

1 Timothy 3:1-7

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 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? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (ESV)

When I worked in network television, I worked in the Entertainment division. It sounds, I know, relatively glamorous. But of course there were very big differences between that talent, and "the suits." Management. Guys like me. The talent, for one thing, make a lot more money. And of course they are a lot more famous. And there are other benefits, too: More time off, limousines, assistants to do things for you, hair, make-up, wardrobe. That sort of thing.

But there is a weight that the talent have that guys like me never have to deal with. In the contract of every person who is on-air talent – it doesn't matter if it's Charlie Gibson and Diane Sawyer or Jay Leno and Meryl Streep – is something called a "morals clause." What's a morals clause? A morals clause is a provision in your contract that prohibits certain behavior in a person's private life. It's behavior that usually has to do with sexual acts and drug use. And the whole point of these clauses is to protect and uphold the public image that the studio or the network or the record company wants to maintain.

These businesses know what people in all sorts of social and public institutions know: the higher up you go in an organization, the more the outside world looks at you. Notices you. And the more the outside world will judge the organization by what they see of you. It's simply common sense wisdom. And we have it in the church: "To whom much is given, much will be required."¹

That's why these instructions matter. If someone is to serve in a role of leadership in the church, their character, their lifestyle, their family life, must reflect what the church is all about. And really, when you think about all of the places where the bible speaks about shepherds, or overseers or elders and deacons, what's clear is that ... "God is not looking for better methods. God is looking for better people because people *ARE* God's methods."² (Unless it's Jason and Jane Method!)

And let's be clear; even though I elected to preach from 1st Timothy because we elected new elders and deacons in this last year, this sermon is for *everyone* here. Because if you are a leader in this church, this message is for you. And if you are a member of this church, this message is for you. Because we need godly leaders and we need godly people to *choose* godly leaders.

¹ Luke 12:48

² Sinclair Ferguson.

And we need this especially today, because much of the church is moving away from this command to pick godly leaders. In the last 10 years there seems to be a lamentable explosion of clerical misdeeds in the media, and frequently, the response of the church sounds something like this: "Well, the church believes in forgiveness. So rather than make a big deal about leaders who don't live up to biblical moral standards, let's look at it as an opportunity to show what we mean by forgiveness and let people continue on or make a new start somewhere else.

Now let's think about that. It's certainly true – at least in part – to say that Christianity is about forgiveness. But you can't talk about forgiveness without talking about a standard – that a standard of behavior was broken. You see, forgiveness presumes holiness (repeat). The point of forgiveness is not that we can now relax and go on sinning because simply "being forgiven" is our testimony. After all, even the worst sinner is to be forgiven seventy times seven!

No, the point of God's forgiving love is to show his grace and transform us into the *new* human beings we were always meant to be, and that he longs to see. So it's absolutely necessary that those who hold leadership positions should model the gospel message and show what a transformed person looks like, and display a new way to be human. To live a lifestyle that different from what we see around us.

And this is interesting: Paul thinks that outsiders – people that don't understand the gospel, or have ever even *heard* the good news – WILL be able to see the difference. They WILL recognize that there's something different about these Christians when they're living a lives of integrity. In other words, everyone can see hypocrisy and call a hypocrite "hypocritical." *This* is why leaders must be above reproach. They are to be on the leading edge of a new humanity.

This morning we want to look at:

- The importance of the elder
- The character of the elder
- The reputation of the elder

Maybe it's my job, but I am always collecting quotes. Sometimes these quotes find their way to the reflections page on the back of the bulletin, or as a citation in a sermon. Perhaps I am a little too active in collecting quotes. Because my wife and I will be in the middle of a conversation about who-knows-what, and she will come out with a pithy little statement about which she is particularly pleased, and she'll stop and say, "Write that down!" And I have to be clear – she's not saying it as if to say, "The prices at store X are a lot cheaper than store Y... and you can write that down," as if to say, "you can take that to the bank." No, she means, this is a proverb, a trustworthy saying, and everyone should hear this!" Sometimes she will stop me a few moments later and ask, "Why aren't you writing that down?!"

This is very Pauline! Five times in the pastoral epistles Paul uses this phrase, "This is a trustworthy saying." In other words, "Write this one down: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task..."

Now, it's an interesting thing to do with Paul what my wife would like me to do with her statements, and that is to lay out all of the trustworthy-you-should-write-that-down statements side-by-side and meditate on them. And what you would find is that this is the second one, which follows on the heels of this verse back in chapter 1: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." So THAT'S important, right? That's the gospel in a sentence! Christ came. He came to save. He didn't come to save the "nice" or the "good" people, but sinners. And he came to save sinners like me! Now, the next trustworthy saying is this one: "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task..." Doesn't sound so important, does it.

But Paul thinks it is! "Write this down!" Why? Well you have to remember that at the time Paul was writing, being an elder was not only as thankless as it often is today – when was the last time you went up to an elder and said, "Thank-you for serving?" – but that being an elder in a place like Ephesus could get you killed. All that would have to happen is that the government – as we've said, someone like Nero who had no problems killing Christians for sport – would become threatened by a small group of Jesus worshippers, and they would seek out the leader and kill him as a message to all the other Christians. An overseer, a bishop, an elder – the bible uses these words synonymously – could get thrown to the lions. **But** more positively, he's also saying, this is an enormously important service. It's kingdom service. Literally, it means a beautiful task." In other words, "How beautiful it is when a man sets his heart on the virtues that are essential for church leadership."

Because look what these elders have to do: they get to communicate the first trustworthy statement! They get to tell the world that broken and lost people have a savior – Jesus came to save them. Of course you don't have to be an elder to do that! But the hard part is communicating this – being *called* to communicate this – to people like Saul! People who want Christians persecuted and dead! Communicating it to the chief of sinners! So it's great to be a messenger of Jesus, but sinners often want to kill the messengers! You see, you get to share the gospel with sinners, but they're not only called to do it, but often must move toward sinners. They have to do church discipline – which wasn't being done in Ephesus (Paul had to get involved with Hymeneus and Alexander) – and control the keys of the kingdom, and do the binding and loosing. Praise God for these servants! This job is important!

And before we go on, we have to say this. While aspiring to the office of elder is a good desire, when someone has an excessive, immoderate confidence that they ARE elder material, it tells me that they have not based this noble desire for a noble task on the first trustworthy saying: that they don't understand what this service will require personally and professionally. You're going to be looking sin in the face all the time. Sometimes the worst of sin. That's what this last verse – verse 7 – is saying. The snare of the devil is waiting to bring down specifically the leaders of the church who teach the doctrines of grace. So just desiring to be an elder because of the lofty position... could be a disaster.

- Now second, the character of the elder

I don't know if you've had this experience, but when I tell people I am a Presbyterian minister, I can tell that there is a caricature that people are drawing on. And some of it... is true!

We Presbyterians talk about doctrine a lot. The stereotype is true! But then you get to a passage like this one, and folks will point out, "Why do you Presbyterians make a big deal about having your pastors be educated and catechized in the faith. After all, when Paul is describing what an overseer must be, it's all about character. There are 12 things on this list, and eleven of them are about character. You can't learn character in seminary!

All I can say is, stand back and really read the whole letter. What is the problem in this church? False teachers! And what does Paul do in combating the false teachers? He says "choose people of good character!" There is a connection, you see, between what you believe and what your character will be! What you believe DEFINES how you live! Show me the person who believes that being Christian means being nice, and I will show you someone who is tempted toward pride, or has a depressive personality! If you think the gospel is, you do good things and you save yourself by being a good person, you will either think you are righteous – prideful – or that you will never be righteous – in despair. If your doctrine is flawed, your character will be flawed. That's exactly what's happened here. These teachers said don't marry... while they were off being sexually promiscuous!

And we're not talking, by the way about smarts or intelligence or that having a good education will make you godly – it won't! No, we're talking about knowing the *truth*. If you are going to understand this trustworthy statement about what a trustworthy leader is, you have to understand the truth of the first trustworthy statement!

Here is what this means. Elders are not people of great character who are also good business men. Or wise administrators who also happen to be paragons of virtue. *No*, elders are people that know, and then live out the gospel. Think about *that* the next time you nominate an elder: Does this person really know the gospel, and then does his life exhibit the gospel? Elders do not rule over others because they are aware of how virtuous they are, but rather they serve others because they know how undeserving they are of the mercies of God. Elders are not the least broken people, but those who know how broken they really are! Elders are not the people in the church with the least amount of sin, but the ones most likely to repent of their righteous good deeds!

Before we get to the specifics, I know that this all sounds a bit messy because it seems to set up two different standards – a special level of holiness for the clergy and a second, lower one for everyone else. No, if you are a Christian and you are not in leadership, it does not mean that you can leave the practice of real holiness to the "professionals." You'll be headed for disaster if you do! The fact is though, that some of us are more consistent in our doctrine and holiness and some less so simply because of the sin that persists. All Paul is saying is, elders need to embody and represent the message they are called to proclaim.

Now let's get specific. When Paul lays out what being "above reproach" looks like, he starts with the person's marriage. Paul is moving, I think you can see, from the private and personal features of one's life, to the public and prominent. He moves from the inside to the outside. And he starts with the person's marriage.

Where I went to seminary, every year they bring in a woman named Diane Langberg to scare the students. Yes, you heard that right. Diane has made something of a career of being a counselor of pastors and their families. And she simply spends 2 hours – not much, really – ripping through the kinds of sins that rip ministries and churches apart. And number one on the list, by a wide margin, is sexual sin. It's not even close. I am told by one pastor who went to Reformed Theological Seminary that Richard Pratt used to say that he could take graduating class photos and "X-out" those pastors that had dropped from the ministry because of adultery, pornography, or because they left their spouse for some ungodly reason, and remove half of every graduating class.

We can't *mis*interpret this standard. The standard is usually interpreted quantitatively – that an elder can only have one wife, ever. So that if he's been divorced, or widowed or remarried, he could not be an elder. There are two reasons this is wrong. The first is obvious – there are other places like later in this very letter where Paul will advise widows to get remarried. But also because if we're being quantitative, it leaves an enormous loophole, because a man CAN be married to one woman his whole life and NOT be a one-woman man! It also can't mean quantity because otherwise Jesus, Paul and Timothy would all be excluded from eldership because they were not married to (at least) one wife.

No, Paul means this qualitatively. The man must truly be a one-woman man. His life has this quality – there are no other women in his life. He's faithful. He doesn't flirt. There are no extracurricular dalliances. He is faithful to his wedding vows. You can't get clever about this. You can't say, "well, *technically, numerically, quantitatively*, I've only had one wife." No, the quality of your life must be utterly monogamous because the elder is to model not a number, but a quality: faithfulness. Holiness.

And that's how this command about marriage is related to the next three, "sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable." All of these can be grouped together under self-mastery. You have to be mastered by God in your character. Some versions say temperate in place of sober-minded. But being sober-minded and self-controlled simply means you are not ruled by your emotions. In our culture, emotions have authority. "Do what you feel." And there is some truth to this. You DO emotions. You don't just feel angry, you DO anger. You turn red. Your veins in your neck start to protrude. Your fists tighten. You see, emotions are not neutral. But anger is also thoughts, right? And anger is also images. It's also an attitude of judgment and a stance of displeasure. Your emotions re-instruct your thinking so that you think, you speak out of your anger when you're angry. It's the way the heart works.

But an elder can't just let that happen. Emotions CAN be re-trained. Emotions can be re-shaped by the story of grace. The prophet Nehemiah says at one point, "This day is sacred to our Lord. **Do not grieve**, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."³ Or in 1st Samuel, when David is about to be anointed King, we are told that the Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go... for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."⁴

³ Nehemiah 8:10-11

⁴ 1 Samuel 16:1-2

Biblically speaking, emotions direct us – the bible is aware of this! But the bible says our emotions are not neutral and emotions themselves need to be directed, tempered, mastered. Jonathan Edwards, once wrote that whatever enlists the affections wins the person; "it is vain to contend with anything that hath the power of our affections in its disposal; it will prevail at the last." So Edwards suggests that the affection is the helm of the ship, **but** the mind must steer, and the chart to steer is God's revealed truth.⁵ Elders cannot be ruled by emotions, but be the kind of people who can take every thought and therefore every thought ruled even by intense emotions, captive to Christ.

What about hospitality? You see that outward, public movement here. The Greek word there is *philazenos*. It's where we get our word xenophobia. Someone who is xenophobic has an intense fear or dislike of strangers. So *philazenos*, or hospitality, is a *love* of strangers. And if someone has a love of strangers it means that the person is able to deny themselves. Strangers get in the way. They use your bathroom and they eat your food and they take up your time. It's uncomfortable! But the bible says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." God loves the stranger and the sojourner. He loves the Ninevite and the Babylonian. So must the elder.

This then is coupled to being able to teach. Why? Because when you welcome people in the gospel you must be able to adequately explain the gospel. It doesn't mean you must be a preacher, but rather that you can apply the gospel to people's lives.

Then Paul explains that you mustn't be a drunkard, violent or quarrelsome. In other words, you can't be a conflict maker. If you have someone in your family who is addicted, a drunkard, you know that the family center of gravity revolves around that individual. Their actions, their lies, their misdeeds. People who know alcoholics or addicts know how hard it is to focus on Jesus because the chaos that surrounds these people is always distracting you from Jesus. It's the same when you live with the violent and those that quarrel. By nature, people who are drunks, violent and quarrelsome, are self-centered because they don't like what they have. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you (violence, right)? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel."⁶ People who are never satisfied and are centered on the self cannot be elders.

And this is obviously connected to the next one about being lovers of money. Look, if you're going to be an elder, you're probably not going to be rich. Because it takes time to work with sinners! Our elders could all probably make more money if they were not elders because eldering means pursuing people and not stuff. It's not that money is bad, but an elder has to pursue first, his family, and second his church, and money after that. But it can't be money first, and then family and church. And it can't even be Family and then money and then church. There will be times in the life of an elder where they will have to make a decision about whether to pursue more money, or pursue you as a shepherd. And they must remember that they are lovers of God's flock, his people, but they are NOT lovers of money.

⁵ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 195.

⁶ James 4:1-3

And finally guys, in our culture today, there is this last command that threatens to rule out all of us as elders: "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?"

Friends this is so obvious, that again, the whole world understands it in the same way that there are morals clauses in contracts. Go to the grocery store with kids that are out of control, and you will start to hear people talk behind *your* back. Why? Because everyone knows and assumes that the behavior and character of a child is related to the kind of parenting the child receives. Can good parents have wild children? Yes! There are exceptions to the rule. But listen, who of us, when are children are pointed out as misbehaving, turn away and say, "That has nothing to do with me!" Nobody! You *know* it reflects on you. And Paul *agrees* with you. Your children are a reflection on you. And for the overseer or elder, if his children are not disciplined and catechized and obedient, then you know there is no way he will be able to discipline, teach and disciple adults who act like children (and we do!).

This world, where men are concerned – and this crosses lines of race and politics – has become feminized. And let me be clear! What I am talking about here is no way meant to be disparaging of women or the wonderful influences of the church down through the ages. Timothy himself, at his mother's and his grandmother's knees, learned the Christian faith! All of us are indebted to great women of the church and we need the feminine as well as male influences in our lives. No, what I mean is what men no longer are doing. Men have lost the ability to set objective standards in their home about what is right and wrong and the way things should be, and look at everything subjectively. Men get upset when they don't like the way things are now, but they are not leading to make sure that things go the right way all the time! When they get to church late, they look at their wives as if, "If it involves kids, she's the leader! I just put my tie on and drive." They no longer discipline, but only point out when it's lacking. They don't lead discipleship in the home, but rather look like they need to be disciple by real men!

And when an elder candidate does this, then you know his oversight over worship will have no backbone over songs that present Jesus as our boyfriend or God as our girlfriend, where the preaching cannot talk about God's law and wrath and holiness, but rather focuses only on his tenderness and mercy. Jesus as a school hall-monitor.

What I mean is that men have abdicated the role that God wants them to have. And by the way, I know there are single mothers who do a great job. God is so gracious in those situations! But when the man is there, but is *effectually absent*, well it would be better sometimes to be raised by a single mother because she has to be tough enough for both!

When Moses says to Israel in Deuteronomy 6 "these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise..." that was not a woman's bible study he was addressing! That was the whole assembly.

And if someone cannot engage his own children in the things of God, how is he ever going to engage those of his own age? Leadership in the home is not delegating the instruction of your children to your wife. That's abdicating. You must be involved in the lives of your children.

- Now finally. The reputation of the elder.

In verses 6 and 7 Paul speaks of wider circles – how people in the church see this person, and even outsiders. Why? Well, let's ask this question: Why does Christianity still get a hearing today? Well it's not because of our leaders, right? There is a long list of Christian leaders that have fallen into sin. And it's not because of the message of Jesus. In fact when people or the media talk about Christianity or Christians, they regularly leave out the message because they don't believe that people are inherently sinful and in need of saving. No, the reason that Christianity still gets a hearing is because of the character of Jesus. *He* is above reproach. No one I know of has ever maligned the *character* of Jesus. They might make fun of Jesus or disagree with what he says, but they do not deny that he was blameless. Jesus is never the hypocrite, we are!

One of my apologetics professors said that there are, on balance, way too many books on the problem of evil and how we as Christians should answer that. You know: if God is good and if God is all loving, why is there still evil in the world. No, he said there should be more books about Christians and their hypocrisy, because more people reject Christianity because of the behavior of Christians than they do over the problem of evil. And I think he's right! Friends, all kinds of people are going to disagree with and maybe even make fun of your Christian faith, but if they know you are a person of integrity, they will still listen to you. You can still get them to hear you. But you can speak the truth all day long, but if you are one thing when you're at work but something else in church, and still something else at home... then people will reject what you say no matter how true it is.

You know, as this job description in 1 Timothy 3 gets broader and more public, you have to ask, who does this really describe! On a good day, I might hit 50-60%! Really! Who could this possibly describe?

A pastor I know out in Seattle has a little girl that brings many theological questions to the dinner table. He has three girls, actually, but it's the little one that asks the BIG questions. And one day she said, "Dad, I think I want to be God." The middle daughter whispers to the eldest, "H-E-L-L!" And of course the little girl can't spell yet, and doesn't understand. So the eldest says to her, "If you want to be God, that means you get *crucified*." Now *that* word the little girl knew – she knew it from Sunday school and she knew it from seeing images of Jesus on the cross.

And there was silence. And then she said, "Dad?" And he said "yes?" And she said, "Never mind."

You see, the *description* of a job DEFINES the qualifications *needed* for the job. If the job description is "die for another person's sins," then you have to be willing and qualified to do exactly that. And it sounds good to be God...until you hear exactly what the job description is! Because that description will define what you are asked to do. Being sovereign, so that you can

snap your fingers and get any toy you want sounds good ... until you read that the job description includes holiness and bearing the sins of the world.

I think what Paul is saying here is that the ministry of the elder IS the ministry of Jesus Christ. HE is the great shepherd and overseer of our souls. And our resources for this ministry don't reside in ourselves but only in Jesus Christ. Only Jesus is truly above reproach. Jesus was the husband of but one wife – the church. Jesus wasn't violent, but took *on* the violence of others – Jesus was a bruised who would not break. And even a smoldering wick he will not extinguish. But Jesus also does perfect disciplines and discipleship. He is *STILL* thought well of by outsiders!

The perfect elder is one, you see, who is always looking to Jesus to be these things. He is always looking to Jesus to *be* that resource for all we need in ministry. So Lord, give us hearts that beat in concert with His.

Let's pray.