

Sermon for the Festival of St. Titus, Pastor and Confessor January 26, 2025 jj
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Paul wrote to Titus about all those qualifications necessary to be an elder or bishop, both terms mean a parish pastor. Look at them! How can a pastor do all of that? How can he be so upright and free of blame? He's just a sinner like the rest of us! What gives him the right to forgive sins?—only God can do that! Why can't a well-qualified woman do the same job, anyway? The answers to all of these well-known and persistent questions about the Pastoral Office are variations on the same main point spelled out in Scripture: (and that is,) this Office, this Ministry, belongs to God and all pastors' work is and always will be our Lord's work of salvation among us sinful human beings here on earth.

But if God's Word is so clear on the Office and work that pastors are called to do, then why is there still so much confusion about it in the Christian church today? Why do some churches constantly blame all their problems on their pastors, while others unreasonably exalt their shepherds to the highest of all pedestals? Why do the guys with millions of views on social media look in no way like the ones who have filled this pulpit? Some are considered chief executives, others are their congregation's number one cheerleader and fundraiser. It seems they have to be a best friend to everybody, while at the same time, they're perceived to be keeping tabs on their members' level of sanctification (“Shhh... don't say anything! The pastor's right behind you!”). So what is a pastor? A therapist? An idea man? Someone you can count on for a handout?

Imagine for a moment that you're on the Mediterranean island of Crete with Paul and Titus, and these intrepid missionaries have nothing but the shirts on their backs and the Gospel in their mouths. Most of the native people had not heard much about Jesus, and as

Paul could attest, some Cretans were not all that easy to get along with. These islanders, however, were just as much in need of salvation, and they had their own version of sinful inner desires that kept them from faith and a godly life. Several Christian congregations were founded in the various towns on this island, and Titus was going to be responsible for providing those house churches with preachers. What do you suppose at this early time was their greatest need in a church? What programs or strategies could these young congregations put into place? What would be the first order of business for these new pastors?

The Bible tells us to look to our Savior Jesus Christ. Everything the Church is about must begin and end with Him. It wasn't our idea for Him to come to this earth; like I said last week about the wedding at Cana, He wasn't waiting around for our invitation—He had been planning His visit to us from the beginning of creation, and He made His prophetic reservation on the very day our world fell into sin and separation from our Creator. God promised Adam and Eve in the midst of their fall from grace that the promised seed, the Messiah, would come to defeat Satan and earn for everyone true reconciliation with Him. The Father sent the Son from Heaven's throne to accomplish the forgiveness of sins and win for us the heavenly perfection that we could never attain on our own. We just finished celebrating Christmas and now we're in Epiphany season, both of which highlight the significance of the almighty Son of God's coming among us in human flesh. Then, after Jesus arrived in the fullness of time and began His ministry, He chose apostles (just as it says in Luke chapter 10) to go ahead of Him and proclaim the Kingdom of God, that is, announce to everyone that peace and reconciliation with the Father are yours by faith in Jesus. The all-important

empowering phrase comes from Christ's own lips: He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you, rejects Me and rejects Him who sent Me.

That's the pastoral ministry—simply stated. Whatever Jesus has to say to you, you should be hearing it from the mouth of your pastor. If someone doesn't hear a fiery zeal for the pure Word of God and a constant drumbeat of free forgiveness in Christ's name, then that preacher is either unfaithful or at least distracted by more earthly cares. Pastors need to have Christ's love for His flock, and patience towards their weaknesses and slowness of heart to trust God in everything. They know their people will be hurting, confused, sometimes angry with God, always in need of forgiveness and eternal, heavenly peace. They know this because that is their own need as forgiven sinners too, washed in the blood of Christ, baptized into His death and resurrection, awaiting the guaranteed promise of resurrection and heaven, yet they're still in this life struggling against the flesh. He may not be always that stereotypical "encyclopedia" of Bible knowledge, but the pastor is called to be one who cares for souls, one who by reason of his very work, needs to take you seriously, probably more so than you do yourself. Rather than running around judging people's bad habits, your pastor must equip you with genuine repentance and a joyful faith in Christ's forgiveness of sins.

As Paul said in his good-bye speech to those pastors in Ephesus (Acts 20), a pastor doesn't have to come up with a constant barrage of new stuff that draws everyone's attention to himself. He should be about the task of proclaiming and teaching the "whole counsel of God," the entire message of salvation, repentance, forgiveness, and the blessed holy life that is yours as a Christian. He needs to wash away your sins, bind up your wounds, bestow the blessing of a clean heart that has been created in you by the Word of God that comes out of your pastor's mouth, and he needs to look forward along with

you to the final-day coming of Jesus with a joyful and expectant heart.

So a pastor carries out the work that the Holy Spirit does: not to entertain you or to exalt himself as an example. It's more like Paul himself said: Follow me as I follow Christ—that means, keep me honest, help me remember that I am my Lord's servant, while at the same time you respect the office I hold as not my thing, but God's, and He's the one doing the work, and He's speaking through me to you. The Russian Lutheran pastors speak the absolution of forgiveness saying something like this, I, the *unworthy servant* of the Lord, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By the words you hear from this pulpit and that you speak and sing from where you are in the nave and in the pew, you are graciously welcomed into the presence of the Almighty God. He deserves to judge and condemn you, but He loves and forgives you instead for the sake of Jesus.

Imagine again that day in one of the ports on the island of Crete—that day when Paul set sail and moved on in his missionary journey and Titus was going to remain behind. Do you think Titus may have thought with a little human anxiety, What have I just gotten into? I'm supposed to get how many churches up and running? Or think of any one of those seventy apostles whom Jesus sent ahead of Him. Everybody was expecting the famous, miracle-working Son of Man Himself. How can I compete with the fame of Jesus and have anything to say that will be half as interesting as when He's doing the teaching? But if these made-up human thoughts ever crept into their minds, thankfully they didn't end up holding these men back from being faithful preachers of the kingdom. Jesus had chosen the seventy men for a reason. Paul selected Titus and commissioned Him with not an open-ended contract so that he had to make up his own missionary job, but rather with the very same ministry of the Word that Jesus gave

to him when he was blinded on the road to Damascus.

Romans spells it out very clearly in chapter 10: “The same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on him. For, ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” The answers to Paul’s rhetorical questions are all the same: How can they pray? They can’t. How can they believe? They can’t. How can they hear? They can’t. How can they preach? They can’t. That’s why God has, through the call of His Church, set forth certain qualified men to be pastors so that they have a particular place to preach the Word of Christ, particular people who will hear and believe in Jesus, and then call upon His name in thanksgiving for the salvation that He won on the cross for everyone.

You may have had your ideas from time to time about what to expect from a pastor. You may have even thought that the Bible didn’t get it right about who is supposed to occupy the Office of the Ministry. Pastors are tempted to think once they start their work at a church: Why didn’t they teach me *x*, *y* and *z* at the seminary? Perhaps you may know of a pastor of another time and place who brought shame and even disgrace to this Holy Calling. Their sins can be forgiven, but they should no longer hold the Office. It’s at those times that we all need to remember it all begins and ends with Christ. He came among us, having been sent from the Father. He sends preachers of His Word, giving them beautiful feet because of the Good News of forgiveness that they bring. And He also brings the Holy Spirit and His comfort, because trial and persecution and spiritual struggle are

going to come upon you. But as those first seventy pastors proclaimed long ago, so also is it true today: the Kingdom of God has come near to you! Peace be to this house-this humble church where you hear His true Word! Pray the Lord of the harvest to send His laborers into every field that yet remains empty. And when you hear your pastor’s word of absolution, trust with all your heart that it is Christ who spoke that powerful Word to save your soul from sin and the devil, and bring you at last to the eternal life that you will see at the last Day.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.