

1 Timothy 3:1-7

Imagine for a moment that you are a person looking for work. Maybe some of you don't have to imagine it, because it's true! But let's suppose you are a person with certain gifts and experience and you ARE looking for work, and as you are looking, you get a copy of the "help wanted" section from the local newspaper. And as you read through the job listings, one of the things you would pay close attention to are the *qualifications* for the various jobs listed. Some jobs you know, immediately, that you aren't qualified for, so you move on very quickly. Others are pretty close, but there are some serious gaps and you know, deep down, that you're really not the right person. But then, thankfully, you finally come across a job *that fits you*. As you read the qualifications, you say to yourself, ".....this is me..... I can do this job..."

Now let's imagine that you're not looking for work because you already have a job. You're not a job hunter this time, you're an INVESTOR. You own significant amounts of stock in a number of corporations and, as a result, you have a vested interest in what is going on with these different companies. And let's suppose that you too are given a copy of the "help wanted" section of the paper. And, even though you are not looking for work, you notice that several of the companies in which you have invested are hiring.

And so you find yourself reading the job descriptions and qualifications as well - not as a person who needs a job - but as a person who has invested a great deal in these companies and wants to know what kind of people get hired to work in these places. What are the standards? And what do the standards say about the company that sets them? As an investor, it's very important to you who gets hired by the company because it affects you, personally, in many ways.

As you look at 1st Timothy 3:1-7 this morning, you will do so either as an applicant or as an investor; as a person considering whether he is suited to the role of Elder in God's church or as one who has a vested interest in those that the church sets apart in this way. In other words, Paul's teaching is vitally important for everyone here.

Now, if you are with us for the first time this morning, then let me just say, by way of introduction, that we are working our way through Paul's first letter to Timothy and have been doing so for a number of weeks now. Thus far in our study we have seen that the overall theme of this book has been to *promote the good order and functioning of the church*.

So far, in pursuit of that goal, Paul has taken time to address the problem of false teachers and their teaching - in chapter 1 - and has turned his attention in chapter 2 to addressing some issues which affected the way that God's people related to one another as a gathered community of believers. In chapter 3, starting at verse 1, Paul continues working to promote the good order and functioning of the church by providing God's people with guidelines for identifying and setting apart leaders in the church.

This morning we will look at the first set of those guidelines - the instructions Paul gives regarding the qualifications of "overseers" or "elders". With that as an introduction, let me pray for our time, and then we'll look at these verses together, focusing firstly on DESCRIBING and EXPLAINING the qualifications Paul gives and then thinking about how we should RESPOND to Paul's teaching here. (Pray and read)

a) For starters, let's look at the list here with a view to understanding what IS and is NOT being said with regard to the elders' qualifications. At the very beginning, in verse 1, Paul begins his survey with the statement that anyone who aspires to the office of overseer or "elder", desires a *noble* task. The only thing I would like to point out in that verse is that the *nobility* mentioned is attached to the *task* - not to the *person* performing it. Elders are not *noble* people - they're ordinary people entrusted with a noble task.

b) Next, notice that the passage says the overseer or "elder" must be *above reproach*.... This phrase "above reproach" has in view a person who is not open to being attacked because of apparently huge inconsistencies between his life and his profession of faith. And please notice here the word "apparently". In other words, as you look through this "list" that Paul provides you will notice that the qualities listed here are ones which are *external* and *observable* by others, as opposed to ones which are *internal* and *hidden from view*. Why is this the case? Simply because Paul is a *biblical realist*. He knows that neither Timothy, nor anyone else in the Ephesian church has the ability to look inside a person's heart to see what is really there. All they can do is look upon the external things - the ways people act, the way they speak, etc.

This is the reason why, for example, the list in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 doesn't say, "...an elder must be godly...." Have you ever noticed that? It doesn't say an elder must be a *deeply spiritual person*. It does not say that an elder must *have a good heart*. Why? Doesn't Paul want elders who are godly, and spiritual? Of course. But Paul is instructing the church on the *process* of choosing elders. And Paul knows that no one can read a man's heart. Even more importantly, it is all too easy to *mis-read* a person's heart - to think that a person is godly, when he isn't, or spiritual, when he isn't anything of the sort. So what does Paul do? He focuses on the externals, the proof, the public track record of the person in question. And so Paul starts off with the statement that an elder must be "above reproach".

And as you think about this first qualification - being above reproach - I want you to ask yourself some questions: If you're sitting there wondering whether or not God has set you apart as an elder in His church, ask yourself this question, "Is this ME? Is this a description of me? Would other people say this is a description of me? Would the people at my place of employment say this is true of me? Would my neighbors say this is true of me? That's one set of questions.

But perhaps you are not sitting there wondering whether God has set you apart as an elder. Perhaps you approach this passage, not so much as an applicant but more like the *investor* we talked about in the introduction - as a person who has a vital interest in the affairs of this congregation.

If you're in that category, I want you to ask yourself a different kind of question: "Do I know of any man in this congregation for whom this phrase "above reproach" would be an accurate description?" Or, you might ask: "Do I know anyone for whom this would cast a shadow on their suitability as an elder?" These questions are important, and we're going to keep asking them all the way through.

c) Let's move on. Next Paul says that an overseer or elder must be "...the husband of one wife..." Now, without going into a lot of detail, this requirement is simply there to insure that the elder is a man who is faithful, responsible, and in a biblically sanctioned relationship. It is NOT, of course, requiring that an elder must be married. And it is NOT here to forbid those who are either widowed and re-married or else legitimately divorced and re-married from becoming elders. Given the context in which it was given, this requirement most likely has in view those who may have been married to more than one woman, as was practiced by some Jews in that day. Some of these polygamous Jews had converted and brought their several wives into the church with them. Coming into the church was fine, being an elder was not.

d) "...temperate, self-controlled, respectable..." These three words speak of moderation and even-ness in one's emotion. Someone who is not given to extreme behavior, or unpredictable mood swings, sudden fits of anger or sharp words, someone who does not fly off the handle, who keeps his head even and ESPECIALLY in difficult, tense circumstances. Many people might try and justify their failure to control their emotions by *blaming* it on their circumstances - but an elder does not have the luxury of that excuse. An elder needs to have exceptional control in this area, to "keep his head when all those around him are losing theirs..." as Kipling's poem goes. So, ask yourself the questions: "Is this a description of me? Would other people say this is a description of me? Do I know anyone for whom this is an accurate description? Or, do I know anyone for whom this would cast a shadow on his suitability as an elder?"

e) "...hospitable..." An overseer or elder must be one who is a welcoming person, whose home is open and who graciously shares what he has with others. He is more concerned about people, than he is about the condition of the carpet. He is willing to share his very life with those whom he leads and serves, recognizing that at least as much is CAUGHT as is explicitly TAUGHT in the Christian life and that if we are going to have any hope of encouraging people in godliness we must MODEL it for people and be willing for them to get close enough to us to SEE it in our life and to test whether our life and our doctrine are even remotely similar. Ask yourself the questions: "Is this a description of me? Would other people say this is a description of me? Or do I know anyone of whom this is an accurate description? Do I know anyone for whom this would cast a shadow on his suitability as an elder?"

f) "...able to teach..." Perhaps the best way to get at the substance of this qualification is to look at a parallel passage, which also talks about elders, in Titus 1:9,

"He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."

In that verse we see three aspects of an elder's *teaching qualification*: 1) He must KNOW and HOLD FIRMLY to the message *as it has been taught*. That is, the truth of the gospel that has been handed down to him by HIS teachers, this he must fully understand and hold to and be able to communicate that Gospel to others. 2) He must know Scripture well enough that he can and does use it to encourage others, in all sorts of situations.

So, for example, if a person comes to him confessing that they have no assurance of their salvation, the elder ought to be able to use Scripture to deal with that. If a person comes to him and says she is struggling with a particular temptation, the elder ought to be able to use Scripture to address that, etc. 3) He must have a firm enough grasp of sound doctrine that he is able to RECOGNIZE false doctrine and even REFUTE those who teach it. Again, ask *yourself the questions*: "Is this a description of me? Would other people say this is a description of me? Or, do I know anyone of whom this is an accurate description? Do I know anyone for whom this would cast a shadow on his suitability as an elder?"

g) "...not given to drunken-ness..." This relates to the previously mentioned qualities of self-control and moderation. Let me be clear: this is not requiring ABSTINENCE. To read it that way is to read more than is there. The issue is not abstinence, but self-control as it specifically relates to the issue of drinking alcoholic beverages. To be sure, some may *choose* abstinence, and that is fine. But for those that do not they MUST exercise strict self-control in this area. Ask *yourself the questions*....

h) "....not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome...." This also relates to a previous qualification. Notice here that "not violent" is further defined by the word "gentle". That is, it is not enough that there is an ABSENCE of violence, since a person can be not violent and yet still be cold and un-caring at the same time. Neither is it good enough that a person is merely gentle since even violent, quarrelsome people are capable of being quite gentle, in certain situations. The person in view here is one who is BOTH - not violent AND gentle. Further, he is not to be picky, petty, pedantic or small-minded. He is a person not given to arguing and bickering and engaging in meaningless word-battles or making an issue over obscure points of Christian doctrine. Once again, ask yourself the questions: "Is this a description of me? Would other people say this is a description of me? Or do I know anyone of whom this is an accurate description? Do I know anyone for whom this would cast a shadow on his suitability as an elder?"

i) "....not a lover of money...." This, most likely, is a reflection of Jesus' own teaching in Luke 16:13, "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." A divided heart creates divided loyalties and a conflict of interest. Please note: This does NOT say an elder must be poor. The issue is not how much money the elder owns. The issue is how much the money owns.

j) "...He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)...." Simply put, for the elder who is married, the family is the proving ground for his overall suitability. Ability in one area is a strong indicator of ability in the other. Natural parenting parallels spiritual parenting.

Likewise, if a man's personal and family life is a train-wreck, then it's a safe assumption that he will make a train wreck of the church too. This qualification is crucial for the work of an elder. A father who will not discipline and deal with his children cannot be counted on to discipline and deal with people in GOD'S FAMILY, either. And that simply won't do because an elder must be a strong person. He must have some backbone. He must show a willingness (not an eagerness, mind you) but a willingness to do the hard thing, to say the things that no one else wants to say. And then, after he has said the hard thing, he must be willing to be un-popular for saying it, and to undertake a sometimes distasteful but necessary course of action.

Now, of course, this qualification does not mean that an elder must have perfect children. But it does mean that his conscientious and consistent efforts to parent his children will be EVIDENT and OBVIOUS to others. *Ask yourself the questions: "Is this a description of me? Would other people say this is a description of me? Or do I know anyone of whom this is an accurate description? Do I know anyone for whom this would cast a shadow on his suitability as an elder?"*

k) "...He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil..." - What is behind this qualification? Simply this: A person who is immature in the faith might be tempted to make the mistake that is so often made with regard to the office of elder in the church and that is to regard it as some sort of indicator of "status" or "privilege". But that's completely wrong-headed. Being an elder is about servant-leadership, with the emphasis upon the word *servant*. Yes, there is a kind of "honor" associated with the work of an elder but it is an honor which results not from one's POSITION, but rather from one's SERVICE.

That's why in 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul says that the elders who *direct the affairs of the church well* are worthy of double honor - in other words, the honor is related to their service and work, not to their position or status. A mature believer, will grasp this distinction while an immature believer will not. Please note: This verse is not saying anything about the AGE of an elder. One does not have to be "elderly" to be an "elder". I have met many fine elders in their late twenties and early thirties who I would give my right arm to work with. And I have met many older elders who had no business being elders. And, of course, I have met many who were terrific. But the point is that AGE is not the issue but rather, MATURITY.

k) One final qualification He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap..." One of Satan's most successful strategies over the years has been to trip up Christians through their reputations with outsiders. In his book, "The Screwtape Letters", C S Lewis gives a fictional account of a Senior devil instructing a Junior Devil in the art of temptation.

Screwtape, the older devil, writes the following letter to Wormwood, the junior devil, about a particular Christian to whom Wormwood has been assigned, to try and trip him up,

"Keep his mind on the inner life. He thinks his conversion is [merely] something inside him and his attention is therefore chiefly turned at present to the states of his own mind Encourage this. Keep his mind off the most elementary duties by directing it to the "most advanced and spiritual ones". Aggravate that most useful human characteristic: the horror and neglect of the obvious. You must bring him to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office...."

Again, Paul underscores what he has been emphasizing all along - the need to focus on those things which CAN be seen, which CAN be observed, and make your evaluations from there, and not on some attempt to mentally reconstruct the inner state of a man's heart. Paul wants Christians to use THESE qualifications - and not others - to think about this issue. Eldership is about these things (hold up bible) - not about being a good business man, a person of influence, a person of standing in the community, a person who has been around for a long time - it has nothing to do with any of those things. It has everything to do with the things written here. It's not about being popular, flashy or being a "great guy". It's not an honor that you bestow upon people because they have hung around for a long time and you feel obligated to do something for them. It's not something you give to people because you think they deserve it.

III SECOND MOVE - Well, that's a description of the qualifications listed by Paul. And the legitimate question to ask at this point is "Okay, but why *these* qualifications? Why are these particular ones so important to Paul?" As we've already seen, Paul wanted to make sure that elders were chosen on the basis of observable facts not on the basis of speculations about the goodness or otherwise of a person's heart and motives. Another reason has to do with the historical context. The early churches were all "house churches" being run and established in people's homes. There were no sanctuaries or other buildings, only homes. With this in view, it is easy to see why qualities like being *hospitable* and *managing the home and family well* and *not being a lover of money* would be so important. Because people were spending a lot of time in an elder's home, it was important that what they saw and experienced THERE did not undermine or hinder his ministry and/or the church's reputation.

However, the greatest influence would most likely have been the actions and attitudes of the false teachers with whom Paul was constantly battling. As you read through 1 and 2 Timothy, which we won't do now, you will come up with all sorts of descriptions of the false teachers - engaging in meaningless talk, conceited, without self-control - etc. If you were to draw up a list of characteristics of FALSE teachers, you would find that the qualifications for ELDERS are ones which are, essentially, the exact opposite. *The point being, of course, that elders are to be everything that the false teachers are NOT.* Which leads us to the last point....

IV THIRD MOVE - After *describing* the qualifications and then thinking about the reasons for those qualifications, it's very important to think about how we're going to respond to a list like this: After all, it's one thing to HAVE a list. It's another to know how to USE the list. There are, I believe, several ways this list can be useful to us in the church today:

Firstly, it is useful in helping to identify FALSE teachers and leaders. If you know what the real thing is, then you will know a fake when you see it. Something won't ring true. Things won't add up. You will look for certain positive behaviours and they will be noticeably absent. Other, more negative behaviours, will be noticeably present.

To put it another way, a list like this can help you to be more discerning. And if there is anything the church needs, it is more discernment in this area as we seem to be ready to hitch our wagon to anyone who has a tape ministry, wrote a book, or has a cool web site.

Secondly, and more positively, a list like this should be useful to you as a congregation because you will in fact be electing elders in a few months time. That means you need to make good use of this list, RIGHT NOW. You need to spend some time thinking and praying and looking around - hoping to discover those people whom God has clearly set apart for this task already - people who, most likely, are *already* functioning as elders, who already have a ministry, who are already serving in numerous ways, people whom others are already seeking out for guidance and wisdom, etc.

And notice that I used the word "discover" in relation to choosing elders. We need very much to get our thinking straight in this area. I meet many Christians who have not yet grasped the fact that it is *God who make elders*. The church cannot do it. The Session cannot do it. No one can do it. The church cannot make elders any more than a scientist can make a law of nature, or a coach can transform just anybody off the street into a world-class sprinter in the 100meters. You don't "make" laws of nature, you can only *discover* them. You can't make a world class sprinter out of just anybody, you have to stumble across a person who already has the raw materials.

Likewise, the church cannot create or manufacture elders, it can only discover and identify them, or, more properly, God can "dis-cover them" to us. And so, the church's job, is not to turn people into elders but rather it is to *recognize* and *set apart* those whom God has already, obviously, and clearly gifted to serve as elders in his church.

In many ways, your task as a congregational member is very much like that of the Prince in the story "Cinderella". You're looking for a particular kind of person, but all you have to go on is this SLIPPER, this SHOE, which won't fit just anybody. And so you go around the countryside, putting this slipper on everybody, to see if it fits. *That's what you need to do as a congregation*. Take this list and, in your mind, "try it out" on the men in this congregation, which may include yourself, if you're a man. And as you do, ask the question, "Is it a good fit?" And when you find someone for whom the shoe fits - you've found an elder. An elder that *God made* and put into this congregation long before the idea ever occurred to you.

Now, admittedly, when one looks at a list like this, you might wonder if anyone who has ever lived - short of Jesus himself- has even come close to embodying these qualifications. Admittedly, these words set a HIGH standard. But when you think about it, what else could Paul do? Imagine, if you will, that Paul had written another kind of standard:

"If anyone sets his heart on being an elder, well, that's alright, I suppose. There are worse jobs you could have. Now in order to qualify for this PARTICULAR job you need to be a pretty decent sort of person, fairly respectable, not given to quarreling too terribly much. You need to be a person who rarely acts violently, gets drunk only once in a blue moon, and reads the Bible occasionally...."

Imagine a qualification list like that. What value would THAT be? Who *wouldn't* qualify for a position like that? You see, the effect of an ordinary standard is to make virtually everyone eligible. But the effect of an *extra-ordinary* standard is to make almost everyone IN-ELIGIBLE. That is, it should motivate greater caution, both in those who aspire to the position and in those who demonstrate their approval or otherwise by the manner of their voting.

But remember, Paul IS a biblical realist. He is under no illusions about the human situation and our sinful natures. In fact, he describes himself *in this very letter* as "the worst of sinners". To Paul's way of thinking, the question is not IF a man might fall short of these qualifications but rather HOW SHORT he might fall. All will fall short, but many will fall shorter than others. So *how does this list help us then?*

Let's think about gardening for a moment. Imagine that an elder is like a Garden Bed and that all these different qualifications are like so many different kinds of plants which have been placed in the soil. If you think about that analogy, then what Paul is saying is that when you look at this "garden" that is an elder's life you will see lots of things growing there - good things. There will be very few dry patches or gaps. To be sure, not every plant is growing at the same rate, and not every plant is as mature as the next, but there is SOMETHING there and it looks HEALTHY and you have every reason to believe that it will continue growing into something even stronger with time.

In addition to that, you notice that in this "garden" that is the elder's life, it is very well kept. There are no really nasty weeds threatening to take over, although there are many which need to be dealt with. So, it's a really healthy garden bed, even if it is not a perfect one. However, you need to remember that even Timothy had a lot of room for progress in his own life:

*"Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, **so that everyone may see your progress.** Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them....." (1 Timothy 4:15a)*

An elder doesn't have to be perfect, but there needs to be strong, verifiable, observable evidence that he is growing and developing in every way.

Thirdly and finally, not only is this list helpful in identifying false teachers and in choosing good elders, it is also useful as a motivation and guide as to how you ought to pray for your current, existing elders. Thinking through these qualifications should help you to understand the responsibility and difficulty of serving in this particular position. In Paul's verses here, especially verses 6 and 7, you see that there is a concern not only for the congregation but also *for the person of the elder himself* and for good reason. Paul well understood the pressures of the ministry. He knew that the nature of Christian ministry is such that it will PUSH you and TRY you and test you to your limits. If you start with a little instability in many of these areas of qualification, the stress and strain of ministry will only compound and exaggerate your struggles in that area.

So, for example, if you start out having a problem with your temper, you may develop a really bad problem with your temper before it is all over with! Some who have struggled with self-control in the area of alcohol have become alcoholics. If you already struggle in managing your home then assuming the responsibilities of eldership will push you even harder in that area. Being an elder, if you do it right, is hard work and it can have THAT kind of effect on you, if you're not careful.

So, one reason for these stringent qualifications is for the sake of the elders themselves - to avoid placing un-suitable men in situations which will only tempt them and test them beyond what they are able to endure. And so, a list like this makes a very good prayer list for your elders. Even more, it ought to make you think twice before you cast your vote and thrust someone into this role because it is a bittersweet pill that you give. And precisely because you know these sorts of things, you should know that if God has set aside certain men for this work in your congregation, then you better be prepared to pray for them, to stand by them and support them and their families.

V CONCLUSION

You are the church. You are the HOUSEHOLD of God. You have a vital, vested interest in these matters whether as one who will oversee the ministry of this church, as an elder, or as one who will carry out the ministry of this church under the oversight of elders whom YOU have elected. Men, if the shoe fits, then you need to wear it. If it doesn't fit, and you know it doesn't fit, don't you dare put it on. Congregation, before you cast your vote, you make sure the shoe fits. And if it doesn't fit, don't you dare try and force it on one to whom it does not belong.

A sign at the beginning of the great wagon trails in the 1800's read "...Choose your rut carefully as you will be in it for the next 1000 miles..." Similar wisdom applies here: Choose your elders carefully as they are likely to be with you for a long, long time.