

Proof in the Life: An Officer's Character
1 Timothy 3:1–13

There's an old story of a young American engineer who was sent to Ireland by his company to work in a new electronics plant. It was a two-year assignment that he accepted because it would enable him to earn enough money to marry his long-time girlfriend. She had a job near her home in Tennessee, and their plan was to pool their money and put a downpayment on a house when he returned.

They corresponded through letters, but as the weeks went by, she began expressing doubts that he was being true to her with many young ladies around him. So, he wrote her back, declaring that he was paying absolutely no attention to the local girls. He wrote, *"I admit that sometimes I'm tempted. But I fight it."*

Shortly after that, he received a package in the mail. It contained a note from his girlfriend - and a harmonica. She wrote, *"I'm sending this to you so you can learn to play it and have something to take your mind off those other girls."* The engineer quickly wrote back, *"Thank you for the harmonica. I'm practicing on it every night and thinking of you."*

At the end of his two-year stint, he was transferred back to company headquarters in the states. He took the first plane to Tennessee to be reunited with his girl, who met him at the airport. As he got off the plane, he saw her waiting for him. But as he rushed forward with arms wide open to embrace her, she held up her hand and urged him to stop. Then she said sternly, *"Just hold on there a minute. First, let me hear you play that harmonica!"*

The girlfriend didn't just want to hear him say that he spent all that time thinking of her. She wanted to see some kind of evidence. His ability to play the harmonica was the proof. All of us say we believe something but do things that seem to prove otherwise. Our lives don't always display evidence of what we say we believe.

Christ came into the world for that reason. And as part of His saving work for us, He not only professed the truth, but He lived according to it – in our place. And He commands that His people – the church – be cared for and led by men who not only profess to believe certain things, but whose lives display evidence of true belief.

But why is this proof so important in the lives of these men? Notice the outline on page 6 in your WG. A potential elder's life must prove that he can oversee the church's spiritual needs, and a potential deacon's life must prove that he can serve the church's physical needs. The characteristics of their lives signify that these men can, by God's grace, lead in these ways.

"Elder" and "deacon" are offices to which men are appointed. These two-offices are the Biblical model described plainly in the NT with roots in the OT. Here in 1 Timothy 3, qualifications for the potential elder are listed first. The words "elder" and "overseer" are used interchangeably by Paul.

Notice verse 1, he says it is commendable to aspire to the office of overseer. It's not inherently prideful to want to be an elder. It's not necessarily a power grab, although it can be. Not all men who aspire to the office have good motives. And so a little hesitation is a good thing, because it is a high calling. A man should look inward and examine himself. It's not something to take lightly.

It's a praiseworthy task, "*Therefore,*" an overseer or elder, must be "*above reproach.*" In other words, blameless. Perfection is not required, otherwise only Jesus could fill the office. But there can be no obvious case against him in regard to any of God's moral law. There can be no easy accusations toward him.

Also, he must be "the husband of one wife" – which doesn't mean single men are disqualified. In fact, elsewhere, Paul commends singleness. Paul has in mind sexual purity, marital faithfulness, and monogamy. Along those lines, look at verse 2. An elder must be "*sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable.*" He can't be unrestrained or gluttonous. His words and behavior should demonstrate discipline. He should be modest and admirable. People should have great respect for the man because they recognize a well-ordered life. Again, not a perfect man, but one who is stable and steady.

People are drawn to a man like that, and as they are, he must willingly receive folks. Notice the end of verse 2: he must be "*hospitable.*" Warm, inviting, welcoming. The kind of man from whom people want to learn. The kind of man to whom people listen because they're eager to hear what he has to say. They want his advice, his wisdom, his perspective on a situation.

And so it makes sense, then, that he should be, verse 3 says, "*able to teach.*" He walks closely with God; he treasures the Word and the rich doctrines of the faith. And he must be skillful in explaining God's Word to the church. People look up to him. Even those older than him admire him and accept him as an able and a knowledgeable teacher.

Therefore he can't be someone, verse 3 says, who gets drunk, who flies off the handle, or who is controlling or manipulative. The man must be strong, but also gentle. Firm and resilient, but not harsh. The elder must shepherd the people of God, therefore, there must be a tender place inside of him.

He must be patient and "*not quarrelsome.*" He can't be contentious, argumentative, or antagonistic. He can't be a hot-head. He can't have a lust for debauchery or power or control, or money, verse 3 says. This means that he must be a content man – content with what the living God has given him.

Now look at verse [4], "*He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, [5] for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?*" We see this method of argument repeatedly in the Bible: from

the lesser to the greater. *“If he can’t do that, how will he do this?”* Why? Because this is like that, but on a larger scale.

The behavior of a man’s children, especially as they get older, tells us a great deal about the man’s leadership. Children are always learning and absorbing, and they display what they are taught. No man should think he can consistently behave in an ungodly manner privately toward his family – while putting on a godly front in public – and get away with it. The truth will come to light; if nowhere else, it will be evident eventually in his children. So an elder, as the head of his home, must be able to manage and lead well in his own house if he would oversee those in God’s house.

This “head of household” language contributes, in part, to our understanding of why these offices are reserved by God for men only. The Scripture clearly says “men” and not women. But in Ephesians 5, also in the NT, the husband is described as the head of his wife as Christ is the head of his church. Men are called to be the leaders of their homes. This is not about male domination. If you look back at verses 2 and 3, they tell us the kind of leader that a man should be. He should be like Jesus Christ, laying down himself for his wife and his children.

Elders must be model believers in the body of Christ, and as a result, notice verse [6], *“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.”* When authority is given to a man who is spiritually immature, it will likely cause him to become prideful. And notice this interesting phrase: he may, *“fall into the condemnation of the devil.”* Not that the devil condemns him, but that he will be condemned for what Satan was condemned for, which was pride.

Now Verse 7 comes full circle with the necessity to be above reproach or blameless, Paul says, an elder *“must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”* The man can’t bring disgrace on the name of Jesus and His church. He can’t speak or behave in a way that will cause people to say, *“Oh see there, Christianity is nonsense. Their leaders don’t even live according to what they say they believe. If they believe those things, then where’s the proof of their belief?”*

Men, you may not aspire to be an officer in the church, but those who live in your home should see you this way. All Christian men should bear these characteristics. And every Christian here today should consider: if you were on trial for claiming to be a faithful follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

What if an investigator came and sat quietly in your home, observing you with your spouse, or with your children or other loved ones? What if someone observed you by yourself – your internet browsing, your TV watching, your music or reading? What about your language when you’re angry? What if the investigator came and observed you at your job?

What if someone came to see how much you drink when you’re alone, or how much you eat? What if the investigator took note of your actual efforts to pray for and share Christ with those

around you? Or your commitment to God's people? Would there be evidence of faithful obedience to Jesus?

The goal is that all who claim to be born-again would be found guilty, beyond the shadow of a doubt, of faithfully following Christ. This has to be the case for an overseer of God's flock. A potential elder's life must prove that he can oversee the church's spiritual needs. They will handle the Word, lead in worship, make key decisions, give advice and correction, receive new members, deal with spiritual and relational crises in the church, and oversee all the spiritual needs of the congregation.

Now notice Verse [8], "*Deacons likewise must be dignified.*" The requirements for a deacon are similar to that of an elder. They must be reverent, honorable. Much of the elder-description is applicable. But in addition, "*not double tongued.*" A deacon cannot be the kind of man who says one thing to one person and another thing to another person. They can't be viewed as a fake or a phony.

Like elders, they can't be getting drunk – drinking too much either in private or public. They can't be "*greedy for dishonest gain.*" Why? These are men who handle the church's resources. A greedy man might steal from the church or perhaps be stingy with the Lord's resources.

We looked at verse 9 last week. These men must hold to the Word of God as elders do. But noticeably, they don't have to be able to teach, although they could teach. There's nothing prohibiting them from teaching. But they should probably not do a lot of teaching in order to devote their time and energy to sympathy and service.

These men are especially gifted in serving physical needs and managing resources. But how would we know that? It's clear that Paul has in mind some kind of testing – probably time for the members of the congregation to observe that they are worthy servants. This is important. Men with these gifts, just like those with the elder gifts, can be observed doing these things long before they are appointed to an office and given a title. A leader leads. A servant serves. There should be evidence to prove that they are worthy.

Now look at verse [11] "*Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.*" The wife of a deacon will likely accompany him in some aspects of serving, so she should be honorable and Christ-like, even though she's not an appointed officer. She will be caring for people and not gossiping about people's business. She must be a faithful follower of Jesus too.

And like elders, verse [12] says, "*Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.*" The role of deacon is reserved for men, and they must be pure and faithful in marriage, able to manage their homes. After all, they will be managing key aspects of the church.

And finally, verse [13] *“For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”* What does this mean? Why does Paul add this? I think it’s because deacons can be overlooked since their role may not be as prominent or noticeable as the elder.

For example, our ruling elders take turns assisting me in worship. So, like me, they are “up front.” But during this time, our deacons are serving in various ways. They are no less important than the elders. And that’s why Paul articulates this great promise for deacons. Their humble service pleases the Lord and even offers more assurance of their own salvation as they know Christ more through serving.

Some of you will remember the Enron Corporation. Enron was one of the world’s major providers of electricity and natural gas. From 1995 until 2000, Fortune magazine named them *“the most innovative company in America.”* Their stock went up 90% in the year 2000 and had gone up over 50% the year before.

But during that time, their business was a charade. It was a fraud. Around 1990, the leadership of the company had big, impressive ideas for new ways to make money in the energy industry. But the money didn’t come in the way they expected, and so key executives began creating the illusion that they were making money, when in fact they were losing money. Eventually, one investor noticed irregularities in the financial statements and suggested to a Fortune magazine reporter that she look into it.

Then in 2001, she wrote an article titled “How Exactly Does Enron Make Its Money?” And about eight months later, Enron filed for bankruptcy. One news article described Enron as *“possibly the largest accounting fraud in history.”* The guilty executives were indicted and received prison sentences.

Their leaders were smart, savvy, strategic, and dynamic, but they lacked something essential: they lacked character. Because of Enron and other companies like it, today there are numerous books and training programs that address the importance of character in the professional world.

The world chooses leaders based on their words, skills, looks, and personality. But when leadership is chosen based on superficial qualities, the fallout is inevitable. This is why God gives us clear, recognizable qualifications for deacons. A potential deacon’s life must prove that he can serve the church’s physical needs.

In Romans 5, Paul writes, *“Suffering produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, [5] and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”* As much as anything else, the officers of the church must lead us in hope. They should be men who are hopeful and confident in the person and work of Jesus. Certainly, any elder or deacon will know that he is not perfect. But he hopes in the One who is perfect. He hopes and rests in the finished work of Jesus.

Jesus is a trustworthy Savior and Lord, and we know this because there was proof in His life. Only Jesus embodies these elder and deacon qualifications with absolute perfection. He alone is the ideal to which these lists point. This is why these characteristics don't glorify the men who possess them. They glorify the Lord our Redeemer.

And these lists remind all of us of the glorious standard of God's moral law. The church must be a group with leaders who reflect the holiness of God. It's much like the relationship between the moon and the sun. The moon does not produce the light; it reflects the light shone on it by the sun. The officers and the people of God don't produce holiness; we reflect the holiness of God as we trust and obey Him.

Do you trust Jesus? Do you trust Him to lead and guide you by His moral law, by His Word and by His Spirit? You can know the hope of God's love. You can display the proof of true belief.

Let's pray together.