

STEWARDS OF GOD'S HOUSEHOLD The Qualifications of Elders

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In Luke 12 Jesus tells his disciples a parable about a steward, the manager of a household. "Who then is the faithful and wise manager [steward], whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions" (vv. 42-44 ESV throughout). According to Webster's dictionary, a steward is "one who manages another's property, finances, or other affairs." In Jesus' parable the steward is not the master or owner of the household but was put in charge of the household by the master to provide for the master's other servants. And if the steward carries out his responsibility with wisdom and faithfulness, when the master returns, he will reward his steward with even greater responsibility, setting him over all his possessions. In the church, the elders or overseers are God's "stewards" (Tit. 1:7), managing the household of God, his church, on God's behalf.

Last week we began a series of messages on biblical leadership. We started by looking at the *responsibilities* of elders, namely, to shepherd the flock of God. Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd, but the Holy Spirit also appoints undershepherds to feed, lead, defend, and care for the sheep on Christ's behalf. In Titus 1 the apostle Paul uses a different metaphor: elders are stewards, that is, managers of God's household. The church is the family of God. He is our Father, Christ is our Head. We are all brothers and sisters, and we are all servants of God. But God appoints some of his servants to serve as stewards, managers of the household. And today, we want to look at the *qualifications* of those whom the Spirit appoints to this task.

My wife and I recently visited Storyland in New Hampshire with two of our children and their spouses and seven of our grandchildren. It was a fun day with lots to see and do, especially going on the many rides. (I especially liked the Splash Battle, with the water cannons!) All of us were admitted to Storyland, and most of us wanted to go on the rides. But not everyone was qualified to go on all the rides. You had to be a certain height. For some rides it was at least 36" tall. For others, 42" and, for still others, 48". You had to measure up, you had to be mature enough to handle the ride.

Everyone is welcome to become a part of the family of God by faith in Jesus Christ. And all who believe are also called to be servants of Christ, using our gifts to serve others. But not all are qualified to be stewards of God's household, to be an elder or overseer. In 1 Timothy 3:1, the apostle Paul commends those who aspire to this task: "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." But then Paul gives an objective set of criteria to determine who is qualified to serve. You have to measure up. According to Acts 20:28, it is the Holy Spirit who appoints men to serve as elders. The biblical qualifications enable us to recognize those whom he has appointed.

At Exeter Chapel we believe in a plurality of both elders and deacons. At present, we are down to one elder and a group of deacons. Last Sunday we began a process to find new elders and deacons – beginning with the relevant teaching from God's Word. **Today a study of the *qualifications* of elders in**

two key New Testament passages will help us to recognize the ones whom God has appointed to this good work. These qualifications should be *goals* for every Christian – all of us, by God’s grace, should be growing toward spiritual maturity. These qualifications are *requirements* for elders.

Titus 1:5-9

Paul and his coworker Titus had been serving as missionaries on the island of Crete. (This ministry was undertaken between Paul’s two imprisonments in Rome.) In Titus 1:5 we learn that Paul had departed, leaving Titus in Crete to complete some unfinished business, including the appointment of “elders in every town.” Notice that “elders” is plural. There were to be more than one elder in each church. This need for elders was acute. According to Titus 1:10-11 there were some false teachers in Crete who were “insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party,” who were “upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.” What was Paul’s remedy to this situation? First of all, the appointment of qualified elders in each church.

It’s interesting to notice what qualifications Paul does *not* mention: education, gifts and talents, wealth or social standing, business ability, etc. – the kinds of qualifications we might look for in leaders. No, his list of requirements falls into three categories.

Marriage and family life (v. 6). Paul assumes that most elders will be married and have children. Of course, single men can also serve in this office – men like Paul, or even Jesus himself! But usually elders will be chosen from the ranks of the husbands and fathers. If a man is married, his home life should be “above reproach” (v. 6). “Above reproach” is an overarching qualification. It does not mean perfect, but it does mean a man’s marriage and family life should serve as an example to others (see 1 Pet. 5:3). He must be “the husband of one wife,” devoted and faithful to her alone. Since the word for “wife” and “woman” are the same in the original Greek, this phrase could be translated, “a one-woman man.” Paul continues: “and his children are believers [or, “having faithful children”] and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.” In other words, the man’s children are not like the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable who was wild and rebellious against his father. Rather, the elder’s genuine faith will influence his children to also believe and obey.

In the Old Testament, Eli the judge and high priest of Israel had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. When he rebuked them for their immoral and sacrilegious behavior, “they would not listen to the voice of their father” (1 Sam. 2:25). Tragically, the priesthood was removed from Eli’s family line, “because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them” (1 Sam. 3:13). Eli is an example of what an elder’s family ought NOT to be like. How important in our society today, with its epidemic of marital and family disintegration, to have church elders whose marriage and family life are an example to others! I will say more on this point when we come to 1 Timothy 3.

Personal character (vv. 7-8). Now Paul turns to the personal character of the prospective overseer. Notice that the terms “elder” (v. 5), indicating the man’s spiritual maturity (not necessarily age), and “overseer” (v. 7), indicating his function as a spiritual supervisor or manager, are used interchangeably.

Also, in verse 7 he begins to refer to the “overseer” generically, in the singular. In his personal character, as well as in his marriage and family life, the overseer “must be above reproach.” Paul explains this overarching quality with a series of character traits, five expressed in the negative (disqualifiers) and six in the positive (qualifiers). Negatively, “he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain” (v. 7). Regarding this last description (“not greedy for gain”), it is not wrong for a church to compensate elders for their ministry, “especially those who labor in preaching [lit., “in the word”] and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). But the elder himself ought to be free from “the love of money” (1 Tim. 6:10), and his motive for serving ought not to be for financial gain.

Positively, an overseer must be “hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright [in his relation to others], holy [in his relation to God], and disciplined” (v. 8). Acquiring and growing in these character traits should be the goal of every Christian. They are requirements for the elder. His life is to be an example to other believers.

Doctrine and teaching (v. 9). As we will see in a future message, most of the qualifications mentioned thus far are also requirements for deacons. However, this third category of qualifications distinguishes between the ministry of elders and the ministry of deacons. According to Paul, an overseer “must hold firmly to the trustworthy word as taught,” that is, the gospel of grace, which Paul expounds later in this letter (Tit. 2:11-14 and 3:4-8), along with the godly lifestyle and good works that accompany this gospel (2:1-10 and 3:1-3). The overseer must not only hold firmly to this “trustworthy word,” but he must also “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and . . . to rebuke those who contradict it.” In other words, he must be able to encourage believers with healthy teaching and refute the false teaching of those who oppose the gospel (like those mentioned in Titus 1:10-16).

In summary, we can recognize those whom the Holy Spirit appoints as elders by their exemplary marriage and family life, their exemplary Christian character, and their sound doctrine, including their ability to communicate that doctrine to others.

1 Timothy 3:1-7

Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy under circumstances similar to his letter to Titus. Between his two imprisonments in Rome, Paul had been serving as a missionary with Timothy in Ephesus (on the west coast of modern Turkey). Again, he departed and left his coworker behind to further establish the work, including the appointment of elders and deacons. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 Paul covers much of the same ground regarding elder qualifications as in Titus 1:5-9, but he organizes his material a little differently.

The overseer’s reputation in the Christian community (vv. 2-6). Again, the overseer must be “above reproach.” Specifically and positively, he must be “the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach” (v. 2). This last quality, “able to teach,” is a briefer summary of Titus 1:9 (see above). Ability to teach does not necessarily mean that every elder is a gifted *public* preacher or teacher (see 1 Tim. 5:17). However, he should be able to teach in his own home, in small group settings, or one-to-one.

Negatively, the overseer is “not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money” (v. 3). Also, Paul once again addresses the man’s family life: “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive” (v. 4). Why? “For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church” (v. 5)? In other words, good leadership in the home is the proving ground for good leadership in the church. A father who knows how to manage his own household well will be qualified to be a steward of God’s household. And not only should the elder’s children be in submission, but the way in which he achieves this result should be “with all dignity.” Or, as Ephesians 6:4 expresses it, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

1 Timothy 3:6 adds another requirement for eldership: “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” The devil fell into judgment due to pride. Giving the responsibility of eldership to a believer too soon after his conversion, before a man is mature enough to handle it, could lead to his downfall.

The overseer’s reputation in the non-Christian community (v. 7). In the final verse of this section, Paul shows that, until now in 1 Timothy 3:2-6, he has been viewing the reputation of the potential elder *inside* the Christian community. Now he adds: “Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.” His reputation *outside* the church among his neighbors, his coworkers, his relatives, and town officials must not bring disgrace on himself and thereby on the church and even on the name of Christ himself. Such disgrace, says Paul, is a trap of the devil. Notice the double reference to the devil in the last two verses of this section (vv. 6-7). Paul knows that elders are in the thick of the spiritual warfare and are a favorite target of the evil one. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (Zech. 13:7; cf. Matt. 26:31).

In summary, we can recognize those whom the Holy Spirit appoints as elders by their blameless reputation both inside the church and outside in the community. Such a reputation should be the goal of every Christian, but it is a requirement of elders.