

Qualified for a lifetime of Leadership: 1 Timothy 3:1-13

A portion Adapted from: The Leaders' Overlooked Ingredients, by Joel Santos @ SermonCentral.com

A woman came to an elder of a congregation in Lubbock, Texas asking if he would study the Bible with her, which He gladly did resulting in the woman's salvation. Curiously the elder asked the woman what PROMPTED her to come in and study the Bible. She said that over a year ago her three-year old son had been hit by a car and was critically injured and it was touch and go for a while. During that time, her next-door neighbor, who was a member of this church, was exceedingly helpful. She took care of her other son. She cooked dinner for her family, she did her shopping, she cleaned the house, washed the laundry. She did all of that without a single complaint or asking for anything in return.

The woman continued, *"I knew that she was a member of this church but that's all that she knew about her. She was always friendly and she invited me to church. But prior to my son's accident, I had nothing to do with her because my mother told me that members of that church were judgmental, rude, and obnoxious toward anyone who was not a member of the church."*

She concluded tearfully that her neighbor was nothing like she had been taught. But instead her neighbor was just the opposite. This neighbor had something she did not have but surely wanted. While her son was in the hospital, her neighbor had encouraged her to read the Bible. Not knowing where to start she decided to ask someone from this church to help her do so. And in time as she read the Bible she discovered that the something her neighbor had which she did not have was a caring Savior named Jesus Christ.

The Presbyterian Church, like many churches, follows the Biblical model of ordaining Elders and Deacons to lead, teach, and care for our congregations; we have no higher positions than these. They are both ordained positions, because our church officially recognizes Elders and Deacons as pastors, serving the priestly function for our congregations.

We do recognize a division of skills among our leadership, as does the Bible, distinguishing between **Teaching Elders** (someone like myself – who has been formally trained to teach God's word) and **Ruling Elders** who having grown to spiritual maturity within a community, now in their turn seeking to nurture that community. And **Deacons** who having followed a similar path now dedicate their talents to caring for the individual needs of the community's members. **Elders are servant leaders and Deacons are leading servants.**

Like that Biblically competent Texas elder and his Biblically illustrative church member, this is what the church has always needed; because these days, more than ever, our world needs first to SEE a sermon lived out before they will be willing to listen to one preached.

Thus becoming an Elder or a Deacon is a ministry to which one must believe that they **have been called by God**, and to which **they must be qualified**, but equally important: it is a service, ministry, responsibility, **they must want to provide**.

But whichever ministry one aspires to, Elder or Deacon, the qualifications are the essentially the same. Writing to his disciples Timothy in Ephesus and Titus on the island of Crete, Paul composed two lists characteristics which those who would be servant leaders must have (1 Timothy 3 & Titus 1:5-9). Today we are only looking at Timothy's list (which is the longer one).

Also note, that while Paul wrote about Elders and Deacons somewhat separately here, his use of the word "likewise," actually applied these lists equally to both (1 Timothy 3:8). So that is the way we will deal with them today; one list for all those who aspire to be a servant leader within the body of Christ.

Another significant thing to note about this Elder/Deacon list is that except for the ability to teach God's Word, **this list focuses on the person's godly character, not on their spiritual gifts or other abilities**. Because "*What God prizes among the leaders of His people is not education, wealth, social status, success, or even great spiritual gifts. Rather, He values personal moral and spiritual character*" (Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership [Lewis & Roth], p. 168),

Of course, no person is perfectly sanctified in this life, so no one can meet these qualifications perfectly all the time. But one who would serve as a leader in the Church should definitely be an example of a mature Christian, not in glaring violation of any of these qualities, and certainly continuing to grow, even as all believers should be growing in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

The saying is sure:
whoever **aspires** to the office of
bishop [elder] **desires** a noble task.
(verse 1)

In summary, both elders and deacons must be a spiritually mature people of integrity as seen in their public life, home life, personal character, and their firm adherence to

Scripture. But the first and most often forgotten requirement must be **their desire to serve.**

Paul uses two verbs to emphasize this primary qualification. First, he says that a person must **"aspire"** to leadership. The verb means to "*stretch out in order to grasp*," like a football wide receiver leaping to pull in that long pass or diving full-length to make it over the goal line.

Second, he says that a leader must **"desire"** such leadership. That verb means to "eagerly desire" or to "be ambitious for" or even to "covet" (in the good sense).

Notice also that Paul calls such church leadership a **"noble task."** While there are many kinds of leaders, some who are much less than noble whether elected, appointed, inherited, dictators, autocrats, **Christian leaders are noble in the eyes of God, because in imitation of Christ the King they are always servant leaders;** willingly laying down their own lives in order to make the church holy (Ephesians 5:25-29, Philippians 2:1-11).

Here then are two implications to think about concerning those aspiring to the noble task of elder or deacon.

1. If such leadership is a noble task, then churches should uphold their leaders before the congregation. Being an elder or deacon is a sacrificially demanding job, serving the Lord as a Sunday School teacher is a great work. Being a trustee is a major responsibility. The same is true for all volunteer positions in the church. Let's honor and support our leaders and encourage our people to show respect and appreciation for the leaders God has given us.
2. Young men and women should be taught that leadership is a worthy calling in the local church. Too often church members make disparaging comments about the pastor, the staff, the elders or the deacons or the choir director or the Sunday School teachers . . . and then we wonder why our teenagers drop out of church as soon as they can. How much better to uphold godly leaders and challenge our high schoolers to aspire to the same kind of leadership someday.

Here, then, is the first requirement for elder or deacon. **A person must want the job!** There should be a God-given desire that moves their heart to action. **The application is clear: If you have to talk a person into serving, you've probably got the wrong person! That goes as much for Sunday School teachers and choir members as it does for elders and deacons. If God is truly calling, that person should eventually feel a deep inner desire for the job.**

Now an [elder/deacon] must be
above reproach ...
well thought of by outsiders so that
they may not fall into disgrace
and the snare of the devil.
3:2, 7

This phrases "**above reproach**" and being "**well thought of**" serve as general summaries of all the character qualities a church leader should have. The Greek word for "above reproach" describes a garment without any folds. When applied to personal character, it means that a leader must be free from any secret or hidden pockets of sin. Said another way, it means that a godly leader is one whose life is such that there is nothing a detractor can "grab hold of." Leaders are often attacked, their motives questioned, their actions criticized. While such things do happen, a leader who is truly above reproach will weather the storm because there is nothing about them which a person could say, "Aha! I gotcha." This means no questionable conduct, no secret sins, no unresolved conflicts.

Lest this seem too discouraging, let me point out that to be "above reproach" describes not perfection, but a model Christian life to which we should all aspire. We should expect nothing less from our leaders. Most of the other qualities in this elder/ deacon list then are examples of a life that has been publicly lived "above reproach."

temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable,
not a drunkard, not violent but gentle,
not quarrelsome, not a lover of money...
serious, not double-tongued
not a slanderer ... faithful in all things

But now in consideration of our current culture, I want to take a brief side trail to remember God's grace and our own need to grow up from and to forgive past sins.

As you know our nation has become so divided so intolerant any perceived cultural sins, that as soon as a person "aspires to leadership" some enemy will dig up a past indiscretion by which to tar their current efforts; Look at what just recently happened to Governor Northam, where a 34 year old photograph of him in blackface at collegiate party was used in an attempt to drive him from his present office. I am not a fan of the

governor, but I applaud his courage in not leaving. Still in our unforgiving culture, his career will be forever crippled and he will need to repetitively repent in public opinion for that long ago moment of what was then thought of as harmless fun. He tried to say: *that was then, this is now, I am changed*, but the vengeful spirit of this culture will not grant forgiveness.

We Christians having been forgiven much and given God's grace to change, should speak out to the world that people can change. Paul described his former life as being *a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence* who in receiving God's mercy became one of His most powerful witnesses. A modern example I think of is Chuck Colson, who was formerly Nixon's "hatchet man" but whom afterward became one of God's most powerful witnesses in the political swamp of Washington DC.

I bring this up, because in Christ, anyone can change, can become a new creation and begin to live a life that is above reproach. And when we meet such changed persons we should honor their difference, forgetting their past and celebrating who they have become. Because forgiveness and the power to change is the at the heart of message we share with the world. Faith in Christ, and growth within his family can bring about a great change for the better in anyone's life.

He must manage his own household well,
keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way
for if someone does not know how to manage his own household,
how can he take care of God's church?

3:4-5

A second major "above reproach" challenge in this list is one's home life. In both lists, Paul stresses that how a person runs their home should be a reflection on their qualification to lead in church. Think of how difficult it has now become to raise children according to your personal standards in a world that easily over-shouts, overwhelms, most parental efforts with its own standards.

Knowing my own minimal successes and certainly failures to raise a godly man and woman in this culture, I certainly have no easy answers other than to shape your home life with a lot of unconditional love, fervent prayer, willingness to forgive, longstanding patience, but still a commitment to maintain Christian standards of conduct within the family. **Know that the most powerful sermon on Christian values ever preached will be the one lived out daily by you the parent! If you worry about your child's practice of their faith, ask yourself what have they seen in your practice of your faith.** I truly wonder what child raising advice Jesus would give to parents these days.

Now, let's move on to an elephant that has too long haunted this list.

What must an elder of deacon be?

Greek " A one woman man "
KJV <i>husband of one wife</i>
NASB <i>husband of one wife</i>
NIV <i>faithful to his wife</i>
NRSV <i>married only once</i>
<i>1 Timothy 3:2b</i>

I believe the Bible is God's inspired word, even in those places – such as this – where I don't quite understand what the original meaning might have been. But **I know that translations are NOT equally inspired.** So while we hope translators would work to translate as accurately as possible, still there are places where they have let past prejudice sway present interpretation; sadly our NRSV translation provides a good example here of poor, prejudiced, translation work.

All the commentaries I have read agree, that they are not sure what Paul meant by the catch phrase "**one woman man.**" While it could be a prohibition against polygamy, since polygamy was illegal in both Greco/Roman and Jewish culture, Paul need not have made such a remark. It might also have been a prohibition against keeping a concubine, which was commonly practiced among the Greek upper classes. **But Paul's remark has nothing to do with whether a man or woman has been previously divorced.** The commentaries' best guess is that Paul was using a then common cliché for an man or woman being known as a **FAITHFUL SPOUSE**; which also better translates Paul's remark about "faithful" widows when he later turns that phrase around (1 Timothy 5:9 cf. "The Message of 1 Timothy, Stott, p.93-94)).

Thus most translations, such as the KJV and NASB, chose to write this phrase as literally as possible without further translation (Husband of one wife). While the NIV translated it as best as possible according to their understanding of its original meaning (faithful to his wife). So then we must ask where did the NRSV get the basis for their translation which is definitely not what Paul wrote?

According to the commentaries both this exact phrase, "**married only once,**" and the concept of divorce as disqualifying one from leadership came not from the Bible but from 2nd century understandings of Christianity that were beginning to value celibacy and asceticism as signs of spirituality (Expositor's Bible Commentary, Gaebelien. P. 364. Also cf. Colossians 2:21-23).

So to this day, while Paul's remarks here on a "one woman man" have often been interpreted to say that anyone who has ever been divorced is no longer qualified to lead in a church.... that is not what Paul wrote. Rather, Paul's concern was for a person's present spiritual maturity, and current reputation, not on past sins that may have been committed years ago. For example, what if a person used to be self-willed, quick-tempered, or addicted to alcohol? Do these past evidences of spiritual immaturity prohibit them from ever becoming an elder? If so, then who could qualify? In other words, Paul is more concerned with present godly character than with past immature behavior. So the term "a one-woman man," is largely concerned with the current character and long standing reputation of a person; that an elder or deacon should have a track record of being morally above reproach in their public and private life.

So while Jesus did have some very strong words to say about divorce, just like murder, such past sins do not necessarily disqualify one from later becoming a church leader IF they have shown evidence of a changed life thereafter and are now living above reproach.

Let me say a final word about translations. I believe with all my heart that the Bible is God's inspired word and guide for my life which I try to understand to the best of my ability and by which to live my life accordingly. That is why I have long strived *to Do my best to present myself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth* (Timothy 2:15). But as you have now learned we dare not give the same authority to various translations of the Bible. In this matter, Paul had it much easier in his day, in that there was only one authoritative Hebrew text and one Greek translation of that text. But now we have countless translations with new ones coming out almost yearly, so when we have questions about a modern translation we need to be willing to check out how other translations may have phrased things differently. This is not a matter of picking and choosing the translation that we prefer but rather seeking to be diligent students of God's word.

There is a story about 4 preachers discussing the merits of the various translations of the Bible. One liked the KJV best because of its simple, beautiful English. Another liked the American Revised Version best because it was closer to the original Hebrew and Greek. Still another like the NIV because of its up-to-date vocabulary. The fourth minister was silent for a moment, then said, "I like my mother's translation best." Surprised, the other three men said they didn't know his mother had translated the Bible. "Yes," he replied, "She translated it into life, and it was the most convincing translation I ever saw."

That is certainly the most God honoring translation anyone of us could ever read and one that everyone of us should aspire to become.