

Going for the Best, part 7 of Serving Jesus Together
November 19, 2017

In 2009 a man named Jag Ballah put out a book on idioms. The long title was, I'm Not Hanging Noodles on Your Ears and Other Intriguing Idioms From Around the World

One definition of an idiom is a phrase whose meaning is not clear from the words in it.

The title of the book comes from a Russian idiom. "I'm not hanging noodles on your ears" means I'm not trying to deceive you. It is the same as when we say, "I'm not pulling your leg."

Some other examples from the book include:

- Give it to someone with cheese = to deceive (Spanish)
- To become naked = to go broke, become poor (Japanese)
- Cleaner than a frog's armpit = to be poor, broke (Spanish)
- Speak through the nose = sweet talk a girl (Japanese)
- To seize the moon by the teeth = attempt the impossible (French)
- Jumped over his bellybutton = overreached (in Hebrew)
- To eat air = really messed up (in Arabic)
- Don't let go of the potato = don't chicken out (Canadian)

Most people groups on the planet uses idioms. It is estimated that there are at least 10,000 American idioms. Many of them are so old that no one knows how they started. Even the Bible includes many idioms from the Jews and other people groups. For example:

- "the sons of God" = angels
- "breaking of bread" = to eat a meal, and later, to eat the Lord's Supper
- "to set one's face" = to make up your mind (Luke 9:51)
- "to go to your fathers" = to die
- "a land flowing with milk and honey" = a fertile land

I wanted to introduce today's sermon with these idioms because I believe there is one in our Bible text this morning. Let's read through the whole passage first.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 (NIV) Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

This passage is loaded with treasure for us. We could spend weeks on these few verses, but I am not going to do so. Instead, I want to just give you an overview of this passage.

Before we begin I need to give you some terms for this ministry in the church. The NIV used the word overseer. Some translations use the word bishop, which also means overseer. And many translations use the word elder. The reason for using different terms is that there are three terms that appear to be interchangeable in the New Testament.

Acts 20:17-18, 28 (NIV) From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived he said to them,... "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds (pastors) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (1 Peter 5:1-2)

Whatever you call these men, they are the leaders of the church. What did these men do? Their duties entailed the spiritual oversight, administration, and preaching of the church. In short, they watched over the church's life and doctrine. This is true in many elder-led churches today.

Now, you might be thinking this passage does not apply to you personally or to our church. First, as a church, we do not have elders. Secondly, even if we did, you might not want to be an elder. Or you might consider yourself disqualified to be an elder.

But there is spiritual truth for us all in this passage. This passage presents to us a picture of Jesus. Jesus lived a perfect life. That means he did not sin. It also means he was perfect in character. This passage teaches us something of His character. We need to know this if we are going to grow up in Christ.

I talk often about how the Holy Spirit is working in each of us to make us more like Jesus in our character. Here are some specifics of what Jesus was like. Here is a picture of what all of us are to become. Here is part of the picture of what the Holy Spirit is working to make of us as we live in relationship to Jesus.

We need to be aware of what the Holy Spirit is working to accomplish. We need to be aware of these characteristics so that we are working with the Spirit instead of against the Spirit. You cannot work with God on transforming your character if you do not know what character qualities need transforming. This passage gives us a list of some of those qualities.

In this passage Paul lists 14 character qualities. Even if you do not desire to be a leader in the church, you should be improving in all of these qualities. This is not a description of a super Christian. This is a picture of a normal, healthy, mature Christian. We should all be praying for this and obeying to become like this.

Paul begins with one phrase as a heading for them all. He writes that an overseer must be above reproach. How many of you used the word reproach in the last year? **To reproach someone is to accuse of and blame for a fault so as to make feel ashamed.**

To be above reproach does not mean to be a person without sin. But there should be no habits of sin in his life that defines him in the eyes of others. If you have ever been bothered by a bully, then every time you think of that person you think "bully." Some people, despite their claim to be a Christian, are seen by coworkers as the gossip, of thief, stealing company supplies, or complainer, not demonstrating the thanksgiving that should be true of all Christians. Such Christians are not above reproach. They habitually commit such sins and become know known by them.

Mature Christians want to bring no shame upon themselves or Jesus. We do not want to give the world reason to condemn us for poor character. They may condemn our beliefs, our faith, our worship, our methods of evangelism, but they should see a highly moral people who are above reproach when it comes to character.

I am not going to spend time on every one of the 14 character qualities this morning. In fact I'm going to look only at the first three. Most of them are pretty clear in meaning. The first three are not.

The first character quality may mean either "husband of one wife" or "faithful to his wife." The New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, the 1984 edition, which I usually preach from, interprets it as "husband of but one wife". The newest version of the NIV has, "faithful to his wife". Those are two very different interpretations.

I purposely used the word interpretation and not translation. There is a difference. Here is a translation of that phrase. **A literal translation of this phrase is that an elder must be man of one woman.**

There are several issues involved in trying to make sense of this phrase which I believe to be an idiom. First of all, we must know that at that time there were no words for husband or wife in Greek. They used man and woman and the context revealed whether or not it involved a marriage. For example, when Jesus is speaking to the woman at the well, in John 4, He says to her, literally, "Go, call your man." The words "your man" shows that husband is intended by Jesus. She answers that she has no man, meaning she is not currently married. The context shows that both are referring to a husband.

The wording in 1 Timothy 3:2 is not so clear. It could, possibly, be referring to a marriage. But translating it that way raises several problems. It would take a separate sermon to deal with those problems. I can't do that this morning. (But see the separate article at the end of this sermon.)

I believe the newer NIV translation is the correct one. **I believe Paul is not writing of a marital state but of sexual fidelity.**

Paul is saying that anyone who is sexually promiscuous is ineligible to be an overseer in the church. I believe this to be the correct understanding.

Therefore, we should not take this phrase to mean that an elder has to be married and not single. We should not take it to mean that an elder can only have one wife at a time, or cannot be divorced or widowed and remarried. Instead, we should understand it to mean a man who treats every woman other than his wife as if she were his mother, his sister, or his daughter. If married, it is a man who is absolutely faithful to his wife.

Applied to women, it is a woman who is absolutely faithful to her husband. While women cannot be elders of the church, this same quality, turned around to read "woman of one man", is applied to women in 1 Timothy 5:9.

The sexual practices and values of our culture are, in many ways, at odds with Christian teaching. Let us not stoop to living as the world lives. Let us strive to be above reproach in all things sexual.

The next two character qualities are close in meaning. **Temperate** can be understood as free from excesses; behaving in a sober manner; moderate in indulging the appetites. **Self-controlled**, in this context, can be understood as sensible; prudent; live wisely; use good judgment.

Taken together we have the idea of **thoughtful** behavior. We tell our children to think before they speak, or think before they act. We want them to consider the possibilities and consequences of their words and actions. We want them to make wise choices. Wise choices require thought, not spur of the moment emotional reactions.

The church needs thoughtful men, who carefully consider the needs of the church. Jesus needs us to be thoughtful people, not reacting to the world, but acting with intentionality based on the Gospel. Jesus needs us to be careful, to use wisdom, to seek wise counsel, to behave with forethought. These are the ideas represented by these two words.

The rest of the character qualities are pretty easy to understand. You can figure out where you stand in relation to them and work to get better. Here is the point of this overview: **You can work with the Holy Spirit to improve in every character quality 1 Timothy 3:1-7.**

And when you do, the people in your life will notice. One of my favorite stories from our church is a man who became a believer as an adult. He had three grown daughters and after about a year at our church they noticed that his character was changing. He was less gruff, less grumpy, more patient, more easy going, more cheerful. He did not notice the gradual change in his character. But they did, and commented on it. The Holy Spirit working with your cooperation will change you. Your character will improve. And God will use that to draw people to Jesus through you.

Even if your character does not now reflect well on Jesus, it can change. The Bible instructs us in what needs to change. The Holy Spirit is in you to accomplish the change. But you have to be informed and cooperating with the Spirit. Give yourself prayerfully and obediently to these things in your service to Jesus. Read through this passage slowly, prayerfully, several times this week. See if the Holy Spirit convicts you of your need to improve on one or more of these qualities.

Invitation

We all should be going for the best us we can be. As a church, we certainly want leaders those who are above reproach, not simply those who are better than the rest of us. But all of us should be working to be the best we can be for Jesus. Jesus died for us. He deserves no less than that we live for Him.

I encourage you to go for the best you, you can be.

Jesus calls us to the best life, an abundant life, lived by faith in Him. The best life you can have is a life lived by faith in Jesus. With that life comes eternal life.

Today put your faith in Jesus as Savior and turn your life over to Him as Lord, and you will enter this best life.

Man of one Woman / Woman of one Man

This phrase appears three times concerning men, 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 3:12; Titus 1:6 and one time concerning women, 1 Timothy 5:9 (same words, different order). So whatever the phrase means, it means the same in all four verses, concerning both men and women.

Most translations are consistent with themselves on the men passages vs. the widow passage, interpreting both to mean the same thing. But there are exceptions. The NIV (1984) has “husband of one wife” for men but “faithfulness” for widows (Their first choice. See NIV note).

Marital relationship is determined by context. There is no separate word for “husband” or for “wife” in New Testament Greek. A literal translation would be “man of one woman” and “woman of one man.”

Consider each of the five possible translations and/or meanings and objections to each:

1. “husband of first wife” and “wife of first husband”

Meaning – Only someone currently married to his or her first, and only, spouse. The Greek word “*mia*” can mean “one” or “first”.

Objection - The widow wouldn’t currently be the wife of her first husband. (1 Timothy 5:9)

Objection - This would mean widowers could not be overseers or deacons. If a man is serving as an overseer, and his wife dies, he would have to resign as an overseer if he remarried.

Objection - Single men could not serve as overseers or deacons.

2. “husband of one wife” – no polygamy

Meaning – A person who is only married to one person at a time.

Objection - Polygamy was practiced by Hebrew husbands in the Old Testament, but not Greek or Roman husbands. There is no evidence that Hebrew men were still practicing polygamy in the days of Jesus. Polygamy was not practiced by women, making the statement about widows meaningless, 1 Timothy 5:9.

Objection - If this is so, then polygamy would be okay for all members of the church except overseers and deacons, something that is seen nowhere in the New Testament.

3. “husband of one wife” – no remarriage

Meaning - This interpretation would preclude those who have been divorced or widowed and remarried from serving as overseers or deacons.

Objection - Paul teaches that there is nothing wrong with remarrying when your spouse dies. In fact he tells the younger women that they should remarry (1 Timothy 5:14). This would mean that if, later, their new husband dies, and they have no other relatives, that they still could not be put on the list of widows. So Paul is telling them to do something that may hinder them later.

Objection - There is no interpretive justification for making this phrase mean divorced, and not widowed. Based on the text, it either means both, or neither.

Objection - It would be problematic to say no divorce at all when Jesus allowed for divorce in the case of adultery (Matthew 5:32), and Paul allowed for divorce if your un-Christian spouse divorced you because you were now a Christian (1 Corinthians 7:15).

Objection - Even if it should really be translated as 'one wife', it is not saying "of only one wife" as the NIV suggests. (The word "but" does not appear in any of the three passages.) We could just as easily assume that Paul meant something like "at least one wife" without mistranslating any more than the NIV does.

Objection - If our pastor's wife died, and he remarried, he would have to resign?

Objection - A person could have committed murder years ago, and now be an overseer, but if he got divorced years ago, he cannot be an overseer now?

Objection - It would imply there is something basically wrong, even if only in a minor way, with being married twice. And yet there is no other hint anywhere in scripture to support that.

Objection - Paul encourages both men and women to be married. And if they end up widowed, even divorced (for the correct reasons), they are free to marry again. In fact he encourages them to marry again, with the condition that they marry a Christian.

Objection - Why would Paul encourage young widows to remarry knowing that if they have no children and end up a widow a second time, they would not be qualified for the widows list?

Objections to options 1, 2, & 3: All of the other qualifications to serve as an overseer or deacon concern current behavior and reputation, not something that may have happened years ago. Many men married only once are unfaithful to that wife.

4. "faithful to wife"

Meaning – The phrase is an idiom or figure of speech. For example, the phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" was not meant to be literal but meant the land was highly fertile.

So, possibly, this phrase, “man of one woman,” is a figure of speech meaning “to be faithful to your spouse.’ This would mean being faithful either to the last one you had, if you are widowed or divorced, or your current spouse.

An overseer must be faithful to his current wife. A deacon must be faithful to his current wife. An overseer or deacon, if widowed, must be known to have been faithful to his wife. And a widow, in order to be on the List of Widows, must be known to have been faithful to her husband. If single, an overseer or deacon must be chaste. It seems unlikely that you had to be married to be an overseer or deacon since that would mean that though Paul could be an apostle and a church-planting missionary who appoints overseers in the churches, he himself could not be an overseer since he was single.

5. “have to be married”

Objection - This doesn't fit the widow.