

Building God's Family: Raising Healthy Leaders (1 Timothy 3)

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Dominant Thought: Leaders reflect the heart of Jesus.

Objectives:

I want my listeners to understand the descriptions of elders and deacons.

I want my listeners to feel encouraged to reflect these descriptions in their lives.

I want my listeners to look to Jesus as the perfect example of these descriptions.

Leaders reflect the heart of Jesus. As we continue our study in 1 Timothy, Paul continues to describe what healthy households look like. In [1 Timothy 3](#), he gives several descriptions of healthy leaders. In [1 Timothy 3](#), Paul uses two words to describe leaders in God's house: overseers and deacons.

As we look at these two groups, we have some other words to help us understand who they are. First, in my opinion an overseer may also be described as an elder or shepherd. We don't use the word overseer much in our context probably due to the negative connection with American slavery and the overseers. At Berlin Christian Church, we generally use elder. I see all three terms interchangeable: overseer, elder, shepherd.

A second group is called deacon. It is not a translation, but simply exchanging the Greek letters for English letters. The word deacon means minister or servant. I see these three words used interchangeably, as well. A deacon is a servant or a minister. In a sense all Christians are deacons, or servants.

I hope that helps clarify some understanding on these two groups.

One more word on how these groups function here at Berlin Christian Church. The following is from our Deeper Life 101 class.

Christ is the head of His church ([Colossians 1.18](#)). In the New Testament, we observe that the church was led by elders ([Acts 20.28](#); [1 Timothy 3.1-7](#); [Titus 1.5-9](#); [Hebrews 13.7, 17](#); [1 Peter 5.1-4](#)). Berlin Christian Church follows the example of the New Testament as an elder-led church. The elders partner with deacons and ministers to form the leadership team. Elders and deacons serve

for three years and then are given a one-year sabbatical. Our church is self-governed by our elders. Our current elders are: Brad Clair, Dan Knappmeyer, and Joe McCann. Our deacons are: John Babbs, Blake Lucas, Sam Millitello, Tony Peecher, John Ruby, and John D. Wyatt.

That's a glimpse on our leadership structure here at Berlin Christian Church. Now, let's get into the text of [1 Timothy 3](#) to learn more about the character of these leaders. My Bible has a heading over [1 Timothy 3](#), "Qualifications for Overseers and Deacons." I have crossed that out because I see this list not as qualifications, but as characteristics or descriptions of healthy leaders.

I want to give thanks for my friend, Jim Dalrymple, leader and teacher at Ozark Christian College for the four D's we will use to describe the hearts of leaders.

As we look at [1 Timothy 3](#), let's look at four ways healthy leaders reflect the heart of Jesus.

First, healthy leaders reflect the heart of Jesus in Discipleship.

As we look over this list of characteristics, we will see some overlap. Two guiding characteristics or umbrella characteristics are: above reproach ([1 Timothy 3.2](#)) or worthy of respect ([1 Timothy 3.8](#), [11](#)). The overseers or elders are to be above reproach. It does not mean they are perfect, but they live a clean life and set a healthy example for what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

The list that follows each of these themes, above reproach and worthy of respect, gives us a picture of what these characteristics look like.

Healthy leaders reflect the heart of Jesus in discipleship. For the overseer or elder, to be above reproach looks like: faithful to his wife. As I read Scripture, I see elders as males. As a child observed, the elders are like the dads of the church. To be above reproach looks like someone who is sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable—they love strangers and are able to teach.

As you look through this list, we hear echoes of the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Paul's list continues in [1 Timothy 3.3](#): not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

My New Testament teacher, Dr. Lowery, liked the idea of seeing the responsibility of an overseer as a caregiver. Anyone who has been in a caregiving role understands the demands to serve those in need. Caregivers set

aside their own schedule and desires to care for a loved one. They do some unpleasant tasks, get little sleep, and have to control their responses when their loved one makes some untimely and, dare I say, unkind requests at times.

Maybe it helps to see an elder as a caregiver.

Deacons or servants or ministers, are called to serve alongside the elders. They are called to be dignified or worthy of respect. That picture is clarified as: sincere or not double tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain—the last two are similar to the elder description earlier.

Deacons must first be tested ([1 Timothy 3.10](#)), then let them serve as deacons if they show themselves blameless. As we look for deacons, we want to give them responsibilities to see how they will handle it. The Bible is clear, if you are faithful with a few things, then you will be faithful with many things ([Matthew 25.21](#)).

Then, in [1 Timothy 3.11](#), the wives of deacons are described in the same way. They are to be worthy of respect or dignified. It's also possible that the NIV is correct in saying, "women are to be worthy of respect." There was not a word for female deacon at the time, so maybe that's what Paul had in mind. We know that a female named Phoebe is called a deacon or a servant in [Romans 16:1](#) "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae." Paul wants the ladies to be worthy of respect, not slanderers—watch your speech, sober minded, and trustworthy in everything.

I want to express our appreciation for the ladies who serve so well in Berlin Christian Church. To the wives of our elders and deacons, thank you for sharing your husbands for Thursday night leadership meetings. To all who serve from teaching in our Sunday school classes, hosting discipleship groups, providing and serving lots of yummy food, helping lead worship, and praying. We appreciate your partnership in the gospel.

In one of our leadership trainings, Jim Dalrymple asked a question like, "Do our leaders spend more time in meetings or in meeting needs?"

Paul is lifting up the character of the leaders in God's household. One of the responsibilities elders and deacons have is to lead the way in making disciples. You reproduce who you are. Our church reflects the character of those who lead it.

Leaders reflect the heart of Jesus.

Second, healthy leaders reflect the heart of Jesus in Doctrine.

Both groups, elders and deacons are called to handle the truth of God's word well. The word is doctrine. It is used throughout these letters of Timothy and Titus as "teaching." We need leaders who are in God's Word and know God's Word. Paul wants the elders/overseers/shepherds to be "able to teach" ([1 Timothy 3.2](#)).

I can remember talking with a prospective elder. He wasn't one to teach in a classroom setting, but he was teaching with his example. He taught in small group interactions and for years would lead a small group Bible study. His name is Tom Ealey. He reflected the heart of Jesus in Doctrine.

Likewise, deacons are called to "keep hold of the deep truths of the faith" ([1 Timothy 3.9](#)). In a world of confusion, we look to our leaders to help us understand the truth. We need servants who saturate their lives with the Word of God.

Third, healthy leaders reflect the heart of Jesus in Defense.

My friend, Jim Dalrymple added a third "D" to his list of responsibilities for leaders in God's house: Defense. In the opening chapter, Paul writes to Timothy, "I urged you... to stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer" ([1 Timothy 1.3](#)). While this character trait overlaps with the previous one of doctrine, you will see it has a deeper meaning, too.

In [Acts 20](#), Paul wants to meet with the elders of this church where Timothy is serving. It is in the passage of Scripture where Paul and the writer, Luke, use all three of these terms for the elders: elders, overseers, shepherds. "From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church" ([Acts 20.17](#)). Then Paul shares the following with those elders in [Acts 20.28-31](#).

Acts 20:28–31 NIV

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Paul warns the elders to be on your guard against the savage wolves. Leaders are called to defend the church against the enemy.

Back in [1 Timothy 3.6-7](#), Paul instructs Timothy that an elder “should not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.” Two times in two verses, Paul warns about the enemy, the devil. The devil wants to destroy God’s church. He wants to destroy families and marriages. So, it is important that our leaders are defending the church against the evil one by caring for the needs of the church and watching out for division and danger.

In those verses, Paul wants elders to have a good reputation with outsiders. Would your coworkers know you are a Christian?

The shepherd image is helpful here as shepherds watch the flock to keep them safe from the wolves. [Psalm 23](#) reminds us, “The LORD is my shepherd.” Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd” ([John 10.11](#)).

The word for malicious talkers in [1 Timothy 3.11](#) has the root word for devil, too. We are in a spiritual battle, and we need leaders who will defend this house of God against the evil one.

One needs only to read [2 Timothy 3.2-5](#) to see a different list of characteristics of what our enemy is trying to advance against God’s people.

Fourth, healthy leaders reflect the heart of Jesus in Discipline.

Both elders and deacons are called to lead their families well. The theme for the whole letter is building God’s family, God’s household. An overseer was one that was given responsibility to watch over the house on behalf of the owner of the house.

Paul encourages Timothy in [1 Timothy 3.4-5](#), “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” The house or the family is the building block of the church. Elders are called to lead their families before leading the church.

Parents must discipline their children. We cannot shy away from disciplining our kids because we want them to grow and learn. What’s true in your family is true in the family of God, the church. We need leaders who will discipline in love, gentleness, and with respect.

A couple of summers ago, I was teaching about church leadership at Nationwide Youth Roundup. I shared how discipline in the church is difficult. Thankfully, another leader in the class raised his hand. He shared about his military

background and shared how discipline is a good attribute to keep everyone organize, unified, and focused on the mission. That helped me see discipline in a more complete way. Yes, we discipline or correct our children when they make mistakes. We also teach discipline each day by how we treat people, respect leaders, obey instructions even when we don't feel like it. Leaders help us see the heart of Jesus in training and discipline.

What about elders or deacons who are not married and don't have a family? I think that's why it is helpful to see this list as brushstrokes of a portrait instead of a checklist. Those who are single have some group of people they are leading. Maybe it's nephews and nieces. Maybe they are leading a small group of students. The picture here is, "Are they training the next generation in the ways of Jesus?"

In [1 Timothy 3.11-13](#), we have the picture of deacons leading their families. In [1 Timothy 3.11](#), we have the picture of wives or female deacons. It's a family image. Then, we read, "A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus" ([1 Timothy 3.12-13](#)).

I appreciate the encouragement Paul gives these leaders. Those who serve well have great assurance. You are making a difference for eternity. That's why I'm thankful for people like: Don and Carol Robertson, Tom and Helen Ealey, Ralph and Jean Tolliver. They were some of the first leaders I met here at Berlin Christian Church. They served well and set an example for others to follow in their footsteps. We can look around the room today and see elders and deacons and their wives who have sacrificed for this church. Could I encourage you to thank an elder or deacon this week? Pray for them.

Paul concludes this chapter with the goal of this letter, "I am writing you these instructions so that...you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." ([1 Timothy 3.15](#)). That's why I have chosen to give my life in ministry. I believe God's church is the pillar and foundation of the truth. I believe Jesus has the power to change lives for eternity.

Then Paul shares a mystery of true godliness that is summarized in the good news of Jesus.

1 Timothy 3:16 NIV

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

Leaders reflect the heart of Jesus.

They reflect the heart of Jesus in discipleship, doctrine, defense, and discipline. Let's continue to grow the next generation of healthy leaders for God's glory.