

The Qualifications of An Elder [Pastor, Overseer]

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Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.
— Jeremiah 3.15

First Timothy 3 entails a God-inspired account describing the shepherd of God's sheep. To whom does God entrust His blood-bought sheep? What kind of man must he be? What kind of character must he possess? What must he do? What does God the Holy Spirit clearly say about the kind of men that serve in leadership in the local Church?

I. ABOVE REPROACH.

The first term serves as a summarizing term under which every other term falls. In other words, this term is so general and yet what follows will further elaborate on the meaning of this phrase 'above reproach.' But the word ἀνεπίλημpton speaks of one who is without any criticism, without any reproach, without any accusation. This is a man who has proved himself trustworthy, faithful, and full of integrity over the course of time so that there is nothing glaring in his life that someone could point to and accuse him in any way. This word does not refer to perfection or sinlessness; it rather speaks of one with such a pure, holy, and zealous pursuit of Christ that one finds no accusation when carefully and closely scrutinizing his life.

2. HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE.

Interestingly, the very first term that describes the man of God (after the first summarizing term) speaks of his marital life and his fidelity to his wife alone. To be the "husband of one wife" translates the Greek phrase μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα which should best be understood as a "one woman man." This phrase does not speak of a man who *must* be married (thus excluding single men from ministry) nor does it refer to a man who has ever been divorced (before conversion) thus excluding him from ministry. The meaning of this phrase seems to refer to the moral purity, the singular focus, the sexual exclusivity, and the gospel-driven love that this man has for his wife — and her alone. No other woman catches his eye. He gazes upon no one else for satisfaction. He totally abstains from infidelity, emotional affairs, all pornography, and lingerings thoughts of women other than his wife. This man must love his wife singularly and passionately just as Christ singularly and passionately loves His Bride, the Church. It should not be overlooked or minimized that total marital fidelity and a zealous sexual purity is the first defining characteristic of a qualified man who desires leadership in Christ's church.

3. TEMPERATE.

The man who serves as a shepherd leader in God's flock must evidence sobriety. He must be temperate, sober-minded. The word νηφάλιον speaks of self-control or self-restraint. Older men must demonstrate this kind of temperateness (Titus 2:2) as well as the women in the church (1 Tim 3:11). This man must be self-controlled and not unrestrained in his dealings in life. This character mark is further defined by the next few words.

4. PRUDENT.

Similar to the previous word ‘temperate’, the shepherd must live a life of prudence. The term σώφρονα refers, as does the previous word, generally to self-control but it also speaks of sensibility and moderateness. Older women must teach younger women to be self-controlled and moderate in this way (Titus 2:5). Older men must live moderately (Titus 2:2). The man must live moderately. He must be self-controlled in his attitude, in his way of life, in his conduct, in his relationships, in his pleasures, in his time management, in his indulging in entertainments, foods, and in his various responsibilities.

5. RESPECTABLE.

Another term that builds on the previous two shows that the man of God must live respectably. This means that he must be proper, respectable and orderly. The word κόσμιον is found in 1 Timothy 2:9 speaking of the women in the church and how they must adorn themselves with *respectable* (κόσμιον) clothing. Thus, the man of God must conduct himself modestly. He must be orderly. He must live respectably. Combined with the previous two terms, νηφάλιον, σώφρονα, and κόσμιον all underscore the importance of the overseer who lives self-controlled, respectably, with moderateness and sobriety. This man cannot indulge excessively in anything (and thus show himself to be out of control or irresponsible). He must have control of himself, his passions, his desires, his life, his conduct, his appearance, his family, his finances, his responses, his attitudes. All of this is bound up in the idea of God’s man being a respectable man.

6. HOSPITABLE.

If one essential mark of godly leadership is sorely overlooked in our day it may well be hospitality. God’s shepherds must be hospitable men. This speaks of not only the willingness but the practical demonstration of hospitality. The word φιλόξενον speaks of showing love to others (strangers) by welcoming them into one’s home, providing for them, caring for them, loving them, and treating them with the utmost passion and care as if they were really part of the ‘family.’ Paul commands believers to pursue hospitality (Rom 12:13). Widows who receive support from the church must have lived a life of hospitality (1 Tim 5:10). The book of Hebrews commands believers not to neglect showing hospitality to strangers (Heb 13:2). Even Paul asked Philemon to prepare a guest room for him as Paul intended to travel through (Philem 22). The man who serves as a shepherd must willingly, openly, and joyfully open up his home to the sheep in the flock. He must invite them in. The sheep should feel welcome to see the shepherd’s home life, his family life, his imperfections at home, his marital life, his parenting life. Perhaps little demonstrates such affectionate, warm, and brotherly love as inviting someone into your home for a meal or to stay for some length of time. After all, Jesus welcomes us into His eternal home; ought not we also be willing to invite others into the homes that God has given to us? The Apostle Peter commands all believers to practice hospitality without complaining (1 Pet 4:9).

7. ABLE TO TEACH.

Paul’s list here provides only one skill that God’s shepherd must ably do, namely, teach the Word of God. He must be διδασκτικόν — able to teach. This word does not necessarily mean that the overseer must love to preach from the pulpit and excel preeminently as a ‘pulpiteer’. Rather, the word here speaks of one who can open God’s Word, explain the meaning of it, and teach the God-intended truth. This could be the context of a pulpit or it may be in a discipleship

setting at a coffee shop as men gather to look into the Word of God together. Elsewhere, Paul writes that God's servant must be able to teach (2 Tim 2:24). God's man must know God's Truth and impart God's Word with God's love in God's power so as to see God's Spirit work to save and sanctify.

8. NOT ADDICTED TO WINE.

Beginning some negative characteristics that must not describe a leader in God's flock, the first that Paul spells out is that he must not be given to wine. He must not be a drunkard. The word πῶροινον speaks of one who is prone to, given to, addicted to, and drawn to excessive alcohol. One translation renders this phrase as follows: he should not be a 'heavy drinker' (NLT). Though this verse speaks nothing about complete abstinence of alcohol, it does provide the 'above reproach' requirement for God's man serving God's flock. He must have such an impeccable character about him and a blameless way of life that he does not plunge himself into excessive alcohol — as the surrounding culture so often does. He must be free from the love of alcohol (and, by application, any substance that would intoxicate or dominate him and his faculties). Obviously the Word of God condemns all drunkenness and speaks lucidly that all drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God. Drunkenness — that is, losing full awareness in even the slightest degree — is sin — always. This character trait does not refer to drunkenness. It speaks of one who drinks, that is, one who imbibes alcohol excessively, frequently, and uncontrollably. What may be permissible for some may not be the most prudent for God's leader. Though all things may be lawful not all things are profitable.

9. NOT PUGNACIOUS.

Paul writes that an elder must not be violent. The word πλήκτην has in mind one who strikes another, one who is violent, one who is pugnacious. This man is a brawler and he looks for a fight. One should recognize that this negative trait follows on the heels of the previous characteristic that the man of God should not be given to alcohol. It can be the case that a man given to alcohol can often be given to anger, violence, brawling and brutality. This must never be the case with God's servant. He must never be a bully, violent, retaliating in vengeance and wrath. He must not fight. He must not strike another. He must not be violent. He must not bully others around.

10. GENTLE.

In contrast to the previous negative characteristics, Paul explicates what the servant of God should pursue. Rather (strong negation in the Greek: ἀλλὰ) than being pugnacious, the shepherd of God's flock must be gentle. To be ἐπιεικῆ describes one who is kind, courteous, yielding to others. Every Christian is called by God to let the gentle spirit (ἐπιεικὲς) be made known to all men (Phil 4:5). Believers must demonstrate gentleness by being considerate of all men (Titus 3:2). True wisdom from above that should define all believers is pure, peaceable and then gentle (James 3:17). This man must demonstrate a consuming passion to show kindness to others; he longs to be courteous to others; he yields to others. And by this way of life, he models Christ and exemplifies Godliness for others in the flock of God.

11. PEACEABLE.

To be peaceable means to be one who restrains from fighting. It speaks of one who is uncontentious (ἄμαχον). Paul uses this word in calling all believers to live peaceably (Titus 3:2).

The man who serves Christ and His church must not be a fighter, nor must he be one who stirs up contention. He must live peaceably with others in the church, outside of the church, and with others with whom he differs in various perspectives. To stir the pot and instigate contention disqualifies a man for eldership. God's man must be a peaceable man.

12. FREE FROM THE LOVE OF MONEY.

This qualification for elders directly zeroes in at the heart. This does not speak of one's performance, nor of one's outward actions but rather of his inner motive. That is, does he in his inner control center of the heart have a love for, longing for, craving for money. Paul says that God's shepherds must be ἀφιλάργυρον. The author of Hebrews concludes his exhortation calling the believers to make certain that their character is free from the love of money (Ἀφιλάργυρος ὁ τρόπος; Heb 13:5). This character trait is essential since the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils (1 Tim 6:10). And, in the latter days, those who love money describes the kind of people who will permeate cultures (2 Tim 3:2). The one who loves money will never be satisfied with it (Ecc 5:10). If one longs for money, he reveals that his heart truly longs for the things of this world rather than the things of God (1 John 2:15-17). This qualification for eldership cannot be ignored, minimized, side-stepped, rejected. Churches must not appoint 'potential' in this regard for eldership. Men must demonstrate a pattern of life that is completely free from an inner attitude, a heart craving, and a lustful pursuit after money and the goods of this world.

13. MUST MANAGE HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD WELL.

It could happen that churches might overlook this crucial qualification for men who desire to serve as overseers in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is demanded that God's leaders lead and manage (lit. *Rule over* or *preside over*) their own households well (τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον). This does not merely refer to a tidy home, a welcoming home but the following phrase helps spell out what it means for a man who manage his household well: τέκνα ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ, that is, he must have his children in subjection (lit. *Obedience*). And this takes place with all dignity (σεμνότητος). Paul convincingly shows *why* the man must be a godly leader, a Christ-honoring shepherd, a humble manager of his home, namely, if the man who aspires to leadership in Christ's church cannot even manage the 'smaller flock' at home (i.e., his own immediate family) why in the world would some think that he can manage the 'larger flock of God' at Church (i.e., the corporate family of God). Thus, this man must diligently demonstrate family worship. He must regularly shepherd his family in the Word of God. He must lead his wife (by washing her in the Word), and he must disciple, train, instruct and discipling his children. He should endeavor to bring his family to the throne of God daily through family worship: singing songs, reading Scripture, and praying together. He must disciple his children. If he does not strive to disciple his own flock at home (nonbelievers within his own walls at home) why ought he to be put in church leadership? If a man neglects his home life, his family life, his parenting life then he forfeits his ministry and is disqualified to serve as an overseer in Christ's church. Does the man diligently discipline his children and lovingly point them to Christ and call them to embrace the gospel with frequency? Does he pray with and for his children? Does he bring his children to Jesus and beg that Jesus "touch them" and "bless them"? This kind of godly, Christ-emulating, biblical, and humble leadership should already be present in a man's family life and home life *before* he becomes an elder. He should be a humble,

servant, sacrificial, Christ-pointing and Christ-exalting shepherd over his home as an act of worship to God.

14. NOT A NEW CONVERT.

God's leaders must not have recently been converted. They cannot be 'newly planted' ones (νεόφυτον). This does not so much speak of age but to maturity. And to be sure, godly wisdom and discretion is needed by other godly elders to decide what is/what is not a 'newly converted one' (e.g., 1 year, 2 years, 5 years). The point for this clear qualification, however, Paul spells out in the next phrase. The purpose of not having a new convert in eldership is so that he will not become proud. The word τυφωθεῖς speaks of one who is puffed up, one who is blown up with himself and his abilities. A proud Christian is an oxymoron. A Christian should look at Christ, His sacrificial death, His atonement, His propitiatory sacrifice and pride will quickly fade away. To be prideful means one thinks too highly of himself and that he thinks of himself too much. A man who lives in pride is one who has fallen into the condemnation incurred by the devil. He fell into pride (Isa 14 & Ezek 28) when he wanted to be 'like God.' God hates pride and God's shepherds must shun pride, endeavor to daily mortify pride and poison the initial thoughts of pride. God's men must emulate Christ. He lived humbly, sacrificially, totally consumed with living for the Father's glory and engulfed in obeying the Father's will. He sacrificed Himself even to death for His enemies. God's men must look at Christ, see His humility and sacrifice, and then strive to live similarly. If a man displays pride in his life, if he talks about himself all the time, if he boasts in his accomplishments, his degrees, his knowledge, his theological viewpoints, or his character then he has no place in the leadership position of Christ's Church. May it be that God's men never boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

15. MUST HAVE A GOOD REPUTATION WITH OUTSIDERS.

Tying everything together, Paul concludes that the final qualification is that God's shepherds must have a good reputation with outsiders (i.e., nonbelievers). The phrase δεῖ δὲ καὶ μαρτυρίαν καλὴν ἔχειν emphasizes the Christian 'witness' (μαρτυρίαν) that Godly men must have with nonbelievers. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that Paul uses a verb (δεῖ) denoting that it is *utterly necessary* for God's shepherd to be *living this way already*. He must demonstrate this *before* he becomes an elder. Why must this elder have such a good reputation with nonbelievers? Why does Paul bring this up as a qualification? The purpose Paul provides is so that he will not fall into the reproach and snare of the devil. He must not live one way at church and another way at the secular workplace while amidst nonbelievers. If he does so, he disgraces himself, his testimony, and most importantly the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ calls believers to live differently. Christ demands that those who follow Him do so unreservedly. God's followers count the cost, they suffer for Him, they are hated by the world, they are an enigma to the world's mind, and are foolish for proclaiming the message of the cross. Nevertheless, even though the world may mock and scorn, God's men must live with such integrity, with such blamelessness, with such love and compassion, and with such zeal for evangelizing the lost that even the nonbelievers can attest to the godly man's integrity and witness for Christ. Like the pagans who could find no accusation against Daniel (even though they tried), they had to find something to accuse him against the law of his God. This is how God's men, God's shepherds, Godly overseers must live toward the lost. Anything less disqualifies him.