

The true priest

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 June 2017

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Father, we do pray that we might see wondrous things from your law.! It's a very long ago and in a very different situation.

! Several hundred years later than the passage that we've just read, Jeremiah, the prophet Jeremiah, just before the time of the exile, wrote these words.

The word of the Lord came to me. What do you see, Jeremiah? I see the branch of an almond tree, I replied. The Lord said to me, you have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.

It may not be immediately obvious what the connection between an almond tree and watching is, unless you've looked it up and looked at the footnote. But Aaron's rod, we are told, was a branch of an almond tree.

It had the buds and blossom and the fruit of an almond tree. And we're going to think a little bit about that. And how that relates to the material that follows in chapter 18.

[1:33] So the first question is, when does this all happen? And indeed, where does it all happen? And we have to say, that's not entirely clear. These three chapters, 17, 18, and chapter 19, complete this middle section of the book.

If you look at Numbers 20, verse 1, it refers again to Kadesh Barnea. So you may think, oh, it all happened in Kadesh Barnea.

Until you read on from chapter 20 and realize, no, hang on a minute, this is 40 years later. In chapter 20, we read of the end of the wanderings in the wilderness and how the beginning of the invasion and the conquering of the promised land from chapter 20.

So we can only assume that these central chapters refer to a time and a place somewhere in the wilderness. There is actually later on in Numbers a list of the camping places.

But as we don't know where most of these places are, it doesn't really help us very much. But somewhere, presumably, in the wilderness. And somewhere in this 40-year period between the report of the spies and the failure to enter the land at that time.

[2:54] And then, as I say, Numbers chapter 20 starts with the death of Miriam, but which makes it clear this is, in fact, the beginning of the next generation and entering the land.

So we don't know exactly when or where. But somewhere in the wilderness and somewhere in this 40-year time slot. You might think from the content, and I would be inclined to suggest it's probably towards the beginning of that time slot.

Because it does kind of follow on from the rebellion, first of all, of the spies and then of Korah. But we don't know exactly when. So, as I say, we're going to look at chapters 17 and 18, which basically, as we read, confirm the position of Aaron, the priest, and the Levites.

Chapter 19, well, it's a bit strange, to be honest, which is why we're going to spend a whole week on it. But it's about the issues of death and uncleanness.

So we'll have a look at that next week. And then I'm going to be taking a bit of a break, because the week after I'm preaching at Park Helm. So, Phil isn't the only one who can do graphics.

[4:09] This is what we're told in chapter 17. The next day, Moses entered the tent of the testimony and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted, but had budded, blossomed, and produced almonds.

The fact that we're specifically told that it produced buds, flowers, and fruit suggests that we're probably meant to take these symbolically, and we'll think about that in a minute.

But I just want to look generally at this, first of all. The head of a craft guild will often have a mace, which is a sort of staff or a stick, usually decorated.

And the decoration on it usually has symbolic meaning. But of course, you can't really tell much of the meaning just from the mace.

It's only a sort of pointer to what the guild stands for and what it does. To understand the meaning of the symbols, we need to study the articles of association on which the guild is founded, and the rules by which it's run.

[5:33] And these things set out the professional standards and codes of practice, and often what the guild members are supposed to charge their customers. And if you look at chapter 18, you can see that's pretty much what this says about the role of the priests and Aaron.

It deals with the... It's almost a contract, isn't it? A tripartite contract between the Levites, the Lord, and the people. Why is it there?

Well, we're told it's there to stop them grumbling. And so we need to see why it's there to stop them grumbling. But Aaron's rod is his mace as high priest.

And we're not just told that it had spouted, as we see, but explicitly what it had produced. So these are meant as symbols of office. So chapter 18 really provides, if you like, the articles of association, the rules, the contract, at least as an executive summary.

There are more details given in other passages of Scripture, but in this fairly brief chapter, it's summarized. And I can suggest to you we can associate the symbols on the staff, actually, with the professional activities of the priesthood.

[6:59] See how convinced you are by that. But even if you're not totally convinced by the symbolism, then at least it will give us a way of looking at the contract and the rules in chapter 18.

At the end of chapter 16, then we had the graphic description, didn't we, of Aaron standing between the dead and the living. And that was to remind us of the importance of Aaron's role as the priest. And really, this theme is developed in our two chapters. And the purpose of chapter 17 is explicitly stated in verses 3 to 5. It's to establish the legitimacy of the Aaronic priesthood.

And it's to prevent grumbling and complaints from the rest of the people. On the staff of Levi, write Aaron's name. For there must be one staff for the head of each ancestral tribe.

Place them in the tent of meeting in front of the testimony where I meet with you. The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites.

[8:07] That was the Lord's purpose in chapter 17. And he also states his purpose in chapter 18, verse 8. Then the Lord said to Aaron, I myself have put you in charge of the offerings presented to me.

All the holy offerings the Israelites give me, I will give to you and your sons as your portion and regular share. Notice the last bit of this, and indeed the last bit of the chapter.

That reminds us that you get what you pay for. A contract usually not only explains the services to be provided, but the payment that is required.

And that's certainly true here. I had a colleague at Brighton University who used to say, if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys. And the contribution here is supposed to be both generous and appropriate.

for the Levites, the service the Levites give. There's quite a lot about that. So what I was going to suggest we do is we examine the symbology, I think symbology is a word, of the staff.

[9:19] And we look at that in parallel, as it were, with the code of practice in chapter 18. So this is how I want to look at it. I want to look at what might call, well, I'm going to call religious economics.

You can argue about whether that makes sense or not, but that's what I'm going to call it. I'm going to look at the staffs and the offerings. I'm going to look at the topic which this is basically all about, as you see when you read it.

It's about matters of life and death, isn't it? The most important professions, the most important guilds in many ways are those that deal with matters of life and death.

And this is certainly dealing with matters of life and death. We're going to look at the idea of being holy to the Lord, and we'll look at that, and we'll look at the blossom, and we'll look at the firstborn.

And we're going to look at watchfulness, and we'll look at that in terms of the almond and the guard. And I do want to, first of all, point out that these were precisely the issues that were called into question in Kor's rebellion in chapter 16.

[10:34] 16. So it is dealing with those issues, as it says in chapter 17. We've got to put an end to this grumbling and misunderstanding and dissatisfaction. And so this is how we're going to go about it.

But then you might say, well, it's all very well, but this is all old covenant stuff. How much does really apply to us as Christians in the new covenant?

And I'm going to suggest to you that it's completely different, but it's exactly the same in the words of my favorite French proverb.

The more it changes, the more it's the same thing. So let's look, first of all, at what we might call the religious economics, the staffs and the offerings.

I feel familiar with the story of Abraham in Genesis 12 to 25. Quite a lot about Abraham in Genesis.

[11:34] I can't look through it all now, of course, but many of you are probably familiar with it. And if you are, you'll probably not have much difficulty in attaching to passages where Abraham fills all those functions that I've listed there.

He makes a sacrifice at one point as a priest. He was a ruler who dealt with kings and other rulers. He was certainly a military commander. He conducted at least one military campaign. He was a prophet in that he declared, received and declared the words of God.

And, of course, he was basically a farmer. That was his day job, as it were. He was a farmer, a herder of sheep. And so Abraham did all those things.

And although there was, of course, it was a large household and there probably was some specialization within the household, basically, when people live just in family units, everybody has to do everything.

[12:40] But as soon as a society starts to develop into a, beyond a single family, as soon as the society starts building cities and founding nations, one of the first things we get, of course, is specialization.

That's really one of the reasons for building cities and founding nations. Because humans can achieve more in larger groups.

We can't all be good at everything. And some people can do one job that they're good at. And some people can do another job that they're good at.

And they can be trade and commerce and cooperation between them. And so more is the group as a whole. The whole is more than the sum of the parts, in a sense.

A nation is more than just a collection of individuals. A city is more than just a collection of people doing their own things. It almost has a life and a coherence of its own. Once you're in large groups, you have benefits of scale.

[13:52] And the benefit of scale is that specialization indeed becomes practicable. We don't all have to do everything. But you might ask the question whether it's right to apply this, as one might say, sociological insight, in religious matters of religious affairs.

In particular, we could ask, should we have a professional class of spiritual leaders? That, after all, was the question, wasn't it, that Cora raised.

It says, the whole assembly is holy. Therefore, does it make sense to have Moses as lawgiver and Aaron and the Levites as priest?

It's not an entirely unreasonable question. And yet, the answer here seems to be most definitely, yes, it is right to have, if you like, a class of professional spiritual leaders.

I know it's been fashionable in some reform circles of late to tell pastors they should not be professionals. And probably in the context that that was said originally, it probably made a sort of sense.

[15:03] There are certain ways in which pastors are not professionals, they're not just in it for the money. But in the true sense of a professional, one might say that can be rather misleading.

Because this passage actually indicates that spiritual leadership, and particularly in this case, the Aaronic priesthood, and the work of the Levites, certainly is a profession in a whole variety of ways.

professionals devote their lives to maintaining the highest possible standards, or they should do. That's why we have professional associations and trade guilds.

Because so that they can ensure that professional standards are maintained. And in order to do that, sorry, I was going to say, look at 18.1-7.

That's what is commanded there, that they maintain high professional standards. In order to do that, the professional has to give up other legitimate interests and activities, because you can't do everything.

[16:11] And so we notice in 1820 that they were not to inherit land, because they were not to spend their time farming, they were supposed to be doing the priest stuff. And a true professional operates not just for money, but to provide a service and maintain standards of professional pride, don't they?

One hopes that's the case. It may not always be so, but it should be the case. A true professional will, a good builder, wants to build with quality, not just because he'll get paid more for it, but because it's professional pride.

he wants to do the job well. And any professional should have that attitude, surely. He wants to do the job well.

But on the other hand, this passage also points out that any competent professional is worthy of the fee for services. 18 verse 9, and indeed almost the whole of the last part of the chapter, says, it ends, doesn't it, with saying, these are your wages for the service that you're providing.

So, yes, to think of the Aaron as the head, as it were, of a professional trade guild is not an unhelpful insight, I think.

[17:40] He was doing a job, he was providing a service, he had a tripartite contract, because it was a contract, as I say, between the Lord, the Levites, and the people.

And that contract set out, the services to be done, and the professional standards, and indeed, the remuneration, which was to be received for that. But at the same time, of course, this passage does tell us a few other things.

We do have to notice, of course, that it is Aaron's staff that buds, not just a sort of random one. It shows us that God does indeed approve of Aaron being set apart for the work, but it also shows us, of course, that this isn't just a sort of job where you can sign up and do an apprenticeship and just get into it that way, because the call comes to Aaron from the Lord himself.

So one shouldn't go too far in thinking of spiritual leadership as being a profession. It does have to be a call, of course, from the Lord himself.

Yes, they are specialists, but they're specialists, given that job by the Lord himself. And again, we'll think later about whether this remains valid in the new covenant, but I want to present the whole argument in the old covenant first.

[19:07] first. But that is the answer to Korah's rebellion. The fact that the whole assembly is holy, which was true, doesn't mean that everyone in it is interchangeable.

And of course, that's very much a New Testament concept as well, and we will come back to that later. It's Aaron's staff that buds, it's Aaron who's the high priest, and by contrast, the other tribal leaders are not.

They have a different role amongst the same holy people. But in fact, I would say on the other that to claim that we do not need a professional spiritual class ultimately amounts to atheism.

Why do I say that? Well, I say it's because it's to maintain that it's a profession devoid of content.

And in fact, that was precisely the argument that Richard Dawkins used when he opposed the appointment of a chair of theology at, I think it was at Cambridge University.

He said that, you know, this is a subject with no content and therefore you can't have a professor of it. I'm glad to say that he was ruled out. So they did appoint a professor.

[20:21] If there's a living God and if we're to live in relationship with him, then we do need people, specialists, if you like, to oversee and help that relationship. And both in the Old Covenant and the New Covenant such people are provided.

I think it's fair to say that the role of the priesthood in Numbers, perhaps by comparison with, say, Leviticus, the role of the priesthood in Numbers is seen as much in pastoral terms as in terms of actual sacrifice and salvation.

salvation. That's certainly the emphasis here, isn't it? It's to prevent the people suffering death by making spiritual mistakes. So, to be a spiritual leader, as Aaron was, is certainly a high calling. Not necessarily the best paid. The Apostle Peter was told he must give up the profession of fishing, which I imagine made them fairly prosperous, and become a catcher of men.

So, it may not be the best paid job, but it is, in many ways, the highest or high spiritual calling. But there's one other thing we might say.

[21:42] If every profession has its body of knowledge, doesn't it? Every profession has its unique skill set. It has its code of standards. And surely that must be supremely true in the spiritual realm.

And as I said, these chapters set out the professional standards in symbolic form in chapter 17 and then in detail in chapter 18.

So, let's look at these details here. So, the first we're told that the staff had a bud.

And as I said, the professions that deal with life and death are the ones from which we expect the highest standard. And the meaning of the bud on Aaron's rod, at least, is obvious, isn't it?

It's a symbol of new life. We have a wisteria in our garden, which we planted a few years back, and it's not done particularly well. And in March and April, Brenda and I were sort of looking at it and thinking, shall we dig it up?

[22:55] Is it dead? But we left it a bit longer, and lo and behold, a bud appeared, and indeed it did turn out to still be alive, and in fact has grown a bit better this year.

We decided to wait and see, and come the spring, there were fresh buds, and the plant was indeed alive. Well, what about Aaron's staff? Well, we don't know.

Perhaps it was originally cut from an almond tree, it might well have been. Certainly it was made of wood, and certainly it had been alive at one point, as had the other staffs.

It's possible, I suppose, that there was some spark of life still in the staff. It's fairly hard to kill a tree, but on the other hand, Aaron had been carrying it around for some time, so it's unlikely that it was still alive in any meaningful sense.

And yet Isaiah would later write of the line of David, a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a branch will bear fruit. So whether or not this rod was originally a branch of an almond tree, whether or not it was completely dead, this new life is certainly supernatural, isn't it?

[24:14] It's life, but not as we know it. No natural almond can go from bud to fruit in a single night. life. And that reminds us that the life of God's people is supernatural.

It's better than natural. This branch is more alive than nature provides in a sense. And so if we expect higher standards from medical professionals who deal with physical life and death, how much more must we expect from those who deal with matters of spiritual life and death.

In chapter 18, what does it say about this in chapter 18? It says that it's the death of the animal that makes the sacrifice holy. It's the death of the animal that makes it a source of life in chapter 18 verse 9.

And there is a kind of paradox there and that's actually explored in chapter 19 so we won't go into that here, we'll think about that next week. But let's focus instead on the source of that supernatural life which comes from the Lord, which is in the place of the tabernacle, the place of the presence of the Lord.

Let me remind you the words of Jesus. Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.

[25:40] Apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

The life of the branch comes from the spirit and presence of the Lord. It's not a natural blessing, it's not a matter of common grace, the growth of an almond tree is in a sense a matter of common grace.

Anybody can plant an almond tree and if you do it right it will grow. But this is a covenant blessing. This life is a promise from the Lord to his people.

But of course any covenant is two-sided. At least this one is really three-sided here. It imposes conditions on all who sign up for it. And the important condition here, which is kind of where we came in, is the holiness of the people.

Yes, it is true that the whole assembly is holy, but how does that holiness work? It works through the life that comes to the people and that life here comes symbolically through the priesthood, through the work of the priest to Aaron.

[27:02] So what does it mean then to be holy to the Lord? We are told specifically that the staff had an almond blossom.

We are not told here what the significance is, but almond does appear to have some special significance in the scripture. The almond blossom is pinkish-white.

It usually signifies the presence and purity of God. Occasionally, it also signifies old age and grey hair, although I don't think my grey hair is particularly pink. Almond trees are pinkish-white, but sometimes it signifies old age, but here it would seem to signify the presence and purity of God.

Why do we say that? Well, the most obvious case of that is actually, if you remember in Numbers 8, we read about Aaron in the tabernacle, who's tending the holy seven-fold lampstands, who's shining them on the showbread, on the presence of the people in the table of the showbread, well, it doesn't actually tell us in Numbers 8, but if you look in Exodus 25, and the people would have known this, verses 33 and 34, it tells us that the flowers which decorated the lampstands were almond blossoms, and this seems to be the connection.

Those lampstands were holy to the Lord and indicated the presence and purity of the Lord, and the almond blossom appears also on Aaron's staff.

[28:46] And the holiness of the priesthood is expressed in other ways in chapter 18. The blood sacrifices could be eaten only by the priests. Other gifts were available for their families, but only in verse 11, but only for the Levites.

They had to be spiritually cleaned to eat them. And the monetary gifts that we read about in 16 and 19 and so on, were monetary gifts to redeem the firstborn, verse 16.

All these things were holy to the Lord. And that leads us on to the next symbol, because as chapter 18 makes clear, the function of the priesthood was to watch over the holy things and the holiness of the assembly.

And that brings us to the almond itself. And the almond here probably signifies watchfulness. It certainly does that years later in the prophecy of Jeremiah.

Why should it be that? Well, it's the word. The Hebrew word for an almond is *shaked*, and the word *shaked*, almost the same word, means watching.

[30:00] That's the reason Jeremiah associates these two things together. The Lord came to me, what do you see, Jeremiah? I see the branch of an almond tree, I replied. The Lord said to me, you've seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.

So the almond probably signifies that the priests were to watch over the spiritual state of the nation. And certainly that's what it says in verses 1 to 7, isn't it?

They were to guard the holy things. They were to guard the holiness of the things and the people themselves, so that wrath would not consume the people.

In verse 5, they were to have guard over the holy things. And that was a very serious thing. If you look at verse 3, the implication is that if they fail in their guard duty, 18 verse 3, then they themselves will die and bear guilt for not watching faithfully.

It's a bit scary actually, isn't it? I mean, if we had a rule that every doctor who lost a patient was put to death, then I think we'd be even shorter of doctors in the National Health Service than we are at the moment.

[31:17] If we had a rule that every policeman who failed to prevent or solve a crime would be put in prison, then we wouldn't have many policemen, would we? The people there are told that they are themselves responsible and would bear iniquity if they didn't do the job properly.

Perhaps it doesn't go quite that far as saying if the surgeon loses a patient, he's going to be put to death. Perhaps it's not going quite that far. In fact, Ezekiel says something very similar and it's worth reminding us of those words.

Ezekiel 33 verse 6 says the following, If the watchman sees the sword's coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people, and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.

The accountability there is if the watchman does not blow the warning trumpet. If you read the rest of the passage, previous verses 2 to 5, Ezekiel has made it clear that if the watchman does blow the warning trumpet and his warning is ignored, then the watchman is free from guilt.

He's not responsible for the death of the citizens who didn't take any notice. doctors. And this is probably what is meant here in these first verses, I think, of chapter 18.

[32:52] The doctor who prescribes the right medicine and properly explains its importance and how the patient should take it has fulfilled his professional responsibility, hasn't he?

If the patient fails to take the medicine and dies as a consequence of that, then it isn't. Of course, the doctor's fault. The doctor has done the best he can.

And I think this is probably the warning that the priests are being given here. It is their duty to stand between the dead and the living. It is their duty to guard the holy things.

And if they don't guard properly, if they don't give the proper warnings, then indeed they will be responsible for those who are those who die as a consequence.

But perhaps if they give the proper warnings, if they guard the holy things properly, then they will not be responsible. Each man in the end dies for his own sin. So what do we see here?

[33:57] We see here that Aaron and the Levitical priesthood are authenticated as legitimate priests. We've seen that their role is to look after the holy things, to keep watch over them, to make sure that things are done properly according to the right professional standards.

And we've seen also that they are to be suitably remunerated for that service. others. But we might argue this is all merely academic interest, isn't it?

Because it's all old covenant stuff. We don't have holy things that have to be guarded in that sense nowadays. Under the new covenant, surely it's all changed.

So is this relevant to us at all? Well, I'd like to say, as I said before. It's changed completely, and yet in many ways it's very much the same.

Let's first of all just look at a few things that are different. Well, one thing, interestingly, it's different is that under the new covenant, actually every profession is holy to the Lord, we're told.

[35:18] That was predicted by the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah 14, verse 20, we read the following, on that day, holy to the Lord will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking parts in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar.

So that was one thing that was going to change, that the ordinary vessels in the household, the ordinary trade, I mean horses, remember, were beasts of burden for trade here, that's what's meant, were holy to the Lord, if you own a trucking company, then you might put your name on the side, but somewhere, perhaps on the side, or at least in your mission statement, if you're a believer, then it's holy to the Lord.

Sometimes we do see it, don't we, the estate agent, I've forgotten their name, in Hove, Kendricks, that's it, there's a little fish at the bottom, it's not too obvious, but there is a little fish at the bottom, and certainly in what they say, they regard their work as holy to the Lord, and that's certainly true, because that's picked up in Ephesians, isn't it, as we were seeing fairly recently, Ephesians 6, 7, and 8, it says, serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free, so whatever profession you do, if you're a believer, then it's marked with that statement, holy to the Lord, and you might paint that on the side of your van, as I say, but that's hardly an excuse, is it, for those who preach and teach the word to have lower standards, surely, if everything that every believer does is holy to the Lord, surely much more so, those whose job it is to preach and teach the word, and be responsible for the spiritual people, as it were, the spiritual state of the people, and is this workman analogy used in the New

Testament, in the New Government? Well, it most certainly is. Paul writes to Timothy, and it's clear here, I think, that he's writing to Timothy in his role as a teacher and spiritual leader, and in two, so Paul writes to Timothy, in Timothy 2, verse 15, do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, and who correctly handles the word of truth.

So the spiritual leader, the teacher here is described as a craftsman, one who has the proper professional accreditation, one approved, one who is a workman whose work meets the standards of the craftmaster, who correctly handles the words of truth.

[38:28] The argument is surely that if the workman who paints the church building is a skilled craftsman holy to the Lord, how much more the one who fulfills the building's purpose in proclaiming the word of the Lord.

But that actual inscription holy to the Lord is quite interesting. Zechariah, I'm sure, when he wrote that prophecy was very well aware.

Holy to the Lord, of course, is what was inscribed on the high priest's headdress, and particularly what was on his headdress when he went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.

But now it seems the whole assembly carries that inscription. And that means, therefore, that in the new covenant, everyone is a priest.

And that was the argument in the sense that the rebels in Numbers 16 were putting forward. And certainly there is a change in the rules. Certainly in the new covenant, every believer does indeed have access to the holy place.

[39:34] Hebrews makes this point very forcefully. And it's based, of course, on the high priesthood of our high priest Jesus. But Hebrews says, we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.

We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The point is, of course, of the argument in Hebrews that under the old covenant, the high priest died and had to be replaced. Of course, that in any professional body, the craft master is going to die, and over time knowledge may be lost and standards may slip.

But our high priest Jesus is still alive and is not just once a year in the holy place, but he stands there constantly.

And the rule is different, isn't it? Because as we read in the beginning of chapter 18, part of the job of the priests and the Levites was to keep the rest of the people out of the holy place.

[40:54] But now our high priest has an entirely different invitation. Now he invites all of us to join him there. He says to approach the throne of grace with confidence.

In that sense, all God's people are holy, and the rules about holy things that in the beginning of chapters 18 no longer apply.

And you'll remember in Mark chapter 7 verse 19 for instance, Jesus declared all foods clean, because this distinction between the holy and unholy has a different meaning in the new covenant, a different way of looking at it, a different understanding.

But still, that doesn't mean to say that there is no case for the holiness of the spiritual leadership. Aaron's priesthood was functional as well as ritual, and I say almost in numbers, the functional takes precedence over the ritual almost.

his job was to stand between the dead and the living, as in numbers 16:48, so that the plague was stopped. He watched over the spiritual life of the nation, not just the temple furnishings.

[42:09] He watched over the holiness of the people to make sure that they didn't make spiritual mistakes. And certainly, we still need people to do these things. And Paul really wrote quite extensively on this topic.

We've already looked at one command to Timothy, so let's just look at a couple of other things that Paul wrote to Timothy on this general area. The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those who work in preaching and teaching.

The double honour here is usually taken to refer to payment, and I'll come back to that in a minute. And that's 1 Timothy 5, 17. 1 Timothy 6, 11, and 12, says the following, But you, man of God, flee

from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. Now, of course, this passage is often applied to all believers, and I'm sure in a sense it does.

It certainly is the case, of course, that all of us as believers should be making that spiritual ambition. But I do think it applies there in the context particularly to those in positions of spiritual leadership.

[43:37] It talks about fighting the good fight of faith and so on. Because, as I say, it comes just after that passage which particularly refers to the elders and other leaders and so on.

In 1 Timothy 6 verse 3, for instance, just before this passage, we see that the false and true teachers are being compared.

So this passage does, I think, apply particularly to those in positions of spiritual leadership. And the suggestion here is, of course, that while the teachers are worthy of double honor, they should avoid greed.

Verse 9 and 10 suggests that, shouldn't it? They shouldn't be doing it, as it were, for the money. They should be doing it. Their ambition is the highest professional standards.

Righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness, taking hold of eternal life. They're not doing it for the money and they should certainly avoid greed.

[44:41] And there is that passage, as we just looked at, talks about being a workman approved by God. So what do we make of this?

The whole assembly, sorry, I should have changed over, I didn't change the slide over, sorry. That gives us those references in Timothy. Preachers and teachers are to be worthy of double honor. You, man of God, pursue righteousness. And that well-qualified craftsman to Timothy 2. So yes, the whole assembly is holy to the Lord. And in a sense, all of us are priests in the new covenant.

But that is all the more reason to demand from your leaders the highest professional standards of integrity and skill, that they should be workmen not ashamed, who rightly divide the word of truth. Because the master craftsman himself is keeping eye on the quality of the workmanship. friendship. The commander of the watch will punish any sentry, find sleeping and duty.

[45:49] The chief shepherd, we reminded, aren't we, who cares for the sheep. He doesn't want hired hands who will abandon them at the first sign of danger. we have spiritual builders who build, rightly dividing the word of truth.

We have spiritual watchmen who watch over the flock. We have shepherds who care for the flock. So let's just think about that.

Acts 20 verse 28 Paul writes to the Ephesian elders. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. And then a bit later, obey your leaders and submit to their authority.

They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that will be of no advantage to you. That's Hebrews 13 17.

[47:01] This is a three-way contract. There is a contract for the people to submit to the spiritual leaders because why? Why should you do that?

Because they are building you up in the faith. And there is a responsibility that you don't make life difficult for them.

Don't be the client from hell. I saw a TV program a few years ago. It was about builders, just showing a builder and a client building an extension in the house.

Oh, and these clients were awful. They really made life difficult for the people who were trying to do the best job they could.

So, that's the message to all of us. Don't be the client from hell. Obey the leaders so the work will be a joy and not a burden.

[48:03] Teachers who are only in it for the money will teach what the students want to hear and not what they need to know. They need to be not in it for the money but out of honesty to the craft.

A good teacher is not in it for the money. A good teacher is in it because they want their students to find something they really need to know. But still, don't forget the economic lesson of Numbers 18

also.

Quality costs. Cost, time and money. We've had, haven't we, a horrendous example. But the Grenfell Tower, what happens if you cut costs and skimp on materials?

People die. And if that's true in the physical realm, how much more is it true in the spiritual realm? Our builders have to build with the best materials.

Paul tells us that, doesn't he? They should be building with gold and silver and precious stones. 1 Corinthians 3.12. Quality costs.

[49:18] And it costs time. And we should give proper remuneration to leaders and teachers. I can say that because I have a pension so I'm not actually paid by the church to stand up here and say this.

But those who are should be properly remunerated. That's clear from the end of chapter 18, isn't it? And I think from a practical point of view, how much should you pay full-time workers? Well, I'd suggest the rule of thumb is that you pay them so that they can live comfortably in the society in which they find themselves.

Not extravagantly necessarily, not luxuriously, but comfortably. comfortably. Because if they're forever worrying about where the child's next meal is going to come from, or are they going to get thrown out of their house or something like that, then they will not be devoting themselves to the work of the Lord.

They will be thinking about something else. So I'd suggest that's a rule of thumb. People have suggested other rules of thumb like the median of the salary of the congregation or the average of 10 members or something like that, but you can think of other rules of thumb.

[50:38] Basically, they are doing a job and they should be properly remunerated for it. And as I say, we don't want them worried about where the next meal is going to come from because then they won't be concentrating on what they should be doing.

And we need to remember that the skills of a master cabinet maker are not learned overnight, are they? you don't wake up one day and think, oh, I'm going to make a beautiful piece of furniture, I'll start tomorrow.

It doesn't work like that. You have to go and do an apprenticeship and learn the skills and the craft. And you aim that eventually you might produce a masterpiece.

And that's of course literally what the term masterpiece means. A masterpiece is a piece that you produce to become the master of your craft, which shows that you have mastered the craft.

Well, a preacher wants each of us, as it were, to be the masterpiece, to show that they've executed their craft properly. But they have to learn to do that.

[51:48] It takes study and of course in this realm it takes prayer as well. A scholar or a lawyer needs time to study. You can't do it instantly.

You can't know everything instantly. You need time to study and to reflect. And we need to give our teachers and preachers time to study and reflect. Sometimes they might need a sabbatical but certainly we shouldn't be always demanding they come and visit Auntie Maud or whatever when it eats into their time when they should be spending with the Lord meditating themselves on the word of God and studying.

We need to remember that sometimes. They're not our slaves to do our bidding. Those who are responsible for our spiritual life and they need time to spend with the Lord and study to do that.

They need to study. I had a music teacher at school who had a phrase which said the amateur practices until they can do it right but the professional practices until they can't do it wrong.

that's a good motto isn't it? Our leaders, our preachers, our teachers particularly should be practicing until they can't do it wrong and they need time to do that.

[53:07] So don't treat your leaders as slaves to be exploited. If you do everyone will suffer and it should be the mark on each of us notice that the assembly indeed does have the mark holy to the Lord but it won't happen unless the leaders do their job properly and so it is right to give them their leaders the professional recognition as it were if you like.

I'm not sure that's exactly the right word to use but to give them the respect that they should have but also to give them the opportunity to do their jobs properly. So it's very different from what situation Aaron found himself in but in many ways it's very much the same.

We do need spiritual specialists we do need leaders and teachers we can't all be that. Paul puts a great deal of emphasis doesn't he on the diversity of the church that we need everybody.

It's not that we only need teachers because we need everyone in the church administrators we need people who help in practical ways all are holy to the Lord but still we do need to remember we need those particularly whose job it is to preach and to teach and to make sure they're equipped in all ways that they need to do that.

I think it was worth mentioning that particularly as we're thinking of appointing an assistant pastor that it's worth remembering that this is a high calling and we should treat it as such.

[54:46] So let's I thought we'd sing a song about ending some