

INTRO

Welcome back to the third week of small groups. I hope everyone has been enjoying their small groups so far.

As you know, we're going through this series titled Maintenance Required, where we're looking at specific challenges that churches in the past have faced and ones we can currently face today as a church. The challenge that we're going to focus on today is the issue of looking at the wrong criteria for what makes someone a good pastoral leader in our lives.

ILLUSTRATION

Many of us have probably experienced buying a vehicle at some point. And if you're anything like me, you didn't go to a car dealership and buy a brand-new car because you're not rich. So maybe you went to Facebook Marketplace to try and purchase a car.

And what do you always need to do when you look at a car on Marketplace? You check out the car to see if it's a good car to spend your money on because you don't want to buy something that is a piece of junk.

Now I want you to imagine I get there to see the car, and the very first thing I start looking at is the color of the floor mats in the car. Then the next thing I start looking into is how nice the seat covers are. Are they perfect for the car? Do they fit the vibe of the vehicle?

And after seeing only those two things, I say, "Yep, we're good," and then I shake the guy's hand and hand him all my money.

You would look at me and say, "Luke! What is the matter with you? You should've checked the engine. Are there any oil leaks? How many miles does it have on it? Are the brakes good?"

The issue that you see here is that my criteria for determining if it was a good car or not was entirely wrong and misguided. It wasn't focused on the items that actually mattered; it was focused on shallow, unimportant items like floor mats and seat covers.

TRANSITION

Here today we're going to see in 1 Corinthians that this is the exact challenge the Corinthian church was struggling with. However, it wasn't about cars, but about church leadership within their church.

These church members were wrongly chasing worldly charisma as the guideline for what successful pastoral leadership should look like rather than what Scripture gives as the guideline.

If you remember in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul addresses people who had factional loyalties to different ministers and preachers in their lives. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul states, "Some of you are saying, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.'" And Paul says, "Is Christ divided? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

Paul is ultimately showing them that, "You guys are creating divisions between one church leader over another and basing your loyalty to them on prideful and ultimately wrong criteria."

They based what a good pastoral leader is on how impressive their speech was. "Are they persuasive enough?"

Another wrong criterion the Corinthian church was using was the status of church leaders. How popular and successful are they? Do they have a large following or fame?

They also looked at the charisma and personality of these leaders. How do they make me feel? Do they charm people?

And we can recognize how this is a problem.

And I think, to bring it to our context today, within our culture we are seeing an influx of this in our world. People, even Christians, are basing who they let speak into their lives on how those people make them feel or how popular or successful they are on their platform.

We must recognize that the modern-day church is just as prone to these mistakes that the Corinthian church made.

There was an article about a study showing us that today within our society, emotional influence is stronger than in previous generations.

What's my point in making this statement?

It's becoming more obvious that people let their emotional feelings about a person dictate whether they think that person is someone worth listening to or not. And I think that includes pastors and church leadership.

Many Christians can fall into this trap, saying things like:

"This pastor just makes me FEEL so inspired."

"This Christian influencer on the internet makes me FEEL so encouraged."

"I just love this certain pastor's PERSONALITY."

On the flip side:

"Well, I just don't like the personality of my pastor."

Or, "The way the assistant pastor or Christian mentor in my life speaks is just so dry."

And due to those feelings about them, positive or negative, that's the determination of whether they're a credible spiritual leader for me or not.

And while there is nothing wrong with enjoying different personalities and having preferences, we're going to see today that these types of criteria—personality, popularity, charisma—are not the biblical criteria when it comes to the credibility of church leaders and spiritual leaders at large.

Charisma, eloquent speaking, and popularity aren't the requirements needed.

And a challenge we need to be aware of as a local church is to not allow such shallow, superficial standards to seep into our hearts when it comes to how we view what good spiritual leadership looks like.

True spiritual qualifications that we should value in our leadership are gospel-centered criteria.

And we're going to highlight three of those criteria briefly tonight to help us walk through this.

So the point I want to drive home for this lesson is this:

In determining what godly leadership is, it should always be based on the Bible's requirements, not the world's ideas of what successful leadership is.

So the question naturally arises:

"If personality, eloquence, and status aren't the marks of an effective spiritual leader, if the Corinthian church was wrong in doing this, then what is? How should we as a local church approach it? What traits should I be valuing in determining effective spiritual leaders?"

So the author Mark Dever, in his book *12 Challenges Churches Face*, gives us three overarching indicators found in 1 Corinthians 4 of what truly marks a good pastor or spiritual leader.

And so rather than earthly standards, the first trait that marks an authentic minister or pastor is that they preach and speak a—

Cross-Centered Message

Going back to 1 Corinthians 4:1, Paul identifies in this letter to this church that he and other apostles and pastors are not owners of the message they preach, but rather stewards of the mysteries of God.

The message that they are to preach is not their own message. They don't speak on their own things to elevate themselves and their status. Paul didn't go out and preach whatever he wanted.

No, he was simply relaying the message God gave him, which is the message of the gospel.

God is the ultimate judge of what message He wants His stewards to communicate, and He expects them to communicate and deliver the secret things—or the gospel—to the people they are ministering to.

A quote in the book states:

"No one—not the Corinthians, or believers today, or ministers, or even Paul himself—has the authority to change the message."

And so here's the point:

A cross-centered message is supposed to be the driving message that a pastor or steward of Christ's church communicates.

This is the first natural expectation of what a godly leader should be consistently doing.

The core message of any spiritual leader—pastor, evangelist, missionary—should always be a cross-centered one.

Listen, we know this. There are plenty of people who claim to be spiritual leaders, and they may speak really well. They may have a very eloquent or engaging way of speaking to their audience. And yet the message they relay is not gospel-centered.

It's not about sharing truth; it's about making everyone feel comfortable or inspired.

For example, we see a lot of this in the false prosperity gospel and its leaders. There are thousands upon thousands of people listening, and yet the core of their message is wealth, health, and self-focus.

It's not centered around Jesus and His message.

And so whether or not a pastor or preacher makes you feel inspired by their words isn't the biblical criteria for a godly leader. It's whether or not they are speaking truth in their message to you.

If they do not relay the message of the gospel clearly and consistently to their listeners, they should not have your ear. They should not be speaking into your life as a believer.

Transition

But not only is a cross-centered message important, the second thing that marks an authentic minister is that they are living a—

Cross-Centered Lifestyle

Paul continues with these Corinthians that the evidence of a cross-centered life is one that's not marked by self-elevation but by humility.

These people in the Corinthian church saw themselves being strong, honored, and highly esteemed as the way of a godly leader.

I like the way the book said this:

"The deceived ones in the Corinthian church had cobbled together some illusions, replacing the cross as the center of the Christian life with something much more palatable."

And yet Paul's life as an authentic minister of God was the polar opposite of this.

In the world's eyes, Paul was foolish. He was weak and dishonored. He was poor.

And the Corinthian church, in their faulty criteria of what marks a good pastor or leader, looked down upon him because of that.

They looked at earthly success, fame, and money as marks of successful ministry, and Paul is saying, "No! That's not it."

A cross-centered lifestyle often does not lead to a palatable, easy life.

But these Corinthians seemed to have it backwards in their heads.

They looked at these temporal milestones of success and said things like, "That's the example to follow after."

And yet Paul is doing what?

He's rebuking that.

He's saying to them, "As a steward of the gospel message, I am not esteemed in this world. I'm looked at as a fool, a dishonored person in this world because my life is not focused on me. It's not focused on my earthly success and comforts; it's focused around the gospel."

Another quote from Mark Dever states:

"The Christian message of a crucified Christ calls us to a different goal. We are no longer concerned with the world's wisdom, a world that made the decision to crucify Christ."

(Pause)

Now, we know it's important to make a caveat that a pastor or leader having money and maybe even a big following does not automatically make them a false teacher.

Money isn't bad. A pastor having a larger crowd or a fancier lifestyle isn't automatically sinful.

But whether their lifestyle is "successful" or not in the earth's eyes doesn't matter.

The lifestyle of a genuine shepherd of the gospel is his life being centered around that gospel.

How a shepherd or pastor spends their time, their money, and how they lead their family should be centered not around themselves and status, but around the cross.

Self-focus and self-elevation in a pastor's—or any Christian's—lifestyle is not the goal. The reflection of the gospel in one's life is the goal.

And finally, the third mark that this book walks through for us is—

Cross-Centered Followership

As we know, Paul influenced and disciplined a lot of people within his years of ministry. He was a multi-region church planter, an apostle, and a preacher.

He took guys like Timothy and Titus and disciplined them and helped them grow.

And in a modern-day context, pastors and biblical counselors are often doing similar work in discipling the people they influence.

The people they preach to and counsel consistently throughout their weeks—they're discipling them.

And a mark of a good discipler is one who helps direct those people they are discipling in the direction of living a cross-centered life.

And we see Paul as an authentic leader directly doing this for the Corinthian church.

In 1 Corinthians 4:16, Paul says, "Therefore, I urge you, imitate me."

Follow after my example.

Now this is NOT Paul arrogantly stating, "Hey, look how great I am. Follow my wonderful example."

This is not what Paul is doing.

Rather, what he's doing is saying, "In the same way that it's not about me, in the same way I'm seeking to live a humble, cross-centered life, I desire that you do the same thing. That your life mirrors Christ-centeredness. That's my goal as your leader—to help you grow toward Christ-centeredness."

And it's interesting. Paul desires this for the Corinthian church so much that he sends his good friend and sidekick Timothy to give them an in-person example to follow after.

He was willing to lose the presence of his dear friend Timothy in order to help the people he was discipling grow toward living a cross-centered life.

And this is the third mark of a real minister or shepherd: someone who desires the people they are discipling to live out Christ-centered lives.

An authentic pastor or leader will seek to have his listeners live a life where Jesus is the center of all, not they themselves.

To finish speaking on this third mark about having a cross-centered followership, I have this quote from the book:

"It is clear here that a Christian minister is called not only to teach the gospel correctly and to live out a Christlike life, but also to lead others to do the same."

CONCLUSION

And so in conclusion, to give a short recap, we've seen this challenge that a local church was facing.

They were looking at the wrong marks for what makes a good pastor or leader, saying things like, "Are they famous? Do I like their speaking style? Do they have earthly status?"

And we've walked through how, rather than looking at earthly-based criteria as a mark of success within our pastoral leadership, we should instead value and base it on biblical criteria.

Do they preach a cross-centered message? Do they live a cross-centered lifestyle? Do they disciple others to live a cross-centered life?

These are the traits that mark a biblically successful leader, and they should be what we value in those we let lead in our lives and in our local churches.

And so before we jump into our discussion times with our small groups and walk through some discussion questions, I want to close with this challenge:

There's going to be things about your past, present, and future pastors that you don't like.

That's when everyone gasps, right?

We're going to be tempted to think things like:

"Well, I just liked it better when our services used to run like this."

Or, "I don't agree with what they named this program."

To bring it closer to home:

"Well, I just wish Pastor Derek was more like this."

"I wish Pastor Paul or Pastor Josh would be less loud when they preach."

But guess what?

In the end, that doesn't matter.

Whether or not you like or dislike a pastor's style of ministry or personality isn't what qualifies them as a good spiritual leader for you as a follower of Christ.

What matters is whether they display these biblical qualities that we walked through.

I want to challenge us not to get caught up the same way the Corinthian church did.

They let superficial, frankly unimportant items about their pastors dictate whether they were a good pastor and leader for them.

And this caused so much division.

Looking at all the things that didn't matter—qualities that were so superficial and meaningless—created unnecessary offense and division within their local church.

And so my hope with this lesson is that we would learn from the mistake that a local church made in the past, and instead of doing the same thing, learn to value the Bible's criteria for what makes someone a good pastoral leader in our lives and in our local church, and value biblical leadership rather than the world's criteria.

Not the superficial things that don't actually matter.

And so with that, at this time we're going to go to our discussion times, where we're going to walk through:

What are maybe some biases and unbiblical criteria that you struggle with?

How are you letting God help you in those?

What do you need to change about your perspective on what good church leadership actually looks like?

And so with that, I want to thank you so much for listening. I hope you guys have a great week, and we'll see you all next Wednesday.

Discussion Questions

What's one thing you naturally look for when evaluating a leader (in church, work, or life), and where do you think that preference comes from?

What are some modern examples (in culture or church) of people choosing spiritual leaders based on charisma, popularity, or how they "make us feel"?

What unbiblical criteria have you caught yourself using to praise or criticize pastors or leaders? (e.g., preaching style, humor, personality, platform size)

Why is emotional influence especially powerful today, and how can that cloud our judgment about spiritual credibility?

What is one specific change you want to make in how you evaluate spiritual leaders moving forward?

