16). What is interesting here, however, is how the ability to teach is listed among and related to other qualities that the pastor should possess (vs 2–3).

Teaching does not happen in a vacuum. In fact, teaching is best done in relation to the life of the teacher. When Jesus calls his disciples, he calls them not only to listen to him but also to follow him and to learn from him by participating in his ministry. On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus began the Passover celebration by washing his disciples' feet.

After such humble and even humiliating service, Jesus asks his disciples, ***“Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet”*** (John 13:12–14). Teaching is joined to life experience.

The life experience that lies at the very heart of Christian teaching is that of salvation. As Paul relates to Timothy earlier in the letter,

“Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”

(1:13–15). Through God’s gracious work forgiving sin and granting salvation, he prepares pastors to teach. They share with others this word of grace that saves.

Paul encourages pastors to teach with a gentle spirit, so that the pastor is “above reproach” and people do not dismiss the message because of the messenger.

At the heart of the world, filled with injustice and violence, is God's Church and, at the heart of the Church, in word and in deed, is our gracious Lord and his work of salvation. Faithful conversation in our world is difficult, but Paul encourages pastors to be above reproach, respectable, gentle, not quarrelsome, creating communities that grow through care and gracious conversation.

Scholars have reflected on Paul's list of qualifications for pastors. Often, they have noted that lists like this are common for positions of leadership in the ancient world. This insight makes it seem as though Paul was just taking the lists used by others and applying them to the Church. If that were the case, then different cultures and different time periods would produce different lists. The qualities important for a pastor in twenty-first-century America would be different than the qualities important for a pastor in twenty-first-century Africa or sixteenth-century Germany.

Another way of viewing this list, however, is to see how it grows out of the love of God in Christ. In Jesus Christ, the eternal Word became living flesh and dwelt among us.

God entered into a saving human relationship with us. God began his good work relationally and, in the Church, God continues to work through human relationships. He leads not only through words but also through life. God offers a list of qualities for pastors so that he can work through them to form congregations that work for the good of others and grow through care and gracious conversation.

Amen