

"I think that there's more to Christian marriage and there's more to the marriages of church leaders than simply, 'Have you ever had an affair,' or 'Have you ever been divorced?' There's more to it than that. It's whether or not we are embodying the gospel in our marriages."

Welcome to the Radically Christian Bible Study Podcast. I'm Travis Pauley, and here we have one goal: Learn to love like Jesus. Each week I visit with Wes McAdams, minister and author, and together we explore biblical passages and topics. I hope you enjoy this study.

TRAVIS: All right, Wes. We're back.

WES: Good to be back.

TRAVIS: And we've got a new question. This is from Gayla, and she references I Timothy 3:2. "Can a man be divorced and serve as an elder or deacon or must he be married only once in order to lead the church? Does this also include a widower or can a man lead if his divorce is scriptural or past wife or wives are deceased?"

WES: Okay. Well, nothing like getting real controversial right off the bat.

TRAVIS: Yeah.

WES: Okay. So let's just go right to the scripture that Gayla references, which is I Timothy Chapter 3. We could also look at Titus Chapter 1, and we may do that in a second, but -- so let's start in I Timothy 3 and verse 1. Paul says -- and, of course, he's writing to Timothy, who's a young preacher who's working with the church in Ephesus, and so he's writing

to Timothy and instructing him about the installation, the appointment, of overseers, shepherds, elders, however you want to put that, bishops. "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil." And then he goes on to talk about deacons and qualifications for them.

And so Gayla specifically is asking about verse 2 and asking about whether or not -- what this phrase means, and I think that's really at the heart of this question. And so it's -- Paul says in verse 2, "an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife." Now, it's interesting that in the Greek -- Hebrew is similar -- that the word for "husband" or "wife" is the same as the word for "man" or "woman." And so it's just context that has to tell us like when you talk about "my woman" or "your woman," you're talking about "your wife" or "my wife."

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: And so here it could be the husband of one wife or it could be, quite literally, the man of one woman. Now, the question is, like, what

does that mean, like the man of one woman or the husband of one wife? And Gayla brings up a lot of great questions, and, frankly, I would say, well, the text doesn't say. You know, I mean, it just doesn't -- it doesn't answer all of those specifically.

We've got to -- with any passage of scripture, we have to look at what it says, look at what the -- the gist of it is and what the author's train of thought is. Like what is he really trying to get across? And then we can get down to the specifics of application and say, okay, well, how does this apply and what about this situation and what about that situation?

What I think we have to be careful about, first of all, here is that we -- we turn this into a checklist, and that's one of my big concerns about the way that we typically talk about -- and "enforce" might be a good word -- these qualifications of elders and deacons. It's not a checklist, and there's lots of nuance. There's lots of room to apply and interpret. I mean, again -- I mean, it says things like "not a drunkard," "not violent but gentle," "not quarrelsome," "not a lover of money." Like, I mean, I've never -- I've never heard anybody get real, you know, specific on, well, what does that mean, "not a lover of money"? Like how much money, and does that mean --

TRAVIS: Yeah.

WES: Like what if somebody's a banker or what if somebody's an accountant, or what if somebody's --

TRAVIS: And they love their job.

WES: Right. Yeah, what if they like their job and they're an accountant

and their whole job revolves around money? I've never once heard anybody say that. I've never heard anybody say, well, this person is a very successful businessman so maybe he's not qualified to be an elder. In fact, we tend to say, you're a very successful businessman; you'd probably be a great elder. You know, and so -- and I'm not, by the way, saying to somebody that they are a lover of money.

What I am saying is that you have to look at their life, and he's really not making that sort of a checklist that is like, well, people with these jobs, they're out, because they -- no, that's not what he's saying. He's describing the character and the qualities. Those are the words I like. We could say "qualifications," and even the heading in my Bible says that, "Qualifications for overseers." But I really like "qualities" and I like "characteristics" because that's really -- when you look at the big picture of the context, when you look at everything that he says both to Timothy and to another young preacher, Titus, that's working with several congregations on the island of Crete, and he -- he's really talking about characteristics. He's talking about the type of a man who makes a good shepherd and overseer. And what does that type of person look like? It looks like gentleness and it looks like not being a lover of money. Can you be a banker and not be a lover of money? Absolutely. And not be greedy and -- yes, absolutely, because it's about your character. It's about the quality of your life. It's about -- you know, similarly, with passages like Galatians Chapter 5 -- I bring up the fruit of the Spirit nearly every week, I think -- but it's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness. It's this kind of thing.

But then there's also another layer that even goes beyond just the general character and characteristics, because a lot of these could be said of every Christian. None of us should be lovers of money, greedy, quarrelsome. None of us should be violent. We should all be gentle. None of us should be drunkards. But then he really gets specific on some of these things about, like, their household, and I really get the idea and the impression, both in what he says about deacons and what he says here about overseers, that it's very important that a -- an elder especially be somebody who is proven, who has proven their character, who has proven the quality of their character, who has proven their ability to lead and to oversee, and that's this entire function and role and job within the church is to oversee and shepherd.

And he gives us the idea that the way that they, quote, "manage" -- verse 5, "If someone does not know how to manage his household, how will he care for God's church?" So this even goes beyond just he's filled with the fruit of the Spirit, he is a gentle and not greedy person, he's a great spiritual person. Yes, all of those things should be true, but also he should be a person who manages his household well and who's proven himself to be a capable leader of overseeing his family and his household because that's the proving ground for how he shepherds in the church and cares for the -- as Paul puts it, the household of God and God's church.

And so I think it's incredibly important to look at how does this person run his family and his house? And so part of that is this idea of being the husband of one wife. I honestly think that probably the most

logical first layer of application -- and we're probably not going to like this -- but it's a person who doesn't have a plural marriage, who doesn't have multiple marriages, who doesn't have multiple wives or concubines. I mean, that would have been a fairly common thing in the culture. I'm not saying it was a common thing in the church -- hopefully, it wasn't a common thing in the church. Obviously, it's not something that would be a good thing.

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: But it would have been something that would have been part of the ancient world, a man who had multiple wives, and apparently that's not a good thing and it's not something that an overseer in the church should be a part of or have, that he should be the man of one woman. Literally, that's what the phrase means, the man of one woman. So he should have one woman -- not multiple women, not concubines, not girlfriends, not -- you know, that he should have one woman, not -- and I think the emphasis is on the one woman, the one wife, but of course that brings up a whole lot of other questions.

But I think that these other questions that are brought up, things like divorce and then remarriage, or even the death of a spouse and then remarriage -- I mean, those bring up questions that ought to go beyond -- and our interpretation of those things have to go beyond just this one phrase because this one phrase just means this one thing. Like it just -- it's a very small phrase. Paul doesn't nuance it. He doesn't list off a whole lot of, well, I mean this and not that. And by the way, this has been debated at least since the -- I was looking at some of my

commentaries earlier -- at least since the 4th century. They highly debated, like, what did Paul mean by this? And what if somebody -- their spouse dies? They asked all of these same questions, so it's not like Gayla or anybody today is asking weird questions because these are questions that have been asked for, you know, over a thousand years. But I think we have to understand that he says -- he says this one very small phrase. We have to use the rest of the Bible to understand, well, what could that mean? Or what should -- not necessarily what does that mean, but what does that mean for appointing elders today?

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: And we have to look at passages like Matthew 19, like what did Jesus say about the morality of marriage? And if somebody is the kind of person that says, "I don't want to be married to you anymore and I found a younger woman over here and she's prettier and I like her better and I'm going to go marry her," Jesus is not okay with that and that is not consistent with being a follower of Jesus, and you can't do that. That's not okay, as followers of Jesus. And if somebody is doing that kind of thing and if that -- if they've proven that that's their character and they've proven this is the kind of person they are, then they are not fit to lead and oversee and shepherd God's church, God's assembly, God's people, God's household. If you're going to be an overseer of the church, you can't be the kind of person that drops your wife for another woman, period, end of discussion. That can't be the kind of men that we're choosing to lead us and to shepherd us.

Then you even think about passages like Ephesians Chapter 5.

Paul says there's a mystery to marriage and there's a mystery to Jesus and the church. There's a similarity between marriage and Jesus and the church, and he says that, really, marriage, a man and his wife, is a living parable, a living image of Jesus and the church, and the way that a husband loves and sacrifices himself for his wife ought to reflect the way that Jesus loves and offers himself for his church. And the way that a wife submits to and respects her husband ought to be a living embodiment and example, a parable, of the way that the church respects and submits to Jesus. And so every marriage -- not just elders or shepherds -- but every marriage ought to be a living parable of Jesus and the church. The husband and the wife and the way they love and sacrifice, submit to and respect for each other, these things should be lived out in every marriage. And if that's true of every marriage, then how much more so of those we appoint to places of leadership?

So it goes beyond just has he ever gotten divorced, is he the kind of guy that would leave his wife for another woman. Like it's beyond that. Like we could satisfy that with a checkmark like, wow, yeah, I guess he's only been married one time and, you know, just check that off. But I think we have to go deeper than that. We have to say, you know, if -- Paul is very concerned that the men that Timothy and Titus choose to oversee and to shepherd these churches, Ephesus and the churches in Crete, and you would assume have been the case when Paul went to Galatia, or wherever, and appointed elders in every community, that he was looking not only for, "How many times have you been married?" He wasn't just satisfying a checklist.

TRAVIS: I thought you were asking me for a second.

WES: Yeah. No, I mean, he wasn't just satisfying a checklist; he was -- he was saying, who are the kind of men who are going to embody this mystery of Jesus and the church? And I don't want this to seem like a cop-out for the question, but it goes much deeper than just that, not because the phrase "the man of one woman" -- it doesn't mean that; it's not like it's packed in there, but it's packed into the gospel, and the bigger picture of everything he's saying about shepherds and overseers is that their family life should be a reflection of the -- it is a reflection of the way that they're going to lead and manage in the church.

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: And, I mean, let's face it. Sometimes there are things that happen in our lives when we're younger, and we've really been transformed since then and we've become different people, and it -- unfortunately, it may mean that because of the mistakes that I made in the past -- I may be forgiven and I may be in good standing with God, but I can't serve as a shepherd or an overseer because I missed out on my opportunity to prove myself with my family when I was younger. And there are -- I know men that are in that situation, and it's okay. Like that's okay. It doesn't mean that they're any less of a Christian. It doesn't mean that they're a second-class citizen because they made some mistakes and now they've been forgiven and their situation now is -- you know, is better and it is good, but there's a lot of mess there. You know, that's okay. But it may mean that they're not the people that we set in these leadership positions, and we kind of have to be okay with that. We have

to be okay with the fact that leaders are held to a different standard in a sense. Not like salvation sense --

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: -- but in the sense that we're going to lift these -- put these men -- I shouldn't say "lift," but we're going to put these men -- and in the church it's kind of an upside-down leadership structure in that the leaders are actually the servants and they are put into a position where they become an example, not of perfection by any stretch of the imagination, but of leadership. This is what -- this is what it looks like to embody the gospel at home. This is what it looks like to embody gospel principles, and some people are fit for -- qualified for those leadership positions and some people aren't because they haven't been a one-woman man, you know. And maybe they are now, and that's good, but they haven't been in the past or they haven't led well in the past and that has consequences today, and, you know -- and, yes, those kind of things happen and that's okay. And it's okay, I think, in the church that we tell people, "We love you and we want you here and we're glad you're part of this family, but these other men have a long track record of leadership and embodying the gospel at home and we're going to allow them to use that for the glory of God and the good of the church and we're going to find other ways for you to serve because you're not yet qualified or you're not now qualified to lead in these ways."

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TRAVIS: So kind of going off that thought, part of the question references if a man has a divorce that is scriptural, so maybe it wasn't their choice. Also kind of another thought I had that I've heard brought up at times at other churches where I've witnessed the elder -- the elder-picking process -- unbelieving children. So if somebody has an unbelieving child -- maybe they have three kids that still go to church and one that's doesn't go to church as much, or maybe at all, and then that gets brought up as almost like a -- "technicality" has a negative connotation, but that's kind of how I think of it, like, well, they didn't -- you know, they didn't, you know, just not teach this child the gospel.

WES: Right, right.

TRAVIS: You know, this child grew up and they made their decisions. And what do you think about that?

WES: Yeah. I mean, both of those things are really good, and I think that -- and I'm glad you brought all of that up, to say at least this, that I think a lot of this has to be handled on a case-by-case basis.

TRAVIS: Yeah.

WES: That we can't just, you know, have this general way of talking about things because sometimes -- you know, I dislike the phrase "scriptural divorce." I understand what it means.

TRAVIS: I always think of Jesus talking about divorce when he said -- he's like, you shouldn't have had the option in the first place.

WES: Right. Well, yeah, so I think that sometimes there's a situation where someone's spouse left them and it was really no fault of the person who was left and they were really left out to dry and they were really -- they were just done wrong. And there's no reason, I don't think -- this is Wes' personal opinion. I don't think that that in and of itself makes someone disqualified to serve as a shepherd.

However, there -- it's not just that cut-and-dried, you know? I mean, if I am a jerk to my wife and she leaves me for someone else, is she right for leaving me for someone else? No. But am I innocent in the -- in this question? No. And so, I mean, again, I think that there's more to Christian marriage and there's more to the marriages of church leaders than simply have you ever had an affair or have you ever been divorced. There's more to it than that. It's whether or not we are embodying the gospel in our marriages. And there are some people who are embodying the gospel in their marriage and their spouse leaves them, and there are sometimes where a spouse leaves because they're not embodying the gospel in their marriage, and Paul doesn't break all of that out for us. I think we have to use wisdom and we have to use discernment, and the same is true with children.

You know, and that brings up a whole 'nother issue. We could spend a whole 'nother podcast talking about faithful children. I actually did a lecture at Freed-Hardeman University about that. But part of it is the fact that we tend to think about children growing up and moving off.

Like that's how we tend to think, that our job as parents is to raise them and then send them out into the world. That's not how the ancient world thought of parenting. In the ancient world -- especially sons -- you raised your sons and they stayed. They stayed and they were part of your household until you died. And then the oldest son, you know, they would have their household, and so we really -- we raise very independent children, or we try to, and then send them out into the world.

But when Paul speaks of households -- and a lot of these men that would be the men that they would be choosing from to be shepherds, overseers of congregations, would have been older men who had, as a part of their household, not only like their wife and children that were at home, but also like their grown children and then their children's children and maybe some nieces and nephews and maybe some servants. We're talking about a large household that they were overseeing. It very well could be -- not every time; I mean, who knows what each household was made up of, but in the Greco-Roman world and in the Jewish communities, it wasn't uncommon for the older patriarch of a family to have his older grown children with their wife and children as a part of his household.

And so, again, as we've talked about on podcasts past, the word "pistos" that he used for believing children -- we translate as "believing" children means faithful children. And there's a big debate about, well, does he mean like faithful to him? Like as this overseer of the family that has this huge household, I mean, do you have loyal children or do

you have disloyal children who are out doing things very different than the way you would have them live their life?

TRAVIS: That's interesting.

WES: And in that honor/shame culture, if you had grown children who were disobeying and disregarding your instructions and living a very different life than the way you instructed them to, that would bring shame upon you, which is why like Jewish parents who didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah, and their grown children who started to follow Jesus the Messiah, it brought shame on them in the community that now they had these children that were following this Jesus guy, and they would -- they would ostracize them and kick them out of the family because it was bringing shame upon the family. And the opposite would be true. If a Jewish leader of a household began to follow Jesus the Messiah, he would expect all of his children to also become Jesus followers, and if they didn't become Jesus followers because of his leadership and because of the truth of the gospel, then it would bring shame upon him. And so part of being a good leader is that you're able to keep your family loyal and faithful, "pistos."

And so a lot of people ask, well, does it mean like believers, like believers of Jesus, like faithful to Jesus or faithful to the father? I would say it probably means both, that it's -- as a follower of Jesus, if you're leading a large household, then your children are going to be faithful to Jesus, as well, because you're leading them in that direction. But now we live in a very different culture, that kids grow up and move off and, you know -- and don't live under their parents' leadership at all. And it

doesn't really bring shame upon -- you know, if you're a farmer and your kid goes off to make movies or goes off to work in a factory, nobody's like, that kid, he went off, living in Detroit now. Nobody thinks that anymore. So it's a very different culture, but I think still, yeah, there's a place to be said that leaders in the church should be people that lead their families towards Jesus, and I think there's a lot of truth to that.

So again, I mean, with both of these questions about the wife or the children, that there's some cultural layers that have to be interpreted and understood. We don't live in a culture where people have multiple wives like that. That doesn't happen in the United States very often. Sometimes, I guess. But nor do we have big households where adult children tend to stay at home. But I think the general principles there still hold, and the main thing is that if somebody is going to be a leader within the church, then he has to be the type of man that's a leader at home, that manages and oversees and shepherds and leads his family towards Jesus and embodies the gospel in his marriage and in his parenting, and that can still be true of somebody who's widowed and remarried. I don't know why being widowed and marrying a second time has anything to do with what Paul would be talking about about being the man of one woman. But if somebody leaves his wife for someone else or somebody's wife leaves him because he's a jerk, yeah, absolutely, I think all of those things and all of the millions of questions that we could have about that -- I think all of those have bearing on whether or not that person is qualified and has the qualities and characteristics that should be present within someone who shepherds in

Jesus' church.

I really hope you enjoyed this Bible study and I hope you'll subscribe to hear future episodes of the podcast. A big thank you to Travis Pauley, as well as our McDermott Road church family, for helping to make this podcast possible, and a special thanks to all of you for listening. We love you, God loves you, and we hope you have a wonderful day.