

A Mature Church has Qualified Elders

Text: 1 Timothy 3:1-7

The world's idea of leadership is power, prestige, and doing whatever it takes to get to the top - stepping on or over whoever is necessary to get there.

But is this what Christian leadership in God's church is to be like? NO, NO, NO!

"The authority by which the Christian leader leads is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned persuasion. Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve." - John Stott

Paul continues the instruction regarding roles within the local church of Ephesus.

Remember last week? Paul, through Timothy is asking the men of the church to lift holy hands in prayer, the women in the church to not focus on outward clothing but to be clothed in good works.

But now Paul turns his attention to a very important aspect of the organization of church, and that is her leadership.

Paul is instructing Timothy to establish Elders within the congregation so they can lead well in the church at Ephesus. As we go through this passage you will see just how serious this role is and the kind of character a man must possess in order to serve in it.

And the point is God desires men who desire this insurmountable important work.

Main Idea: Do You Desire A Noble Task?

There are two things that Paul focuses on in determining who should serve as Elder in the church. And the first is...

1. What Do You Desire ? (vs. 1)

1 Timothy 3:1 (ESV)

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

Paul moves into a discussion about the important leadership role of the Elders within the church.

He starts off by saying the often repeated phrase, *"The saying is trustworthy..."*

Paul uses this four other times in the Pastoral letters (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus). And he uses it to make the point that what he is about to say is worth listening to... An important truth he is about to share.

What is so important here? If someone desires the OFFICE of overseer, HE desires a NOBLE task.

Okay, let's tear this trustworthy saying apart and see what we can learn.

First if someone in the congregation “aspires” this important position in the local church, he aspires a good thing.

The word “aspires” means to...

[The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament \(3713. ὀρέγω orégō\)](#)

Literally, to stretch out especially with the hands, to snatch. To stretch oneself, reach after something, and hence metaphorically meaning to covet, long after, desire, try to gain, be ambitious

So, if anyone stretches their hands out to snatch the office of overseer - in other words someone striving after this office, desires a noble task.

Now, before we get to the noble task part, let's take a look at the phrase, “**office of overseer.**”

The church is an organization and the position is an office.

The word, “office” connotes authority.

Certainly, the Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church. Let's make this point abundantly clear by looking at a couple verses...

[Ephesians 1:22 \(ESV\)](#)

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,

[Colossians 1:18 \(ESV\)](#)

And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

There is no man in the past, present, or future that has more authority than Christ.

This church is His church and He has given us instructions on how His church is supposed to run.

I cannot emphasize this enough. It is His church. He is the head and we are the body.

The Head directs the body.

And he gives overseers, who are part of the body to instruct the body onto maturity.

[Ephesians 4:11–16 \(ESV\)](#)

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in

deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

So, the Head (Christ) instructs the Body by His Word, through the Ministry of the Elders.

You might be feeling a bit confused about terminology.

Paul in the 1 Timothy passage, uses the word **Overseer**. But then you use the title, **Elder**. And in [Ephesians 4:11-12](#) we see the words **Pastor**/teacher. And in other places we see shepherd. And even the word, **Bishop**.

In the English New Testament, we find at least five words that describe both the office an elder holds and the work that he does.

Elder is from the Greek word, *presbuteros*. Paul told Titus to “appoint elders in every city” in [Titus 1:5](#). The lexicographer, Thayer, comments that this particular term denotes the dignity of the office, describing the age and experience of one who holds it.

Bishop is from the Greek word, *episkopon*. In [Titus 1:7](#), Paul uses the word “bishop” as a synonym for “elder,” which he used in verse 5. “For a bishop must be blameless.” There is, then, absolutely no difference between a bishop and an elder. The two words simply describe the same office and work. Thayer comments on this word as showing the superintendent function of an elder over a local group.

Overseer is also from the Greek word, *episkopon*. Peter used it in [1 Peter 5:3](#) in teaching his fellow elders (verse 1). “Overseer,” then, is synonymous with elder, bishop and presbyter.

Pastor/Shepherd is from the Greek word, *poimenas*. It is used in [Ephesians 4:11](#) as a noun, but more notably in [Acts 20:28](#). Paul had called the Ephesian elders to meet with him in Miletus (verse 17): “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God.” The elders (or overseers) were to **shepherd** the church of God. They were to be the pastors. Peter uses the term in precisely the same fashion in [1 Peter 5:2](#), again addressing the elders. “Pastoring” is the work of a group of men also called elders; there must be a plurality of pastors in any local place to fulfill Bible precedent and authority ([Acts 14:23](#)).

In these five words, we do not have five distinct offices. Instead, we have a series of word pictures of the same office. In reality, the Greek only has three different words. Our first, *presbuteros* (translated elder and transliterated presbyter), displays the dignity and aged experience that is required for one to serve. Our second, *episkopon* (translated bishop and overseer), shows his role in overseeing the local group. Our third, *poimenas* (translated pastor/shepherd), describes his vital function in shepherding the flock and protecting it from soul-killing wolves. With this study in mind, it is easy to see why elders are so important to the stability, unity and labor of any local church. There is no substitute for a qualified, diligent eldership.

What I want you to understand about all five of these terms is they are basically synonymous. They are different descriptions of the same office.

Our constitution gives me the role of Senior Pastor/Shepherd/Elder/Bishop/Overseer.

This position does not give me more authority over the other elders, just more responsibility. Especially in the areas of preaching, teaching, leading, and shepherding.

Pastor Larry has come on to help me with my responsibilities, especially in the areas of Discipleship and leadership development.

Our lay elders each have their responsibilities as well. Together, the staff elders and lay elders are charged with *“moving the ball down the field.”*

The point is this, Paul is saying that anyone who aspires, that means works toward the office of pastor, shepherd, elder, overseer, bishop, *“desires a noble task.”*

The word for desire means - *“to long for or even, in the negative, to lust after.”* It is a strong desire.

What is interesting about this word, is Paul doesn't use the word, **“Call”** in this verse. Instead, he uses the words, aspire and desire.

Frankly, God has to put that aspiration and desire on your heart, and in that sense you are or are not called, but if there is not aspiration and no desire, then DO NOT PURSUE this direction for your life.

When I was considering full-time pastoral ministry, my pastor gave me this advice...

“If you can do anything else, do it. But if the desire doesn't leave you, run after it with all your heart.”

Why? Because it is a **NOBLE** task.

Noble - pertaining to a positive moral quality, with the implication of being favorably valued—‘good, fine, praiseworthy.’ - Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 741.

Task - “Ἔργον - “action or active zeal in contrast to idleness (ἀργία [ἀργία]), or useful activity in contrast to useless busy-ness.” Louw-Nida

This means pursuing the NOBLE TASK of Eldership is not an authoritative board position that you seek.

It is WORK! It is not a position where you come to meetings and dispense wisdom and pontificate about theology and ideology.

It is a position where the man is promising to *“Smell like sheep”* and *“Oversee the flock.”*

Meeting with fellow elders is part of the job, but more importantly a good elder is rubbing shoulders with the people of the congregation.

Caring for their spiritual needs, protecting the flock from aberrant theology, and being a Christlike example of love, kindness, and encouragement.

They are men who are full of Grace and truth. A good elder *"Smells like sheep."*

A good elder knows the sheep and *weeps with those that weep, mourns with those that mourn, and rejoices with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15).*

So, aspiring and desiring the office of overseer/elder is a NOBLE task. But it isn't for power and prestige, it is so you can be like Christ.

What was Christ like? He was a servant - even unto the point of death.

Matthew 20:25–28 (ESV)

But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Elders, Pastor Larry and I are not Lords, we are servants of Christ as we serve you, the congregation.

On the other hand, you as the congregation are to joyfully submit to the leadership God has placed here at ABC.

As John MacArthur puts it...

In other words, the congregation is spiritually accountable to the elders, and the elders are accountable to God.

John F. MacArthur

Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

So, the elders are not at the top of the org chart, Jesus is.

The elders are the under-shepherds working in your midst as representatives of Christ. The elders are here to serve you, love you, lead you, shepherd you, pray for you, and help you become more like Jesus.

Some elders are afforded more time to do these things than others but we are a team working toward the same goal, your Christlikeness.

Do you pray for the elders of this church?

Do you bring them before the throne of God's grace?

Do you appreciate the fact that one day, each one of us who bear the title, ELDER, will stand before God on your behalf and give an account on how well we shepherded you?

Elders of ABC, do you feel this tremendous weight? I do!

It is an honor to serve in this church with you.

But we, as elders must grow and become more effective in leading and shepherding.

Men, we dare not become complacent and we dare not begin to think we are in charge.

The Lord is in charge of this church and we follow His directives laid out in His Word.

God has called the Elders of ABC to a NOBLE Task.

Perhaps the Lord is calling you as well? It is a difficult task, but one worth pursuing because serving in this capacity - you are formally representing Jesus.

Review - Do You Desire a Noble Task?

- What Do You Desire?

The second thing that Paul focuses on in determining who should serve as Elder in the church is their character...

2. What Is Your Character? (vs. 2-7)

1 Timothy 3:2-7 (ESV)

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.

What is the point of this list?

Is it a legalistic checklist to prevent most men from serving and creating a superior group of men (ala the Pharisees in the NT) lording their spiritual position over the congregation?

Hopefully I've made the point in the portion of this sermon that religious superiority is NOT the point of the God given position of Elder - Rather it is one of humble service like that of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

By the way folks, do you see a pattern here with the roles Paul is laying out for the church so far?

Whether it is men, women, elders, deacons, or whatever role you play, HUMILITY is the main attitude we ABSOLUTELY must possess.

Now, what I want you to notice about this daunting list is it has much more to do with a humble character than it does with ability.

In fact, there is only one thing on the list that has to do with ability - **apt to teach**. The rest have to do with the kind of person the elder is.

I personally would prefer to serve with men who are humble than capable. Capability can grow.

My pastor used to say to me, *"How can you tell a proud person they are proud? They are typically too proud to see their pride issue."*

Going from pride to humility is a work of God. There is no room for pride on the elder team. That's why Paul gives this list.

And by the way, if you get to the end of this list and say, *"I've got this, this list is a piece of cake."* You might have a pride problem.

I personally battle my pride every day to keep it at bay.

One way I battle my pride is to review the list Paul gives.

Because when I do, I realize how woefully short I fall and how much grace I need to have any semblance of capability to functioning in the massive role of elder at ABC.

Look at this list

A. Above Reproach (vs. 2a) - Not open to attack. Accusations that come against him are not taken seriously. No one is able to point to a significant breach of character. He is a man who is not perfect, but the general course of his life is righteous and Godly.

B. Husband of One Wife (vs. 2b) - We must be careful how we read this passage. Literally in the greek this word means *"A man of one woman."* Or we might say, *"He is a one woman man."*

Remember, this is a character issue. He has the kind of character that stays with one woman in a committed relationship.

He is not jumping around from woman to woman like some kind of gigolo.

Paul could have used the word divorce here, he does not. I'm not going to descend into that discussion, because a careful reading of this shows that Paul is talking about a man who is committed to one woman and not one who is having multiple relationships with women for his own gratification.

The reason I say a careful reading is because we can make our interpretation so rigid that a man whose wife passed away, would no longer be qualified for the role of elder. Surely this is not the sense of this passage.

Or someone who is not yet married would not be qualified as well.

A better understanding is if he has a wife, he is only to have one wife and not a bunch of women on the side.

Remember, what is this man's character? Do you want an elder in your church who has a reputation as a womanizer?

I think not. An elder is a man of fidelity, purity, and commitment.

C. Sober - Minded (vs. 2b) - He is not flippant about his role as elder. He takes his position seriously.

This doesn't mean he is a judgmental curmudgeon looking down his nose at everyone - no, he is to be filled with joy, like Jesus.

But, he is to take his role seriously, constantly working to do better as a shepherd leader in the church.

D. Self - Controlled (vs. 2b) - He is able to say no to his flesh. By the way, this is one of the Fruit of the Spirit.

He is not an out of control hot head.

He is not someone who is given to appetite or gluttony.

He takes care of himself physically, spiritually, emotionally.

He is disciplined especially in spiritual activity.

If the guy never reads the bible, has no interest in scripture memory, has no prayer life rarely comes to church - If he can't control himself in these ways, he shouldn't be an elder.

E. Respectable (vs. 2c) - Well behaved and virtuous.

F. Hospitable (vs. 2c) - This man has a shepherd's heart. He opens his home for fellowship or for those in need. He is someone who is with the sheep of the congregation.

Alistar Begg says this about what a hospitable elder should not be -

"Incomprehensible on Sunday and invisible during the week." Alistar Begg

G. Able to Teach (vs. 2c) - An elder is a man of the book.

He is able to rightly divide the word of God. He doesn't need to be able to preach every Sunday, the Bible gives latitude for those elders he has gifted for that task.

1 Timothy 5:17 (ESV)

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

But if they need to, they should be able to handle the pulpit ministry.

They should be able to teach an equipping class easily and with competency.

They should be able to lead in a bible study.

They should be able to know how to and be able to teach others on the principles of Bible study.

They should be able to counsel someone with the word of God.

If you cut them, an Elder should bleed Bipline.

Spurgeon, in speaking about John Bunyan said this...

I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like the reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress—that sweetest of all prose poems — without continually making us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bipline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved. - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/do-you-bleed-bipline/>

This is an apt goal and description of elders of a local church.

***"We shepherd the people by the power of the Word of God."* - Alistar Begg**

If an elder doesn't function this way in a local church, something is very wrong.

Paul now gives four negative examples of people who should not shepherd the church...

H. Not a Drunkard (vs. 3a) - He is not someone who is given to the bottle. He doesn't have the reputation of a drunk.

Like Ottis on The Andy Griffith Show. He was the town drunk and everyone knew it! An elder of the church cannot have that kind of reputation.

I. Not Violent, but Gentle (vs. 3a) - Would you want an angry person who muscles people around as an elder? Of course not. They need to be someone who is strong, but gentle physically, emotionally and verbally. Which leads into the next characteristic.

J. Not Quarrelsome (vs. 3b) - Do you know that person who always has to be right. They want to argue and argue and argue until they get their way?

Yeah, that guy should not be an elder.

They lack humility and theologically, they lack an understanding that Jesus is in charge of the church, not them.

K. Not a Lover of Money (vs. 3b) - If money is all they think about and talk about, they probably love it and that is a problem, according to Jesus.

1 Timothy 6:10 (ESV)

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

This person should not be an elder.

L. Manage His Home Well (vs. 4a) - Paul uses the lesser to greater argument here. If he can't manage his home...

M. Dignified (vs. 4b) - ...in a dignified way...

N. Manages His Children Well (vs. 4c -5) - if he can't manage his children, while they are under his roof, He ought not to attempt to manage the Church of Jesus Christ.

This is profoundly challenging.

O. Not a New Convert (vs. 6) - Not a novice. Why? Because when put in a leadership position without proper maturation, it is a recipe for a horrible arrogance.

Paul likens it to the same arrogance that the devil Himself, Satan suffered when he fell from Heaven.

Pride in a leadership position will destroy so much. We must be careful.

P. Good Reputation with the World (vs. 7) - He not only must smell like sheep from within the congregation, he must also be in the community, reaching the world for Christ and being salt and light.

Loving the community with the love of Jesus Christ.

The bottom line is this, Begg says, He is a normal guy, with an extraordinary calling and an extraordinary task.

As we walk through this do you sense the gravitas of this position?

It is no joke. It is not to be taken lightly.

It is a tremendous, glorious, grave position for a man to hold in the context of the local church.

It is not for the faint of heart, because ministry is messy and we are putting ourselves in the middle of people's spiritual lives.

We are called to insert ourselves and help people come to a saving knowledge of Christ, help them grow in Christ and train them to make disciples of all nations.

I have a question for you. Who is sufficient for such a task?

I certainly am not!!

I read through this list and I recognize clearly my utter dependence on Christ.

I am so very weak.

And no offense to the elders of ABC, but they are just as weak.

But do you know what? There is great advantage to weakness.

Paul was weak. He had a thorn in the flesh that made him weak.

2 Corinthians 12:9–11 (ESV)

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong...

I still have my flesh that weakens me.

Elders of ABC, we are tasked with an impossible task.

It is the elders who are charged with teaching, feeding, and protecting the church, and it is the elders who are accountable to God on behalf of the church.

John F. MacArthur

But we are weak!

My friends, only in Christ can we find the sufficiency for such an impossible task.

What are we to do, men?

How can we be the Elders we are called to be?

Pursue holiness.

The more holy, the more humble.

The Elders Before The Throne, *Volume 8, Sermon #441 - Revelation 4:4; 10, 11*

Charles Spurgeon

Pursue Christ in humility.

Seek Him. Admit to Him regularly your desperate need for Him to work through you. Pray to Him that His Character would work through you and that His Character through you would be evident to all!

And lastly, do this holy, humble work with joy.

After all that is what our savior did as He faced a life of sacrifice and of death.

Hebrews 12:1–2 (ESV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Review - Do You Desire a Noble Task?

- What Do You Desire?
- What Is Your Character?

Conclusion

Men of the church - live as if you were an elder. Exude the character we see in this passage!

God may place that aspiration and desire on your heart. Live in such a way that you could step in and help lead this congregation.

Don't wait to live out these characteristics, pursue this kind of character now.

Elders of this church - fulfill your role faithfully.

Live and serve in such a way that your progress is evident to all.

You are not called to be sinlessly perfect, but Christlike.

Remember the words Paul gave Timothy...

1 Timothy 4:14–16 (ESV)

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see

your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Elders of ABC, we must do all we can to function as Elders the way God has designed. All the while we must believe that He who called us to this NOBLE TASK will empower, enable, and encourage us along the way.

For this body of ABC - Please pray for, encourage, and support the men God has placed in this role knowing that one day we will give an account to God for our season of eldering, shepherding, overseeing, among you.

Pray that we would take this role seriously and soberly, with all humility.

I close with the powerful words of Peter...

1 Peter 5:1-4 (ESV)

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.