



Sermon Transcript

April 29, 2018

Shepherds and Souls

Set an Example

1 Timothy 3:1-7

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 29, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
1 Timothy 3:1-7

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Introduction

This passage lays out for us the qualifications for the person who steps into the role of shepherding God's people in a local church. In this passage, Paul is telling Timothy that this is the kind of person you want to step into "that role" in the church. In fact, through this passage Paul has given us somewhat of a checklist that can be used to evaluate a person's readiness to step into this important position in the church.

Before we walk through this "checklist" and look at the particulars, I want to make a general observation about this list of qualifications. There is only one qualification on this "checklist" that describes the duty of an elder. You find it at the end of verse 2, "*able to teach.*" The rest of the list has to do with character and spiritual maturity. The list doesn't so much concentrate on what an elder does, but rather on who an elder is. And yet, ironically, this does get to one of the main tasks of an elder in the church. An elder is primarily an "example" to the congregation of what it means to follow after Christ. This is no small thing. Rather, the example set by the elders of the church is critical to the work of the church.

In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul says it this way to Timothy, "*set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.*" How you talk to people matters. How you conduct yourself towards others matters. How you love people matters. How grounded you are in the faith matters. Your sexual purity matters. It matters so much that Paul concludes this thought in 1 Timothy 4:16 by saying to this leader in the church, "*Keep a close watch on yourself and the teaching.*" These things require ongoing attention. And furthermore, it is not an either, or; but a both, and. How you live it, is as important as how you teach it. Paul finishes out this thought by saying, "*Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*" Persist in what? Work at being a good example to the church and in what you teach. Together, they are effectual.

On numerous occasions I have made the following observation: "On one hand, you would be hard pressed to name the five sermons that have had the most impact on your life. On the other hand, you would have no problem recalling the names of five people who had the biggest impact on your Christian growth."

This in no way diminishes the value of the weekly ministry of preaching and teaching the Word of God. Rather emphatically, in 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Paul instructs this young church leader, "*I charge you . . . preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*" Sitting under the regular,

ongoing, weekly ministry of the Word of God is essential to your spiritual sustenance. But it is kind of like eating. You would be hard pressed to remember five meals that “changed your life.” (I do remember a lobster roll on Cape Cod that was life changing!) But for the most part, daily meals are good, but rather ordinary. And we don’t question whether or not we should eat on a daily basis. So also, we need the regular feeding of God’s Word. Paul said to Timothy that keeping a watch on his teaching is one of the two things he needs to make sure are priorities in his leadership.

But in the life of a church, that message we preach also needs to be demonstrated by the way we live. Often, the way we live either gives credibility to the message we preach or it turns people off to the message we preach. On the positive side, Paul says that a godly example will lead to saving those who hear you. Rarely do you hear a testimony that doesn’t include the story of someone—or, multiple “someone’s” - who made a positive impact on the faith of that person. But the opposite is true as well. I think this is why Paul instructs us in 1 Timothy 3:6-7 to not put someone into the role of leadership who is not yet ready. He ends verse 7 by saying, “*so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*” In other words, if an elder falls or sets a bad example, then it discredits the church and that discredits God. John Stott says of this verse, “in his malicious eagerness to discredit the gospel, the devil does his best to discredit the ministers [elders] of the gospel. It is an old trick with a long history. The devil has used it for centuries; it remains an effective strategy today.”¹ We have seen that scenario play out way too many times in our day. Whether good or bad, elders are an example and their example has impact on the life of the church and her witness to the world.

Healthy churches are built upon healthy leaders. The first priority of a shepherd in a local church is to set an example of what it looks like to follow Jesus. In this passage, Paul lays out the kind of example an elder needs to be in the life of a local church.

The Importance of Elders

Paul begins his instructions by elevating the role elders play in the local church. He starts by saying, “*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*” Now again, the word *overseer* is used in the New Testament interchangeably with the words *shepherd*, *elder* and *pastor* (*pastor* is used only one time in the New Testament). For example, in Titus 1:5, Titus is told to “*appoint elders in every town*” and then he introduces their qualifications by saying in verse 7, “*For an overseer . . . must be above reproach.*” Clearly these titles are interchangeable. So when we hear Paul say in 1 Timothy 3:1, “*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the*

office of overseer” we know that he is talking about elders in the church. I believe the office of elders represents a plurality of elders comprised of what we think of as “pastors” and lay leaders in the church. It blurs the line we have created between “pastors” and “elders.” In many ways, they are one in the same.

Do you notice how this verse and this passage begins? Paul says, “*The saying is trustworthy.*” 1 Timothy is the first of three letters known as “the Pastoral Epistles.” They are grouped together and they are written to give instruction to leaders on how to lead the church. They are 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus. When you group these three epistles together, there are five times in these three letters where Paul uses this phrase, “*the saying is trustworthy.*” A few times he even adds to this saying, “*and deserving of full acceptance.*” In fact, often when Paul uses the word *trustworthy* he is referring to God. God is trustworthy. And so Paul is saying that this statement he is about to make is “a faithful presentation of the heart and the message of God.”²

I am struck by the other four statements in these three letters where Paul says “*the saying is trustworthy.*” The focus of these other four statements revolve around the gospel. For example, in 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul writes, “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*” Truly this a “*trustworthy*” saying and “*deserving of full acceptance.*” When Paul uses this phrase, he seems to be sharing matters of importance and he wants us to fully embrace what he has to say. Consequently, by introducing the topic of elders with this qualifying statement, “*the saying is trustworthy,*” Paul elevates the importance of the office of elders in the church. This is why we are having this conversation. We want to bring our polity in line with what we find in Scripture. Scripture is not silent on this matter and clearly this is a matter of importance. “*The saying is trustworthy.*” What Paul is about to tell us is “a faithful presentation of the heart and the message of God.”

In this introductory verse, Paul adds that this task of being an elder is a “*noble task.*” Do you know why it is a *noble task*? It is because “it involves the care and the nurture of the people of God.”³ My hope is that as we fine tune our polity around the offices of elder and deacon that we do a better job at caring for people. This may be somewhat simplistic, but I think it illustrates the goal of spiritual leadership. Elders care for the spiritual needs of the church. Deacons care for the physical needs of the church. In both cases, these offices are designed to care for the people of God. Phil Taylor is a pastor and has written a book on developing elders. In it he instructs his elders that the emphasis of their role is on shepherding the church, not on decision making.⁴ I think that when we think of leaders in the church we tend to think more about “decision

making.” No doubt, that is a role of elders, but it is not primary. At the heart of spiritual leadership is caring for God’s people. That is a transition we are striving to make right now, long before we even make any changes to our polity.

Last week we saw that Jesus provides the template for us as we seek to care for and shepherd the people of God.

Psalm 23 - Jesus is MY shepherd. He knows the sheep

John 10 - Jesus is the GOOD shepherd. He loves the sheep

Hebrews 13 - Jesus is the GREAT shepherd. He leads the sheep

1 Peter 5 - Jesus is the CHIEF shepherd. He equips the sheep

So it is with elders in the church. They know the people. They love the people. They lead the people as servant leaders. They equip the people so that together we mature in our faith and are used for the cause of the kingdom of God in this world. Much of this is accomplished through the example and the spiritual leadership of elders.

Six Observations about Elders

So what kind of a person is needed to fulfill this noble task? What kind of example does an elder need to provide for the good of the church? I want to make six observations about the qualification of elders from the “checklist” found in this passage.

A Willing Steward: Paul begins by telling us that whoever steps into this position needs to be there because they want to be there. *“If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble task.”* He *aspires* to serve in this role. This is not a self-seeking aspiration or a quest for power. Remember, an elder is a servant leader and there needs to be a sense of God’s calling on him for such a task. Granted, just because someone aspires to this position, does not automatically mean they are qualified or ready to serve in this role. Added to this desire and this sense of calling needs to be the affirmation of the leadership and the congregation that indeed you reflect the qualifications needed to serve in this role. But once a person steps into this role, he needs to do so with a willingness and eagerness to serve. He wants to be there.

I have noticed how this spirit is present among our board. Last year I asked them to consider adding another meeting to our monthly schedule. It is an early Saturday morning, once a month meeting. It is a “shepherding meeting.” No “business” is conducted. It is just focusing on learning how to shepherd the church. It has led to what we are talking about this morning. But what I appreciate about these men is their

eager desire to engage in this meeting and to learn how to better serve the church. They are faithful and willing stewards who are modeling what it means to serve God's people.

In one sense, an elder is no different than anyone else in the church. We say around here that we are sons and daughters, deeply loved by God in Christ. We are servants, called to put the needs of others before ourselves. We are stewards, investing what we have for the sake of the kingdom of God. That is true of all of us. We all have something to give to the work that God is doing here. We all have gifts and a role to play. So we need to be good stewards with what God has given us as we serve one another. An elder is simply stewarding the gifts and the passions God has given to him to serve the church. By doing it well and because he wants to be there, he becomes an example to all of us as we find our place to serve in the body of Christ.

A Godly Character: In verse 2, Paul adds that *an overseer must be above reproach*. It is not unusual for a prospective leader in the church to look at this list and question their suitability to serve as an elder. It is because they readily know their own faults and shortcomings. Who fully lives up to this list of qualifications? Clearly, Paul is not suggesting that an elder leads a morally impeccable life. If that were the case, none of us would be serving in this role. But the sense here is that he is the kind of man “who no one suspects of wrong-doing or immorality. People would be shocked to hear this kind of man charged with such acts.”⁵ There is a tone of spiritual maturity that marks this person and people readily see it and he is respected.

Being *above reproach* is described in verses 2-3 as “*sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable . . . not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.*” Do you know what I like about this list? It is pretty self-explanatory. But if I could take this list and group it under two headings, I would summarize these character traits by saying that an elder demonstrates self-discipline and is marked with a gracious and gentle spirit.

The example is one of “self-control.” Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit and it touches every area of life. He is not given to too much alcohol. His finances are in order and lives within his means. He is in control of his anger and is not given to gossip. It is interesting to me that Paul charges Titus in Titus 2 what to teach older men, what to teach older women so that they can teach younger women, and what to teach younger men. Do you know what is on every list no matter the age or the sex of the person? It is self-control. In fact, it is the only thing on the list for younger men. It is as if Paul is saying, “if we can just help the younger men to exercise self-control.” But the fact that it

is on the list for older men and older women tells me it is a life-long and daily battle. This is why Paul tells Timothy to “*keep a close watch on yourself . . . Persist in this.*” It requires ongoing discipline and vigilance. And yet, it needs to be the general tone of an elder in the life of the church.

All of this is wrapped with a gentle spirit that strives to maintain peace and seeks to reconcile people to God and to each other. Even when there is the need for confrontation, it must be done so in a firm but gentle way. Why? Because our unity is vital to our testimony to the world that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. Elders must guard that and help cultivate it.

A Way of Life: Did you notice how many references there were to an elder’s home life? He is to be *the husband of one wife . . . hospitable . . . He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?*” In other words, his Christian life is “a way of life” and not just something he does while at the church. It shows up in his home.

For starters, Paul says that an elder is to be *the husband of one wife*. At the very least, an elder who is married needs to have a good marriage. “How you handle your bride matters very much if you would care for Christ’s bride.”⁶ It is a big part of “being an example” to the church. It should also be noted that this does not exclude singles from serving as elders. Paul champions the idea of remaining single for the purpose of having *undivided devotion to the Lord*. But no matter what your marital status happens to be, the elder must maintain sexual purity and have a respect for the sanctity of marriage. How many times has the church suffered because of a leader who has fallen in this area?

Some take the stance that a person who has been divorced and remarried cannot be an elder. He is to be *the husband of one wife*. That is a legitimate interpretation of this verse. Even if one believes that there are biblical reasons for divorce and remarriage, it would not be unreasonable to hold an elder to a higher standard. And yet, I can’t help but think that if a person was divorced and remarried before they came to Christ, or the victim of a spouse who committed some kind of sexual sin that severed their relationship, or in the case where an unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage because their spouse has become a follower of Christ; that this person would be automatically disqualified from serving as an elder. Literally the text says that this elder must be “a one woman man” - meaning that he is sexually faithful to the one he happens to be married to. Admittedly, in the context of the local church, there is a seriousness to which this

issue needs to be evaluated and even possibly evaluated case by case. That requires discernment by the leaders of the church.

In addition to this, an elder needs to also demonstrate that he can manage his own children. Paul says, *for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?*" This implies that there are similarities between being a dad and being an elder. Jeramie Rinne puts it this way, "In both cases a man takes on a leadership role. In both, he bears the primary responsibility to help those under his care grow up and live together in harmony. Both parenting and shepherding are about guiding people toward maturity within a community context. Learn to shepherd God's family by learning to shepherd yours."⁷ Now you don't know how your children will respond to Christ. That is between them and God. You can't make that decision for them. But you can provide a nurturing and disciplined home and that is the same skill that is needed in shepherding and caring for the church.

Finally, by being hospitable, we allow people into our homes. That is part of the qualifications of an elder. Do you know what is great about that? People get to see how you interact with your wife. They get to see how you interact with your children. They are able to see things they can't see just by observing you in the pew. So by being hospitable, you allow for an even more intimate picture of how you live out your faith. It is being an example to others and it opens doors to speak into the lives of people.

A Good Reputation: Paul adds in verses 6-7 that an elder must have a good reputation outside of the church as well. *"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil."* What you find here is that over time the faith of the elder has been truly cemented in his heart and it shapes every area of his life. He is a good worker and has a good reputation at work. He is a good neighbor and is attentive to those who live around him. He is an upstanding citizen and engages in public discourse with tones of respect. He is concerned about the needs of his community and for those who are disadvantaged. He lets his light shine before others that when they see his good works they give glory to God the Father, who is in heaven. In other words, he carries himself in such a way that when someone finds out that he is a leader in the church, they have a positive impression of the church.

Able to Teach: I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon that this is the one duty for an elder that is mentioned in this list of qualifications. It is possible that this does not

necessarily mean that an elder has to have the gift of teaching and is involved in the formal teaching of the church. However, it does insinuate that the elder needs to know his Bible and have some ability to be able to defend the faith. Teaching happens in many different formats. It can happen in a classroom. It can refer to preaching from a pulpit. It could be leading a community group. Or it can even happen in one-on-one conversation or in counseling settings. But if the elder is to “*keep a close watch on himself and his teaching*” then that implies that there needs to be a basic understanding of Christian doctrine and biblical knowledge. This can be learned. And right now our leaders are studying the Scripture together one Saturday a month to learn what it has to say about church leadership. We are learning together. Last week we mentioned that the authority of the Word of God is one of the four resources God has given to the church to help it be a viable church. The elders are responsible for this ministry. We will talk more about this when we talk about the role of elders in guarding the flock.

A Manly Presence: The final thing I want to say about elders may be a settled issue for some and a debatable issue for others. But at least in the text, you can’t help but pick up that the role of elders is a call that God has placed on the men of the church. This in no way is a negative comment about women nor does it discount the fact that women are a vital part of the church.

Carolyn Custis James wrote a book called *Half the Church*. It is a book that recognizes that women comprise “half of the church.” Quite frankly, in many local settings, it is probably over “half of the church.” In this book she champions the role of women in the church and when you come to the end of the book you can’t really tell where she falls in this debate about the role of women in the church with regards to elders. But one thing she does do is that she makes sure that women are recognized as “equals” in the eyes of Jesus and the church. She writes, “Jesus engaged women publicly in deep theological conversation in a culture where respectable men avoided public conversations with women. . . He included women among his disciples, welcomed their friendship, forged strong bonds with them, was blessed and fortified by their spiritual ministries, and recruited them as kingdom leaders and builders.”⁸

Furthermore, it was to women that Jesus first appeared after his resurrection. Daniel Brennan says of this, “When Christ met Mary in the garden, friendship—not marriage, not family, not community, but male-female friendship—was the first relationship highlighted and attended to by the risen Christ at the dawn of the new creation according to John.”⁹ When a friend of Carolyn Custis James sighed over the fact that this debate is not going away, James said with a matter of resolve: “But in the meantime .

. . There is much work to be done. Earth is emitting a distress signal we cannot ignore. Suffering and injustice are rampant, and they are our business. God has called us. We are ready.”¹⁰ In other words, no matter where you fall on this issue, does not limit the role of women to engage in the needs of this world and the kingdom of God. Men need to champion this and women do not need to feel constrained by this.

And yet, as I read the text, there seems to be a call for men to step into this role of elder in the church. I find it to be true in a marriage. I find it to be true in a home. I find it to be true in the church. Godly male leadership is important.

Conclusion

So what do we do with this? How do we respond to this list of qualifications for elder?

1. Pray for the leaders of the church, that they would be godly examples for our church.
2. Pray that the focus of church leadership would be to care for people.
3. Examine your own life against these qualifications. We should all desire to set an example for others in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity.
4. These qualifications call for an intentional process for training elders and deacons and that will be my assignment during my sabbatical. Pray about that.
5. Pray that all of this would lead to an increased testimony for Jesus in this community. The more we multiply leaders the more we will be able to multiply churches. At the end of the day, this list of qualifications is not something we manufacture by working hard. Rather, they are formed in us as we come under the ministry of God’s Word, make time for community and relationship, rest in the grace of Jesus and the cross, and ask for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

¹John Stott *Guard the Truth* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996) 99

²Ibid., 52

³Ibid., 92

⁴Phil Taylor *Eldership Development: From Application to Affirmation* (Orlando: Floodlight Press, 2017) 19

⁵Jeramie Rinne *Church Elders* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014) 20

⁶Ibid., 24

⁷Ibid., 26

⁸Caroyln Custis James *Half The Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 167

⁹Daniel Brennan *Sacred Unions, Sacred Passions: Engaging the Mystery of Friendship Between Men and Women* (Elgin: Faith Dance, 2010) 112

¹⁰James, 172

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Looking back on your life, who are the people who set “an example” for you in your Christian life? What was it about them that impacted your life?
2. Identify an area in your life where you want to be “an example” to others. In what way do you want to be an example?
3. What is one thought or question you had from the sermon on Sunday?



Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Timothy 4:11-16. What kind of example should a leader set in the church (take note of the five categories in verse 12)? Why do you think this is important?
5. Read 1 Timothy 3:1. Why do you think church leadership is important to the health of the church? Why is it a “noble task?” What role do you “aspire” to in the church?
6. Read 1 Timothy 3:2-3. Discuss the qualifications listed here. Why is “self-control” and a “gentle” spirit important for church leaders as they seek to be an example?
7. Read 1 Timothy 3:4-5 (plus “husband of one wife” in verse 2). Why is the home life of a church leader important?
8. Read 1 Timothy 3:6-7. The devil is mentioned two times in this passage. Why does the devil go after church leaders?



Taking It Home

9. What are you learning about church leadership?
10. In light of your study, how do you want to pray for our church leaders?