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## WHAT DOES AN ELDER LOOK LIKE?

1 Timothy 3:2-7

By

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Lesson 9

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I want to read you a letter I received from a man interested in a ministry position in our church: Dear Steve,

I am looking for an opportunity for ministry and wondered if your church has a position available. I am a single man in my fifties, short of stature, slightly built, balding, with a beard. My health is not the best. I have difficulty with my vision. But in spite of my physical limitations, I have seen the Lord use me in many ways. I have never been able to stay in full-time ministry for long because of repeated problems with my financial support. But I have always continued serving the Lord, even when I've had to take a secular job. I used to have a violent temper, but the Lord has given me victory over that problem.

As my resume shows, I've been involved in the founding of a number of churches, although I have never stayed in one place for much over three years. I admit I am not a persuasive or eloquent public speaker--in fact I've been criticized over this matter--but I do maintain that the Lord uses me in this capacity and I would like to have opportunities to speak regularly in your church. Some have complained about my speaking because at times I get carried away and forget about the clock. I must also warn you that my teaching has often stirred up controversy, even to the point of causing riots in some towns. I don't want to hide the fact that I've been sent to prison several times for my part in causing such disturbances. My life has been threatened on numerous occasions and I have been physically attacked several times. A number of evangelical churches are divided in their opinions about me. Even some of the churches I helped found have turned against me.

I have done some writing on various theological and church-related topics, although a well-known Christian leader complained that I am hard to understand in places. I am not particularly strong at administrative details, being somewhat forgetful. But I am a hard-driving, zealous, dedicated man. I believe I could be useful in

the ministry of your church, especially in discipling any young men who want to follow the Lord. Please let me hear from you.

Would you choose a man like that for a position of leadership in this church? Oh, I forgot to give the salutation: "Sincerely, Paul of Tarsus." Except for part of the description of Paul's physique, which comes from early extra-biblical sources, all of the above was based on the New Testament.

That fictional, but biblically-based, letter from Paul should show us the importance of understanding the biblical qualifications for a leader in the local church. Human wisdom and worldly standards are not adequate; we must know what the New Testament requires in an elder. As we saw in my last message, the fundamental principle in church government is that Christ is the Head of His church. He has ordained that His headship is exercised through spiritually mature elders who through example and servant-hood shepherd His flock. So we should not "vote" for elders in the style of American democracy. We should confirm as elders men who approximate the qualifications given by the Apostle Paul.

In 1 Timothy 3:2-7, Paul gives us a portrait of what an elder looks like. We learn that ...

Elders must be spiritually mature men.

Paul spells out 15 qualifications so that there are no doubts as to what spiritual maturity entails. Before we examine the qualifications in more detail, several things need to be said:

First, most of these qualities are prescribed elsewhere in the Bible for every Christian, including women. So we all should be seeking to grow in these areas.

Second, spiritual maturity takes time, effort, and discipline (1 Tim. 4:7). There are no shortcuts. We live in a day when we're used to instant everything. But there is no such thing as instant godliness. The crucial question is, Are you involved in the process?

Third, no one is perfectly qualified to be a church leader. These qualities, for the most part, are not the kind of thing where you can say, "I've arrived!" There is always going to be room for growth. If you require perfection, no one would qualify as an elder. But at the same time, an elder should not be in glaring violation of

any qualification. If he is weak in any area, he should be aware of it and should be working on that area.

As Paul says with regard to the ministry, "Who is adequate for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16). Then he adds, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of the new covenant, ..." (2 Cor. 3:5, 6). Every elder ought to have a sense of inadequacy in himself when he considers the office of overseer, but also a sense that God has called him to this fine work (3:1).

With that as background, let's examine Paul's list. I am going to omit several other qualifications added in Titus 1:5-9. Also, I must be brief in order to cover all 15 qualities in one message. If you want to study each characteristic in more depth, I recommend Gene Getz's book, *The Measure of A Man* (G/L Regal Books, 1974). Since the qualifications are not arranged in any obvious groupings, we'll just take them in the order Paul gives them.

1. "Above reproach" (KJV, NKJV = "blameless"):

This quality heads the list in both Timothy and Titus and serves as an overall characteristic of a man's life. You may be inclined to think, "I'll never qualify because I could never be perfect." But Paul isn't demanding perfection. The Greek word has the idea of not having anything in your life that the enemy might lay hold of. In other words, an elder must not be living a double life. In his home life, personal life, and business life, he is living in obedience to God's Word. When he sins, he judges himself and seeks forgiveness from God and others. He is a man of integrity.

2. "The husband of one wife":

This quality is second in both Timothy and Titus, pointing to its importance. Unfortunately, the term is a bit ambiguous, and so different interpretations have been put forth. The phrase is literally, "a one-woman-man." Some take it to mean that an elder must be married, not single; but this would disqualify Paul and Timothy. Others say it means that he cannot be polygamous; but that was rare in the society of that time, so it would be almost irrelevant. Another view is that it prohibits a divorced man from ever being an elder; but Paul could have said that more clearly if he meant

that. Some go so far as to prohibit even a widowed elder from re-marrying; but this seems extreme.

Since the other qualities deal with moral or spiritual characteristics, I think the best view is that a "one-woman-man" is a man who is intimately related only to his wife. He is a faithful husband. He is not a flirt nor is he enslaved to the sin of mental lust. Whether single or married, he has an extended track record of mental and physical sexual purity.

Thus it does not have to do per se with whether or not a man has been divorced in the past. While some men who may have been divorced in the past could qualify for elder if they have matured in this area, other men who may never have been divorced would be disqualified because they do not have victory over a habit of sensual thoughts. An elder must be a one-woman-man in thought and deed. If a church leader commits sexual sin, he needs to get out of any position of leadership until he has established a history of moral purity. A history means years, not months!

3. "Temperate" (KJV = "vigilant"):

The word means to be clear-headed, mentally alert, able to make sound judgments. It originally meant "not mixed with wine," and came to mean "sober, someone who is able to think clearly." The verb is associated with alertness in view of the enemy (1 Pet. 5:8) and the end times (1 Thess. 5:6, 8), so it points to a man who has sound spiritual discernment in this evil world.

4. "Prudent" (NIV = "self-controlled"; KJV = "sober"; NKJV = "sober-minded"):

In Titus 1:8; 2:2, 5 the NASB translates this word "sensible." It means "to be of sound mind," especially in the sense of not being impulsive. He doesn't live by his feelings, but by obedience to God's wisdom as revealed in His Word. Plato defined it as "the mastery of pleasure and desire" (in William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [Westminster Press, p. 80]).

5. "Respectable" (KJV, NKJV = "of good behavior"):

The word means "orderly, decent, modest." The NASB translates it "discreetly" with reference to a woman's apparel (1

Tim. 2:9). It points to a person who lives in a well-ordered, decent life in every area so that he is becoming to the Lord and His Word.

6. "Hospitable" (KJV = "given to hospitality"):

Literally, the original means, "a lover of strangers." He is quick to open his heart and home to others. He is not afraid to meet new people. He's able to make them feel relaxed and welcome. All Christians are exhorted to pursue hospitality (Rom. 12:13) and to be hospitable without complaint (1 Pet. 4:9). This must especially be true of an elder.

7. "Able to teach" (KJV = "apt to teach"):

Since the other qualifications for elder can be developed, I do not take this to mean that an elder must have the spiritual gift of teaching. In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul indicates that some elders should concentrate on preaching and teaching, while others do not. By "able to teach" Paul means that an elder must know Scripture well enough to be able to set forth sound doctrine and to refute error in a kind manner without quarreling (see 2 Tim. 2:24 where the word is also used). He must be a man of the Word who also understands people so that he can guide people into God's truth. And since you can never arrive at a complete knowledge of God's Word, an elder must be continuing to study with a teachable heart.

8. "Not addicted to wine" (NIV = "not given to much wine"; KJV, NKJV = "not given to wine"):

The Bible does not prohibit all drinking of alcoholic wine. Every indication is that Jesus drank wine, not just grape juice, although it was diluted wine. But the Bible warns of the dangers of strong drink: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise" (Prov. 20:1). Drunkenness is clearly a sin (Gal. 5:21). I believe that in light of the widespread problem of alcohol abuse, total abstinence is best, especially for a man in a position of leadership. If a new Christian who has had a problem with alcohol sees you as a mature Christian drinking an alcoholic beverage, and because of your influence goes back to drinking himself and falls away from the Lord, you have caused him to stumble. It is better not to drink any alcohol than to lead a weaker brother into sin (Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 8:11-13).

Since an elder is to be temperate, prudent, and self-controlled (a fruit of the Spirit, Gal. 5:23), and since Christians should not be mastered by any harmful practice or substance, an elder should not be enslaved to tobacco, drugs, or even to overeating (that disqualifies a lot of fat pastors!). A spiritually mature man will have control in all these areas.

9. "Not pugnacious" (NIV, NKJV = "not violent"; KJV = "no striker"):

An elder must control his anger so that he doesn't respond to provocation by decking the other guy. In the home, he doesn't hit his wife or beat his children. If he has to spank them, he uses control and does not abuse them. To hit a child in the face is never proper discipline. There is no place in a Christian home for physical violence.

(The KJV adds at this point, "not greedy of filthy lucre"; NKJV = "not greedy for money"; but in view of poor manuscript evidence and since it would be redundant in light of the end of the verse ["free from the love of money" or "not covetous"], it was probably added by a copyist from Titus 1:7).

10. "Gentle" (KJV = "patient"):

There are several Greek words translated "gentle." This word points to a man who is gracious and does not demand his rights. He is not harsh in demanding extreme penalties. An elder must be a man softened by God's grace so that he deals with people as God has dealt with him.

11. "Uncontentious" (NIV, NKJV = "not quarrelsome"; KJV = "not a brawler"):

The Greek word is *amacho*. Our slang term "macho," refers to a man who has to prove how tough he is. That's the opposite of amacho. An elder should not get into fruitless quarrels, whether over theology or anything else. He is not out to prove his manhood by force or authority. He's not a spiritual bully or an angry man.

12. "Free from the love of money" (KJV, NKJV = "not covetous"; NIV = "not a lover of money"):

The Bible has much to say about money. It definitely does *not* say that God wants every believer to prosper financially as the cur-

rent heresy teaches. Riches are not wrong per se, but they are spiritually dangerous. Paul warns, "... those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction" (1 Tim. 6:9). Every Christian, but especially the men who lead the church, must be clear that you *cannot* serve God and money (Luke 16:13-15).

13. "Manages his own household well" (NKJV = "rules"):

This includes all aspects of a man's family life--his relationship with his wife, their finances, etc. But especially Paul singles out having his children in submission. The phrase, "with all dignity," may refer to the man's manner in dealing with his children or to the children's proper (dignified) behavior toward their parents (the NIV translates it this way; both are required, of course.) This is an important qualification which has been ignored by many churches in our day. Many pastors should not be in leadership because they have grievously failed on this point. Paul does not mean that an elder's small children should never disobey or that they must always be perfect little examples. There are no children (except Jesus) born without sin natures.

Paul does mean that an elder's family life should be exemplary. If a man's children are rebels who reject the Lord, don't increase his area of responsibility to the entire church. The same weaknesses that made him a poor father will make him a poor church leader. If his own children disrespect him, he will not have the respect he needs to shepherd the church.

This verse demands that I and the other elders have a priority that comes before ministry to this church, namely, ministry to our families. It is a tragedy for a man to be so involved in church work that he neglects his family, with the result that his children grow up to hate the church and the Lord because of it. And there is no such thing as quality time apart from quantity time. So if I tell you that I am too busy for some church activity, it may well mean that I'll be at home that night.

14. "Not a new convert" (KJV, NKJV = "not a novice"):

Obviously, a new convert could not have had the time to develop these qualities. It takes time to obtain a thorough grasp of the Scriptures. This is another common error in our day, that of

pushing new converts into the limelight, especially if they were well-known as non-Christians (movie stars, musicians, athletes, etc). Or, a guy who is a successful business executive becomes a Christian and immediately is asked to become an elder in the church. Paul says, "Don't do it!"

Why not? He will become conceited (the original means, "puffed up or clouded with smoke") and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. Spiritual pride is a subtle but serious sin. When Satan grew proud, he fell from heaven. When a man who is elevated into a position of leadership too quickly grows proud, he will fall from his position and perhaps even from the faith. Part of Christian growth involves God's humbling us through trials. A recent convert hasn't yet learned that lesson.

15. "A good reputation with those outside" (KJV = "a good report"; NKJV = "a good testimony"):

He should be recognized in the community as a man of moral character and proper conduct. His business dealings should be honest and right. This should be true of all Christians, but especially of leaders. Non-Christians should not be able to bring the charge of "hypocrite" against a church leader. We may be maligned by non-Christians for our godly behavior, and they often will slander us because our lives convict them of sin. But we should not give cause for reproach by our ungodly behavior. The "snare of the devil" (v. 7) probably refers to the trap which the devil sets for church leaders by getting them to ruin their testimony.

### Conclusion

That's a glance at the kind of maturity God wants to produce in all of His people. In our personal walk with God, in our family life, and in our relationships, God wants us to develop practical spiritual maturity and godliness. He wants us to be above reproach. Elders should be men of spiritual maturity. It is the qualification for leadership in the church. As we approach our annual meeting, and even as we meet tonight to consider calling a youth pastor candidate, we need to look for men who approximate these qualities. Before you all get under a pile and all the elders resign, remember, we're looking at a process that takes years. No elder will ever match every quality perfectly. But it's the direction we need to

be growing in. No elder should be in glaring violation of any of these qualities.

Also, please observe that elders are the special targets of the enemy. Twice (vv. 6, 7) Paul mentions the devil in connection with elders. It reminds me of the Far Side cartoon where two deer are talking. One deer has a target on his chest. The other one says, "Bummer of a birthmark, Ernie!" Elders are marked men. If Satan can cause a church leader to fall, he brings down many others. Pray for me and all the elders, that we would daily be walking in reality before God, judging ourselves according to God's Word.

You can respond to this message by being overwhelmed with guilt and running for cover or by responding to God's grace and to the process of growth He wants for us all. I would encourage each of you (not just elders) to pick one or two (at the most) areas where you are the weakest. Study that quality in God's Word and ask God to begin to develop it in your life. Who knows—one day the church may say, "You know, this man looks like an elder!"

### Discussion Questions

1. How is the Scriptural method of choosing church leaders different from the methods used in most churches today?
2. If you were going to make a list of qualities of a spiritually mature person (independently of 1 Tim. 3:1-7), how would your list have differed from Paul's?
3. If you had to single out just one of these qualities in choosing a man for church leadership, which one would it be? Why?

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