

* The Heights Baptist Church * Series: 1 Timothy: Instructions for the Church *
* Topic: Overseers and Deacons * Scripture: 1 Timothy 3 * 5/19/2024 *

MAIN POINT

Church leaders should be held to high standards, and these qualifications are qualities that should be developing in the life of every follower of Christ.

INTRODUCTION

What are some key characteristics of a good leader in the church? How are those characteristics similar to those we expect of leaders at work or in our government? How are they different?

1 Timothy is a letter written by the apostle Paul to Timothy, who was a church leader at Ephesus. Paul is giving directions to Timothy on how best to lead the church. Paul has emphasized the importance of holding on to the true faith while opposing false doctrine in the church and provided instructions for proper worship. Today, we will be considering the qualifications for church leaders. In studying the biblical qualifications of church leaders, we see that God's standards for leadership are different from the standards that the world values. God values Christlike character and values his children serving each other as they serve him.

UNDERSTANDING

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 TIMOTHY 3:1-7

Note to study leader: The Greek word "episcope" translated as "overseer" in verse 1 means a person who is a presiding officer in the church. This title can be applied to a pastor, elder, or bishop. This lesson will use these words interchangeably.

What's your initial observation from these verses of how God views the importance of elders? Why are elders so important to the church?

Why is the "office of overseer" a "noble task"?

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul specifically addressed the role of an "overseer," a term the New Testament uses synonymously with "elder" or "pastor." It refers to those the church has recognized to lead and shepherd the congregation spiritually. Paul wrote that a pastor does a "noble work," meaning honorable or excellent.

Why is it important that elders "desire" their office? How would the church be affected if those who served as elders did so merely out of obligation?

The local church ministry is a calling one "aspires" to (meaning "sets one's heart on," "longs for") and "desires." The first qualification of an elder should be that they have a passion for helping the church pursue Christ. We must not fall to the temptation of twisting people's arms to serve as elders or pastors.

The first qualification is that the overseer must be "above reproach". This quality can be viewed as an overarching quality that includes all of the other listed attributes. What do you think it means that the overseer is "above reproach"?

Paul required church leaders would be abiding in Christ. The fruit of the Spirit should be evident in their lives, and they should be grounded in God's word. They should not be compromising with sin in their life.

According to verses 2 and 4, what is the connection between leadership in the church and one's home life? Why do you think this distinction is important?

The answer to Paul's rhetorical question in verse 5 would be that if a man can't even manage his own household well, he won't be capable of leading the church.

Note to study leader: “Husband of one wife” could literally be translated “one-woman man.” This doesn’t mean that an elder cannot be single. The apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, was single. It means the leader must be a man of moral purity. If he is married, he is wholeheartedly committed to and devoted to his wife. He is to be the spiritual leader in his home and must manage his own household competently.

What threat does pride (v. 6) have on effective leadership? Why might this be more of a threat to someone who has recently come to know Jesus?

Ultimately, these character traits represent a person abiding with Christ and has put off the old nature. The transformation that the gospel brings through submission to the Holy Spirit is a lifelong journey. The further along in the journey, the better we understand that we are saved by grace alone, and we grow by grace alone as we abide with Christ. Who we are in Christ and our ministry in Christ should glorify him, not us.

These qualities are given to Timothy specifically to guide him in selecting church leaders. How important would you say these qualities are for everyone in the church?

These qualities should be evident in each of us as the fruit of the Spirit develops in our lives. And the whole local body provides a group-witness to the world. But there will be believers at all stages of their walks with Christ in the church. So, we all need to apply these qualities to our own lives, and our church needs to ensure all of our spiritual leaders are characterized by these qualities.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 TIMOTHY 3:8-13

Compare the list for deacons in verses 8-13 with the list for pastors in verses 1-7. Which seem to be unique to deacons? Which seem to be unique to elders?

The second office of the church mentioned in 3:8 is that of deacon, from the Greek word “diakonos,” which means “someone who serves.” The “likewise” in verse 8 indicates the standards for deacons are a continuation of the previous list of pastoral qualifications. The primary difference in the qualification of these two offices is that elders are required to be “able to teach.”

What do these qualifications communicate to the world as the church carries out the great commission, and reflects the light of Christ to a needy world?

Spiritual leadership is about more than just a good résumé. It’s about being changed by the gospel—having a life that has been touched, healed, and restored by God.

What qualities is Paul endorsing in verses 8-9?

Not given to excess wine [“I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12)], and not pursuing dishonest gain—both demonstrate denying self and not being given to excess.

What does verse 9 say about the importance of a deacon’s service?

The love for Jesus that deacons have is evidenced by the way they cling to Him. After passing the test of blamelessness, they are well positioned to model faithfulness for other members of the church.

Verse 11 lists requirements for the deacons’ wives. How would you summarize these qualities?

Note to study leader: Some translations translate the Greek word for “women” in verse 11 as “women” (NIV). Others translate it as “their wives” (ESV). Others as “deaconesses” (KJV). And it could be translated as “deaconesses”. The Greek word is “gyne” (pronounced “goo-nay”) and by itself means “woman” and can also mean “wife”. Translators often choose “wives” here based on its context in the midst of the description of deacons and their relationship with their family in verse 12. This same Greek word clearly refers to the deacon’s “wife” in verse 12.

Why do you think the connection between family life and the church is given such prominence?

The spiritual well-being of our families is a highly important priority for us as believers. And we witness to the world and to the church as a family unit, not just as individuals.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ PHILIPPIANS 2:14-16

How can godly service in the church lead to bold witness outside of it?

We are the light of the world. Our lives need to reflect the light of Christ as we share the gospel.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 TIMOTHY 3:14-16

In what three ways did Paul describe the church? How does each description help you to understand the identity and mission of the church?

1. God's household (where God resides ☺).
2. The church of the living God.
3. The pillar and foundation of the truth.

What do these metaphors communicate about the relationships we have as members of a church, to God and each other?

“Household” is a fantastic metaphor. God is our Father, and in the church, we are more than just friends or co-workers, we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

As the pillar of truth, the church is to hold the truth of the gospel high enough that the world can see it.

In your own words, paraphrase verse. 16. What is the “mystery of godliness”?

The gospel is the core truth that the household of God is to proclaim and defend. In 1 Timothy 3:16, Paul references Jesus' incarnation, ministry on earth, and his resurrection. We defend, personify, and shine forth the truth of the gospel to the world (See also Romans 16:25 and Colossians 1:26).

APPLICATION

The qualities that we look for in elders and deacons are qualities in which every Christian should strive to grow. What is one step you might take this week to grow in one of these areas?

What can we do either individually or as a group to encourage the leaders in our church?

“And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1 (NLT))

“A church should be able to direct a newborn believer to an elder and say: ‘Do you want to know what a real Christian should be like? Then look at him.’” Jeramie Rinne, (Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus).

PRAYER

Thank God for raising up the church leaders at the Heights—pastors, staff members, and deacons, and for their families. Pray that God would strengthen and encourage them in their ministry and give them the grace to continue to exhibit upright, godly character in their homes and at the church. Pray that their ministry at the Heights would be a joy, not a burden, and that they'd be refreshed as they serve in the church. Pray for their families, that God would protect them, and bless them with spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health.

COMMENTARY

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-13

3:1. Paul reminded Timothy, a leader in the church at Ephesus, about a second saying he described as trustworthy. These formal statements, occurring five times in Paul's writings to Timothy and Titus, were likely cherished beliefs first-century Christians held and frequently voiced in Sunday worship. The sayings also served as theological benchmarks regarding Christian beliefs that mattered most to them. The specific saying here was "If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work." Throughout the New Testament the words "overseer," "elder" (Acts 20:17), or "pastor" (Eph. 4:11) refer to a church leader. Today we usually refer to this specific church leader as pastor. Every local church must have leadership as its backbone. A church leader must first and foremost be a person of godly character, which Paul described in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Some of the same qualifications for leaders are listed in Titus 2:2-7a in reference to all believers. The beauty of Christlikeness can shine in every Christian, and even more brightly in church leaders.

3:2. Paul wrote a long list of qualifications for those aspiring to and desiring the leadership role of pastor/overseer/elder. He demanded these of an overseer. The first requirement is "above reproach," which Paul likely used as an all-encompassing must for anyone seeking leadership in the church. One above reproach has a spotless character with such integrity that no one, whether Christian or non-Christian, can successfully charge him as unfit for the role of overseer and deservedly so. Paul left no room for moral laxity in the life of a pastor. To specifically teach what living above reproach means, he followed with ten moral qualities for a godly leader's moral character. First is "husband of one wife," a phrase describing a one-woman husband, a man devoted to the wife he deeply loves and thus is not sexually promiscuous. In the first century, immorality was the norm; Paul demanded Christian leaders reflect the sanctity of the Christian home.

Next is "self-controlled," meaning sober-minded, clear-headed, free from rash actions. "Sensible" describes a person whose judgment is thoughtful, evenhanded, and thus trustworthy. The sensible leader is not erratic or unpredictable in decision making. "Respectable" refers to an orderly, disciplined lifestyle that reflects inner steadiness. If a person's lifestyle is chaotic, how can he create and maintain order in the church? Together these three words picture a leader who is able to conduct himself in an orderly fashion as he performs pastoral duties.

"Hospitable" is the next character quality Paul demanded of a Christian leader in God's church. It reflects the attitude and action of keeping an open house to Christian servants, an especially important service in the first century when traveling believers needed a place to eat, rest, and sleep, as well as hospitality toward needy members of the local congregation. Church leadership is not enough. It must extend into the overseer's home. "An able teacher" is the one quality in Paul's list that doesn't necessarily apply to believers generally but to overseers particularly. God calls and equips pastors to skillfully teach correct doctrine, refute error, and build up the Christian flock in God's Word.

3:3. "Not addicted to wine" is Paul's first negative qualification. The overseer must control a thirst for wine. Getting drunk is unacceptable behavior. Additional negatives are "not a bully" and "not quarrelsome." A man who bludgeons believers to do what he wants, who chooses fists over reasonable arguments to get things done, doesn't have the right stuff for church leadership. Instead of looking for a fight, the overseer must be gentle, or kind, forbearing, willing to show flexibility to others' points of view. "Not greedy" is another negative requirement of a church leader. Greediness is bad; generosity is good. Pondering get-rich-schemes obviously contrasts with having God's people and their spiritual needs utmost in the leader's heart.

3:4-5. Paul next turned to the overseer's home life. In verse 4, his emphasis is not that a church leader must be married and have children. Rather, if he has a wife and children, the overseer manages his own household competently and keeps his children under control with all dignity. The overseer is to exercise in his home proper authority with sensitivity and care. Of course, Paul did not mean the pastor's home is a perfect model of home life with no problems. He stressed that an overseer manages his home with dignity, love, truth, and

discipline. The one answer to Paul's rhetorical question (v. 5) is, "He can't." If an overseer succeeds with his own family, likely he will succeed in God's family.

3:6-7. The final two qualifications are "not be a new convert" and "have a good reputation among outsiders." Without spiritual maturity, not necessarily maturity in age, conceit may swell up in a spiritually immature leader's heart. Then the Devil steps in with condemnation, trapping the leader in the grip of trouble, loss, and ruin. Last on the list is that the overseer must have a good reputation among outsiders (that is, non-Christians). The overseer's good standing and name in the community of unbelievers is important as a witness to them. Consequently, the Devil focuses on setting his trap to bring the pastor and his flock into disgrace with the likely result that unbelievers turn their noses up at the gospel.

3:8 Deacons are the other office of the NT church, in addition to the pastor or elder. Likewise suggests a link between the lists of qualifications. There are striking similarities between the qualifications for pastor/overseer and for deacons. One key distinction is that deacons are not required to be able to teach.

Paul next laid down eight similar qualifications for believers who serve as deacons in God's church. The word translated "deacon" means "servant." In a general sense, God calls all believers to ministry. Some Christians even have a special spiritual gift for service (Rom. 12:7). Still others hold the office, or position, of deacon in the church, which Paul addressed here in 1 Timothy (see Phil. 1:1 where the office is mentioned along with the office of overseer). Likewise, this forms a key transition that suggests both overseer and deacon were officially recognized offices in the church. Paul gave four general and spiritual requirements for the office of deacon (v. 8). The reason for not spelling out in detail-specific functions likely was that deacons' ministries were to be flexible so they could meet different needs in churches. The first is "worthy of respect," a single word in the original language, meaning "dignified, stately, serious." The deacon who lives this quality understands the importance of ministry for Christ yet is not joyless, stern, or cold. "Not hypocritical" defines a servant who does not speak out of both sides of his mouth, not thinking one thing and saying another. "Not drinking a lot of wine" contrasts a person whose thoughts are continually preoccupied with drinking because of loving wine. "Not greedy for money" refers to a man who will not use the office to gain financially. Unhealthy attitudes toward money and pursuing questionable money-making schemes are off the table. A deacon must remain free from loving money, instead serving for God's glory alone.

3:9-10. The word mystery (Gk *mysterion*) is a common Pauline word. It refers to the gospel (1Co 2:7; 4:1; 15:51; Col 1:25-26; 2:2; 4:3; Eph 3:4-13). A deacon must maintain the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. "Mystery of the faith" refers to Christ living in His people and their living in Him. The Old Testament did not reveal this mystery. Only the person who lives, not just believes, this mystery has the necessary non-condemning but affirming conscience to serve in the office of deacon.

Deacons must also be tested first before they step into that responsibility. ("Also" suggests overseers too must undergo testing before entering the office of overseer.) Paul didn't state who should do the testing. Presumably it would be done by the church under the leadership of the overseers. Paul also didn't explain what the nature of this testing should be, whether concerning doctrinal beliefs, moral behavior, or both. Once proved blameless, those approved may begin serving as deacons. Paul demanded in verse 12 the same qualifications for deacons' home responsibilities as he previously did for overseers (vv. 2-7).

3:11 The Greek word translated as "wives" here can mean "women" or "wives." Looking at the context, it appears the persons Paul had in mind would have been wives of deacons because their qualifications fall in the middle of the qualifications for deacons, and many of the deacons would have been husbands, and "wives" is used immediately before a verse that clearly refers to a deacon's marriage and family relationships (3:12). At any rate, Paul mandated four qualifications for these women who join their husbands in serving in the church. First is "worthy of respect," the same requirement of deacons in verse 8, and "not slanderers," meaning a person who damages another's reputation. The women were to be self-controlled, or exercising self-discipline in behavior, as well as being faithful in everything. Clearly, Paul viewed women in the church as having important roles to fulfill as servants of Jesus Christ.

3:12-13. Paul concluded his teaching regarding Christ's servants by pointing out two rewards for deacons who have served well. The first is a good standing for themselves, meaning believers in the church respect and appreciate deacons who serve them so effectively. The second reward is great boldness in the faith that is

in Christ Jesus. The meaning likely is that deacons gain greater confidence for even greater service because they see the gospel powerfully changing lives through their ministries. These verses highlight the value and importance of the office of deacon by stating two results of good service in this role. Good standing refers to respect and appreciation from the church toward those who serve the church in this way. Great boldness probably refers to the increase in confidence in the faith that comes from serving and seeing the truths of the gospel proven in ministry.

3:14-16. After concluding his teachings about church leaders, Paul expressed his hope of returning to Ephesus soon (he likely was at Macedonia) and also stated the purpose in writing this letter. Paul wasn't certain about traveling to Ephesus right away. He could be delayed. That possibility prompted this epistle to Timothy. Whether Paul later made the trip to Ephesus, we do not know. What was the letter's purpose? Paul stated it clearly to Timothy—so he would know how people ought to act in God's household. The apostle's purpose was singular. He wanted his partner in ministry to understand clearly what constituted appropriate conduct for believers in Christ. To Paul, the church was not a building where Christians gathered for worship. It was people, God's household, who lived in ways fitting for members of His family. Paul elaborated more on defining this household of believers. He identified it as the church of the living God and further still by the description pillar and foundation of the truth. Paul viewed the church as a temple, not a building of stone pillars and marble foundations where worshipful devotion to dead idols occurred, but a dwelling of the one living God. Further, God's household is the singular place where truth abides. (Paul beautifully defined God's truth in verse 16.) The truth is Jesus. Your supreme mission is faithfully holding onto the truth about Jesus no matter the consequences. That mission is every believer's mandate; not just Christian leaders' responsibility. Without question, our remaining faithful to God's truth in Christ matters above everything.