

The Office of Overseer: 1 Timothy 3:1-7
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This is a very special morning in the life of our church. It is exciting and momentous and weighty. We have just installed three additional men to serve alongside Jeremy and me as elders of this congregation. And now we will study together what exactly that means. What does it mean to be an elder? What are the qualifications, and what are the responsibilities? As I've been studying the letter of 1 Timothy, again and again I have marveled at the fact that God has not left us to ourselves to figure out how a church ought to be ordered, how a church ought to be led, how a church ought to function. There is such a temptation in the church to adopt various structures of leadership that work well in the business world, but are not what God's Word prescribes. And I am so thankful that I don't have to be up-to-date on all the changing fads of business leadership in order to know how to lead a church. Because God, in His kindness to us, has revealed very clearly what the leadership structure of the church is to look like. As we find in 1 Timothy 3, there are overseers and there are deacons. These are the two biblical offices of the church. This morning we'll talk about overseers, and next week we'll talk about deacons.

There are three different angles from which I want to examine the matter of overseers. First, we'll examine the nature of the office by looking at the meaning of the word overseer as well as the other ways that the New Testament refers to this office. Secondly, we'll talk about aspiring to the office of overseer. Thirdly, we'll see the qualifications for overseers.

The Office of Overseer

The first thing to observe about the office of overseer is that it is synonymous with a few other terms used in the New Testament. The word that is used here is *episkopos*, and "overseer" is a very literal rendering of the word. This role involves watching over the flock. From the word *episkopos* we also get the word "bishop," which shows up in some translations. And the word bishop now carries the connotation of overseeing not just one congregation, but a large number of congregations. But in the New Testament this word refers to those men who are serving as overseers in a particular congregation. For instance, Paul addresses the letter to Philippians in this way: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (Philippians 1:1). So *episkopos* is one way of referring to this office of leadership in the church, translated overseer or bishop. Another word that the New Testament uses for this office is

presbyteros, which is translated “elder.” In chapter 5 of this very letter Paul refers to “the elders who rule well” (5:17, see also 5:19). And in Titus 1, where Paul again gives the qualifications for elders / overseers, he says to Titus, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). This also shows another very important point, namely, that there are to be a plurality of elders in each congregation. There is not to be only one elder in a church, but a group of elders serving together. We see this in other places as well. In Acts 14:23, telling of Paul of Barnabas, it says, “And when they had appointed elders (plural) for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (see also James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1). There are to be elders / overseers in each congregation. Finally, this role in the church is also referred to in terms of shepherding. In Acts 20 Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders (*presbyteros*, verse 17), and he says to them in verse 28, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopos*), to care for (literally, “to shepherd”) the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” The noun form of this verb, “to shepherd,” is used in Ephesians 4:11, and this is where we get the term “pastor.” A pastor is a shepherd, an overseer, an elder. These are all synonymous terms in the New Testament, and we see in these terms the nature of the office. The term elder implies maturity and wisdom. Overseer connotes the oversight and instruction that this group of men must provide for the congregation. And pastor / shepherd gives us a vivid picture of how those who serve in this office ought to lead and protect the sheep. Elder, overseer, bishop, pastor, shepherd – these are all ways of referring to the same office as it is described in the New Testament.

This is to be distinguished from the role of deacon, which is the other church office described in the New Testament. The word deacon means servant, and deacons are to serve in various ways in the life of the church. The unique role of elders is teaching and leading. And as we learned last week, this is why elders are to be men. Paul wrote just a few verses earlier, in 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man,” and he based that on the order of creation. One clear inference from that statement is that women are not to serve as elders, because two unique functions of elders is teaching and exercising authority. Just as the husband is to be the servant leader in the home, godly men are to serve as the humble leaders in the church family.

One other thing that we must say about eldership, before getting to our text, is that the authority of the elders is a derived authority. For Christ is our Shepherd. He is our Head. He is our

ultimate authority and leader and protector and overseer. 1 Peter 2:25 refers to Christ as “the Shepherd and Overseer of [our] souls.” And 1 Peter 5:4, in the context of exhorting the elders to shepherd the flock of God that is among you, calls Jesus Christ the “chief Shepherd.” It’s God’s flock, not the elder’s flock, and Jesus Christ is the chief Shepherd. So we have Christ as the chief Shepherd and the Overseer of our souls, and elders are merely the under shepherds who are appointed to lead the flock under Christ’s authority and guidance.

Aspiring to the Office of Overseer (verse 1)

Now that we’ve gleaned some important insights about elders from other parts of the New Testament, let’s go to our text in 1 Timothy 3 and begin by considering verse 1 and the mention of those who aspire to the office of overseer. Here we find the second of five trustworthy sayings that Paul gives in the Pastoral Letters. And the trustworthy saying here is, “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” Serving as an elder is a noble task and an awesome responsibility because the church is so precious to God. To be an elder is to shepherd the flock of God, as we just read in 1 Peter 5. It is to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood (Acts 20:28). This is not a light thing. It is not an easy task. It is not an insignificant role. It is caring for the cherished bride of Christ, for whom He died. Therefore it is a noble task, and those who aspire to it desire a noble task.

Notice here that it is not wrong to want to be an overseer. It is not wrong to aspire to the office of overseer. Of course, one may aspire to this office for the wrong reasons. One may imagine that godliness is a means of gain, as Paul mentions in 6:5. One may desire a position of leadership in the church as a means to financial gain or as a means of gaining respect and prestige and power. There are various reasons why a person may aspire to the office of elder that would not be noble reasons. But those who aspire to the office of elder out of a love for Christ and His Church desire a noble task. The seventh question in the elder vows is, “Have you been induced, as far as you know your own heart, to accept the office of elder from love of God and sincere desire to promote His glory in the Gospel of His Son?” If God has placed those desires in your heart, then you desire a noble task, and it is good that you aspire to that task. May that desire spur you on in your pursuit of holiness, your study of the Scriptures, and your service in the church. That is what we would refer to as the inward call, God placing those desires in a man’s heart to serve and lead the church of God for the glory of God and the good of His people. That inward call, then, must be confirmed by an external call,

which is the church's role in evaluating a man to see if he is qualified and gifted to be an elder.

The statement of 1 Timothy 3:1 should land on us in a few different ways. First, for those of us who are elders, we should recognize the weight and responsibility *and joy* of the ministry we get to be involved in. This is a noble task. It is a good and excellent work, and we should labor at it reverently and joyfully. I love the exhortation to leaders in Hebrews 13:17. It first says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." And then it gives this exhortation to leaders: "Let them do this *with joy* and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." So, elders, let us continually be aware of the gravity and the joy involved in the task to which we've been called.

Secondly, those who aspire to the office of elder should be encouraged and motivated to continue in that pursuit. God doesn't put that desire in every believer's heart. So if you find yourself being drawn to this task, and as far as you know your heart you discern that you are drawn to the task out of a love for Christ and His Church, then pursue it heartily and faithfully. Carefully consider the qualifications that we're about to look at, and seek to grow in them. And then see if the church recognizes that call on your life and confirms your inner call with an external call.

Thirdly, this affirmation of eldership as a noble task should spur on the entire congregation to pray for and encourage your elders. It is a very good thing that God ordained for the church to be set up this way, and we should be grateful to Him for raising up these men to humbly serve and lead the flock. Please pray for us. Pray that God will give us wisdom for the task. Pray that God will protect us from sin. Pray that He will clearly lead us as we seek to faithfully lead this church.

Qualifications for Overseers

Now we come to the actual qualifications for overseers, which Paul lists in verses 2-7. As we walk through these various qualifications, let me encourage you all to examine your own hearts in terms of these godly attributes, because these qualifications are moral attributes that all Christians should aspire to, by God's grace. Not all will aspire to the office of overseer, but all should be striving to grow in these godly characteristics.

The first on the list is that an overseer must be above reproach. In a way, this is a broad qualification which encompasses all the rest. An overseer must be above reproach—he must be free from any hidden sins for which someone could bring a reproach against him—and this must be true in the following specific areas, as Paul goes on to list them. Being above reproach

does not mean that an elder has to be perfect. If that was the case, we would have no elders. It means, though, that there are no concealed sins, no secret sins that could be the ground for reproach if someone found out about them. The elder who is above reproach is not sinless, but he confesses his sins and repents of his sins and seeks accountability to help him battle against temptations.

A very important area of life in which an elder must be above reproach is in the area of sexual purity and marital fidelity. He must be “the husband of one wife.” There has been much debate over the precise meaning of this phrase. Some have argued that this means only married men can be elders, which seems unlikely since Paul, himself, was single and also commended singleness in 1 Corinthians 7. This kind of reasoning would also insist that elders must have children, and if one were to be completely literal, it would require having at least two children since verse 4 says, “keeping his children (plural) submissive.” I don’t think Paul’s intent here is to mandate that an elder be married or have children. He does not clearly state that as a requirement, which he very easily could have done. Instead, he is simply speaking to the common situation. There are a lot of men who are married, and a lot of married men have children. So Paul addresses that common situation. The married man must be “the husband of one wife.”

Others interpret this phrase to mean that an elder can only have one wife throughout his entire lifetime, which would prohibit an elder from remarrying for any reason. But elsewhere, again in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul makes it clear that there is freedom to remarry if a spouse passes away, or if an unbelieving spouse abandons the believing spouse. Also, Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:9 seem to leave open the possibility of remarriage for the faithful partner when the marriage ends due to the spouse’s sexual unfaithfulness. Therefore, I do not believe that a man who is married second time is necessarily disqualified from being an elder. He *may* be unqualified, depending on the situation. But based on the other things Paul and Jesus said about remarriage, it’s unlikely that this phrase means “married only once in his entire lifetime.”

A third view is that these words are meant to prohibit polygamy, since polygamy was practiced among Jews in New Testament times. It’s certainly possible that Paul had this in mind, but it’s doubtful that polygamy was the focus of this comment. A helpful parallel is the qualification given for widows who would be supported by the church. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:9, “Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband.” This phrase is the exact parallel to what we have in 3:2, “the husband of one wife.” These widows

were to be the wife of one husband. But while polygamy was practiced in that time period, polyandry was not. It was not unheard of for a man to have multiple wives, but you never came across a wife who had multiple husbands. Therefore, the phrase “the wife of one husband” did not have in view women who had multiple husbands. Instead, it meant that a woman was required to have been faithful to her husband.

And I think that’s the best way to understand “husband of one wife” as well. It is a man who is sexually pure and evidently faithful to his wife. He is not an adulterer. He is not into pornography. He is not flirtatious. He is not involved with another woman emotionally. The husband of one wife is a man who is clearly committed to his wife. He loves his wife. He pursues his wife. And no other woman (or image of a woman) is allowed to invade that sacred relationship. I believe those are the characteristics of a one-woman man.

The next qualifications are sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, which John Stott puts together under the heading “self-mastery.” And we could add to this heading “not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome.” The elder must be a man who can control his various appetites and instincts. He must have a focused mind (sober-minded). He must control his desire for alcohol (not a drunkard). He must control his temper (not violent but gentle). He must control his tongue (not quarrelsome). In all of these ways an elder must be self-controlled and respectable.

He must also be hospitable. The word here, *philoxenos*, literally means a love for strangers. All believers are exhorted to be hospitable (see Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9; Hebrews 13:2), and it is a particular requirement for eldership in the church (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). Elders need to be the kind of people who gravitate toward strangers and desire to welcome them into the church and into their homes. This is an important demonstration of love that must be present in those who would lead God’s flock. Alexander Strauch, in his book *Biblical Eldership*, says, “Giving oneself to the care of God’s people means sharing one’s life and home with others. An open home is a sign of an open heart and a loving, sacrificial, serving spirit. A lack of hospitality is a sure sign of selfish, lifeless, loveless Christianity” (pg. 194).

Next is “able to teach.” In the other list of elder qualifications found in Titus 1, Paul elaborates by writing, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). As the shepherds of the flock, the overseers must be able to feed the sheep with the rich food of God’s Word, and they must be able to protect the sheep from false teaching. This is why the teaching of God’s Word is such a vital

part of the elders' role in leading the church. We must be able to instruct in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. Strauch says, "This doesn't mean that an elder must be an eloquent orator, a dynamic lecturer, or a highly gifted teacher (of which there are very few). But an elder must know the Bible and be able to instruct others from it" (pg. 195).

I've already mentioned the next three qualification, so let's move now to the mention of money. An overseer must not be a lover of money. In chapter 6 Paul speaks further to the issue of money. He first refers to those who imagine that godliness is a means of gain (verse 5). There have always been, and continue to be, those who seek to use the ministry as a means of gaining wealth. This must not be the motivation of an elder. He must labor for the glory of Christ, not for the comfort and pleasure that wealth can provide. Paul goes on in that passage to contrast contentment with the love of money. "Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 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" (1 Timothy 6:6-10). Don't love money. Don't let money become your god. Let us pursue godliness with contentment, for in this there is great gain.

Now in verses 4-5 Paul gives an extended comment on the relationship between a man's home life and his role in the church. This shows us a couple of things. First, it shows us that this is a very important qualification for overseers, since he spells it out in such detail. And secondly, it also shows us the very close parallel between a family and a church family, since a man's ability (or lack of ability) to manage his own household will be a clear indication of his ability (or lack of ability) to care for God's church. "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?" The argument is from the lesser to the greater. A man must be competent to lead and shepherd his own family if he is to be given the responsibility of leading and shepherding the church family. He must be bold enough to confront error and disobedience, and he must be wise enough and loving enough to confront and discipline in appropriate ways. He must be the father who, as Ephesians 6:4 says, does not provoke his children to anger, but brings them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Overseers need to exhibit clear and consistent discipline with their

children, which will, Lord-willing, produce submissive children. And those qualities of management and care will carry over into the church family.

Finally, in verses 6-7 there are last qualifications that are given for overseers. Verse 6, he must not be a recent convert. This points to the obvious fact that an elder must be a believer. We might think that this can go without saying, but I assume there are many churches that have individuals serving in the eldership of the church who are not actually regenerate. There are many individuals who are naturally gifted as leaders and teachers. They are successful in various leadership roles outside of the church, and so they are quickly made leaders within the church as well, without a careful examination of their spiritual condition. Elders are not just gifted leaders and teachers. They must be men who have been convicted of their sin and have repented of that sin, turning to Jesus Christ as their only hope of forgiveness. They must be men who have been changed, and are being changed, by the grace of God.

And the qualification is not only that they be converted, but that they not be recently converted. There must be a good span of time during which one can mature and grow in the faith. There must be a track record of growing in holiness. These men must be believers, and *mature* believers.

Paul then gives the purpose of this qualification. Literally it says, “in order that he might not be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” In other words, a recent convert is susceptible to becoming a proud elder, and a proud elder is at risk of being condemned just like the devil was condemned.

Then verse 7, he must be well thought of by outsiders. He must have a good reputation among those who are outside the church. He must be the kind of man who, even if people disagree with his beliefs and his commitment to Christ, they can’t deny that he is an honorable and upright man, which brings us right back to the first qualification—he is above reproach. Even those outside the church can bring no objection against him.

If those outside the church *can* point to some inconsistency in the life of an elder, then the elder will fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. The devil loves to bring down *any* Christian into sin and hypocrisy, but he especially loves to see this happen in the life of an overseer, for this discredits the Gospel more effectively. John Stott writes, “in his malicious eagerness to discredit the gospel, the devil does his best to discredit the ministers of the gospel. It is an old trick with a long history. The devil has used it for centuries; it remains an effective stratagem today” (99).

In closing, I simply want to encourage all of us to pray for our church and for our elders, because it's only by God's grace that a group of men can faithfully lead and shepherd a church, remaining above reproach in all of these different areas of life. What we see in these qualifications for overseers is the same as what we find in the requirements for all believers. We are required to be and do things that we are utterly incapable of being and doing. This is true generally, as we learned in Sunday School this morning, that because of the bondage of our sin we are unable to respond to the Gospel. We are unable to live holy lives. We are unable, in and of ourselves, to make any move toward God or godliness. These things remain impossibilities until God invades our lives with the power of the Gospel and transforms us by His grace. This is true generally of all believers, and it is something we should be reminded of as we consider these qualifications for overseers, because none of us, on our own, are able to live up to this standard. Left to ourselves, we would fall into all kinds of vices that would discredit the church and the Gospel. Apart from God's grace, we would fall short of every one of these qualifications. That's the reality of our sin nature. But the Good News is that God has saved us through the blood of His Son Jesus Christ, and He has called certain men to serve as overseers in the church. And the same grace that forgives our sin also empowers us to live holy lives. Therefore, as we consider these qualifications, it should cause all of us to cry out to God for His grace. May He bless our church by preserving a group of overseers who, by His grace, live up to this standard of godliness, so that the flock will be cared for and edified and so that those outside of the church may see the Gospel for what it is. Let us pray, fervently and continually, to that end.