

1 Timothy 3:1-7 Bible Study Guide And Commentary

Cross-References

1 Peter 5:1-5 – So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Acts 14:23 – And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 20:28 – Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

1 Timothy 5:17-19 – Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Titus 1:5-9 – This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Verse by Verse Commentary

1. The office of overseer – The words overseer, elder, and shepherd in the New Testament refer to the same office. It is a position of leadership and oversight over a local church body. The New Testament clearly lays out the method by which the local church is to be governed, and that is by a team, a plurality of elders. The idea of a single head, a dominant pastor who has all the authority is not taught in the Bible. Neither is the concept of church voting taught. God’s design for the church is clearly taught in 1 Timothy 3 and other New Testament passages as being led by a team of elders and deacons, who function as servant leaders. The elders shepherd the body and look after spiritual needs, while the deacons assist by helping with physical needs such as facilities, caring for the poor, finances, etc. (Acts 7).

2. If any aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do – A person who seeks to serve the body of Christ by being an elder is doing a good thing. The church needs faithful leaders. We could expand this to say that any believer who desires to use their gifting and experience to serve the body (1 Corinthians 12) in any role is seeking a good thing and is blessed and appreciated by God.

Note that some people in history have sought positions or leadership in the church out of ulterior motives. Sometimes these motives include gaining the respect of men, benefiting financially, or increasing one’s power or influence. But these people are not seeking the office of overseer as it is described in Scripture. They are not doing it for God’s glory, but for their own. These people will receive what God has in store for them.

The below verses set very high standards for an elder because it is of extreme importance that such a person, or any unqualified person, is not selected as an elder. When a church has unfit or selfish elders, the entire body suffers. Not only will they not be properly fed or shepherded, but the sinful model of their leaders will influence and effect the entire body.

In [Ezra 9-10 the leaders were foremost in the sin](#) of marrying pagan women. Their sins influenced many others in the nation to sin.

A church should be very careful about this process and should adhere to the high standards laid out in this chapter. A person should be recognized as an elder not for their tenor, their wealth, their age, or their popularity, but because their lifestyle conforms to the principles in this chapter.

Below we will look at many of the qualities of an elder.

3. An elder must be above reproach – This is a general character quality that covers any Paul does not mention specifically. It does not mean that an elder must be perfect. No one can attain to that. It does mean that an elder should have a good reputation. But where is the exact line for being “above reproach?” Probably the best answer is, “you will know it when you see it.” Many things not on the list could disqualify a person under this principle. Embezzling money, abusing one’s wife, or a dirty mouth would all subject a person to reproach. On the other hand, if people have good comments about the candidate and agree that he is a godly person, then he is above reproach.

4. The husband of one wife – Literally this means “a one woman, man.” There are actually two qualifications here. One is implied and the other is stated. The implied qualification is that an elder should be male. We see this throughout the chapter and the pronoun used to describe an elder is “he” in each case. In 1 Timothy 2, we saw the difference in roles (but not in value) between men and women in the local church.

The second qualification is that the man must be faithful to his spouse. Most Bible scholars agree that this does not mean an elder must be married. After all, Jesus was definitely single, and Paul probably was. It does mean that if a man has a wife, he should be faithful to her. This would prohibit a divorced and remarried man from serving in this office. It would also prohibit a man who is living in adultery or a man who practices polygamy.

In the modern age, the church is very lenient on these standards. As a result, the holy sanctity of marriage is not being respected. Divorce and remarriage is rampant in the evangelical church and allowing men who engage in this practice to serve as leaders only reinforces this problem, while giving a bad model. It gives an implied permission to anyone in the church that this lifestyle is OK.

5. Temperate – An elder should not be prone to wild mood swings or excesses. He should be stable, calm, and cool headed. He should have a balanced life and not follow extreme practices.

6. Prudent – Prudence is a very important quality for leaders. A person who is prudent will not make quick decisions. He will get more counsel and input from the team of leaders or others before taking action. Instead of acting after he hears one person, he will patiently wait to gather all the facts and listen to both sides of a story before rendering a judgment (Proverbs 18:17). A sound and prayerful decision is better than a quick decision. If an elder fails to act prudently, his rash decisions can be very destructive for the church.

An example of a lack of prudence is seen in Judges 11:21-40 when Jephthah made a foolish vow without thinking through the consequences. On the other hand, [Daniel](#) prudently got all of the facts straight by asking questions before taking action when King Nebuchadnezzar was about to kill all the wise men in the kingdom (Daniel 2:14-16.)

7. Hospitable – A leader should care for the sheep. It is not just a job or a title. His service does not begin at 10 AM and end at 11:30 AM each Sunday. You can get a glimpse into the heart motivation of a person by noticing if he is hospitable. If he routinely opens his home to others, then it shows a kind, caring, and compassionate heart. It shows that he is a people person.

At the same time, it allows him to minister far more effectively because he is sharing his actual life (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Hospitality indicates a time investment which is above and beyond a responsibility. A church should seek out leaders who care for the flock in this kind of self-sacrificing way.

But if a person views his home as private and keeps others away, you may rightly wonder why. At the very least it can hint that the person is not open or caring. And it could hint at worse problems at home, which are kept hidden.

8. Able to teach – An elder is not required to be a gifted speaker. In a team of elders, certainly it is beneficial if some have the teaching gift, but it is not required for each elder. And a person may also have the gift of teaching and not be qualified in other areas.

However, elders should be “able to teach.” They should be able to open up the Bible and explain it in a clear and logical way. This will enable them to answer questions or refute false teaching. Therefore elders should be students of the Word and able to “accurately divide the Word of Truth.”

9. Not addicted to wine – Drinking a bit in moderation is acceptable. Getting drunk or allowing wine/alcohol control is not.

10. Gentle – A big head often comes with authority.

On several occasions, I have taken my family to a water park to go swimming. And when we were splashing together in a wave pool or engaging in another innocuous activity, security guards would sometimes harshly demand us to stop. The premise is very simple. If someone has a whistle, they want to blow it. A whistle gives them a feeling of power, and power is to be used, right?

God does not want His leaders of the church acting in this way. Authority is not to be abused. A leader does not lead by yelling and constantly giving commands. Jesus taught another way, a way that contrasted with the pushy aggressiveness of worldly leaders. He taught us that leaders should lead by serving (Matthew 20:25-28.)

One important aspect of servant leadership is gentleness. An elder must be able to respond to annoying people or chaotic situations with a firm, gentleness. There will be times when people complain or want to stir up a fight. But a gentle answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1.)

11. Free from the love of money – The love of money has attracted many unfit men into ministry. Indeed for centuries being a pastor/vicar/priest was considered a stable job. Even unbelievers or believers who were not called would go in to ministry because of the pay.

Television evangelists who desperately seek donations are a plague upon the church. It is perfectly acceptable for a person who serves the church to receive compensation for his time. This can enable a person to have much more time serving God than if he had to make a secular income. But, loving money or serving for money is a snare.

How can you tell if a minister is serving because of a love of money? Are there any signs?

12. Manage one's household well – Jesus said in Luke 16:10, “If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones.” Managing one's household is of course not a little thing, but it is “littler” than managing a church. If a man is faithful in managing his own household well, it is a good sign that he will also be a good shepherd of a church. On the other hand, if his kids are out of control brats, then he should not be entrusted with taking care of spiritual kids.

You can get a lot of insight into a person in how he treats his family. Is he harsh with his wife? Does he show her love and respect? Is he patient with his children? Does he yell at them loudly in public? Does he spoil them? Does he allow them to do wrong without any consequences? Do his children like him or are they afraid of him?

Some ministers have neglected their families for the sake of serving the church. They are too busy doing ministry to minister to their own families. This passage is clear that this is wrong. The family is first.

What about a man whose grown up children are prodigals? When kids are living with their parents, their behavior to some extent is the parents' responsibility. As a teacher I sometimes see young children of 3-5 years of age who routinely hit, scratch, push, or bite other children. Their parents are responsible for this. Wise parents will deal with their children so that this doesn't happen as a habit (all children are sinners and even the best parents cannot prevent it happening sometimes.)

But it is entirely possible that a parent can pray for, teach, model for, and do everything else in their power to raise up their child to know God and when the child grows up he may still reject God and rebel against Him. A man is not unqualified as an elder purely because a grown up child is not walking with God. He is unqualified if his children in his home are generally rebellious or out of control.

13. Not a new convert – If a person is “promoted” too quickly, he could become prideful. At the same time, he will be a target of Satan and perhaps not be ready to face the temptations about to be thrown his way. And he may not be experienced enough to deal with various problems. Rather a believer should be given adequate time to grow and mature before being appointed to this office.

Note that “new” is a relative term. In some places when a church just begins every single person may be “new.” In these cases it may be acceptable for a younger believer to serve as an elder or deacon than in a more established church.

14. Have a good reputation – This is another “catch all” similar to the one at the beginning about being “above reproach.” It is possible that a person could be saintly in church, but how they act at work or in their sports' league may tell another story. If a person's co-workers have a negative opinion of him then it is a sign that he is living two lives and he should not be an elder.

Discussion Questions

- Based on verse 1, how should the church view those who aspire to the office of overseer?
- What is the office of overseer?
- What other words are used for this same role in the New Testament (elder, shepherd?)
- Do you think this is an exhaustive list of requirements? Why or why not?
- Why does Paul set such high standards for a person to have this role?
- What does it mean to be above reproach?
- Is a divorced man disqualified?
- What does temperate mean?
- What would a person look like who is prudent? What kind of things will a prudent person do?
- What does hospitality look like?
- Must an overseer have the gift of teaching? What does the phrase “able to teach” mean?

- Why is it important for a leader to be gentle? What is the opposite quality?
- Why is observing how a man manages his household important when considering whether or not to make him an overseer?
- Does this disqualify a man with grown up unsaved or rebellious children?
- Why is “with all dignity” emphasized in verse 4?
- What is a “new” convert? Saved for six months? Three years? Twenty years? Or some other standard?
- What is the danger of “promoting” a new believer into leadership too quickly?

Application: How can you apply today’s passage? Most of us will never be elders, but this passage is still very applicable. Firstly, it is important that we understand what God expects of godly leaders and encourage our own churches to respect these standards. Secondly, we see that this is God’s ideal for each person. We should all strive to live up to these standards. Choose one area discussed today you think you are weak in and write down how you think God would like you to improve in this area this week.