

1 Timothy 3

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Introduction.

As we look at the last writings of Paul's life, the books like 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, we see that the nature of his epistles has shifted somewhat since his earliest letters. No longer is Paul dealing with churches like the church in Corinth. He's not concerned that the church in Ephesus, with which Timothy is working, has to get rid of a man who has his father's wife or deal with any other such gross immorality. By this point, the church in Ephesus has existed for quite some time, its members have grown as Christians, and they're largely past problems like that.

Instead, Paul is now concerned with shaping an overall philosophy about the Christian's position in the world and in the church. That's why in the last chapter, we saw a lengthy discussion of the differing roles of men and women. Throughout the rest of the book, we're going to see Paul address many topics similar to that. He's saying to Timothy and to us, "OK, you're a mature Christian; here's how you need to think and who you need to be."

Nowhere is this more apparent than in tonight's subject, the third chapter of 1 Timothy. Almost from beginning to end, Paul is instructing the leaders of the church in what their roles ought to be. This too fits with the idea that Paul is writing to a more mature church. Neither in 1 Corinthians nor in 2 Corinthians does the idea of elders even come up. Why? Most likely because there wasn't anyone in that congregation who was qualified to serve, and Paul had a whole bunch of fires to fight before he could even think about teaching them what they needed to know later on.

The situation of the Ephesian church was very different. Even as far back as Acts 20, they had elders, men who were probably appointed by Paul directly, and now Paul is describing the criteria he used to Timothy so that he can continue to add to their number. These church offices are equally important today. Let's look at them in 1 Timothy 3.

Elders.

Paul begins this discussion with the most rigorous set of qualifications, the qualifications for elders. In this book, they appear in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Let's break this down, and start by looking at what it tells us about the family relationships of the elder. First, this says that any man qualified for the office must be the husband of one wife. Because Koine Greek doesn't have words for "husband and "wife", the Greek text literally says that he must be a one-woman man. As with all the other qualifications of the elder, this one is primarily concerned with character. The relationship that a man has with his wife is one of the most revealing relationships in his whole life. Is he devoted to her and her only, or does he have a wandering eye that leads him to be interested in other women? There are countless men who are legally married who illustrate by their shameless behavior that they are not one-women men. Likewise, there are widowers who are not presently married whose past record of marriage testifies to their present high character. In this, as in all things pertaining to godliness, we must not be concerned with the outward appearance, but with the inward person of the heart.

Likewise, this text tells us that the elder must manage his own household well and keep his children under control. Notice that Paul does not say the same thing here as in his letter to Titus. This qualification is comparatively simple. If a man still has his children living in his household, they have to obey him and respect his authority. The reasoning is obvious: a man who isn't respected by his own children won't be respected by the church either.

In addition to having these family traits, an elder must also have several character attributes. He must be blameless, a man who has no conspicuous flaws in his character. He must be temperate, able to maintain his self-control even in the most trying situations. He must be sober-minded, able to consider his work seriously and thoughtfully. He must be of good behavior, a man who lives a quiet, respectable life. He must be hospitable, willing to open his home to other Christians and even strangers. He must be able to teach, a man who can explain the word to somebody else and show them what God wants them to do. He must be gentle, a man who knows how to keep his strength of character under control. Finally, he has to be a man of good reputation among outsiders, which is to say that even the non-Christians who deal with him are aware of his moral uprightness and are willing to speak well of it.

As though these things weren't enough, this text also lists several character attributes that the elder must not possess. First, he cannot be given to wine, someone who is a drunkard or an addict. From this, it's fair to say that a man of elder caliber isn't addicted to anything else either, whatever it may be. Likewise, he can't be violent. In our time, most Christian men don't go around beating other people up, but we can legitimately extend this to say that the would-be elder can't have a bullying personality or even be given to outbursts of wrath. He also can't be quarrelsome. Some men have a knack for picking fights just by walking into a room, and they enjoy disputes and contentions. An elder, though, must be a peacemaker rather than a quarrel-starter. He also can't be covetous. Some men love money and will do anything to get it, whether it ruins their families or even breaks the law. Such men should never become elders. Finally, the elder can't be

a new convert. He has to be someone who has been in the faith for a number of years, so that he understands that his office is an opportunity to be humble and serve, not to be puffed up and proud.

This is an intimidating list of character attributes, and it should lead us to two things. First, we should be thankful for the two elders that we have here. Joe and John do meet these qualifications, and in all the time I've known them, they've given exemplary service to the kingdom. We should make sure that we let them know how much we appreciate it. Second, for the men of the congregation, this list gives us an opportunity for self-evaluation. No matter how many elders a church has, it can always use more. I'm certain that every man here can look at this list and see where he needs to grow. Just the process of writing this sermon has really led me to examine myself about some of these things. Let's be honest about what we learn from these qualifications and temper our character so that we too can become qualified to serve.

Deacons and Wives.

Next, Paul addresses the less rigorous qualifications for deacons and the wives of church leaders. These appear in 1 Timothy 8-13. Unlike the qualifications for elders, these are not repeated in Titus. Let's start by looking at deacons. Just like elders, deacons have to be the husbands of one wife, and they also have to keep their children and their households under control. All of the things that we just said about elders in this apply to deacons too. However, from there, the lists diverge somewhat. Once again, there are several things that the deacon must be. He must be a man of dignity, possessing the personal presence and gravity that keeps others from dismissing him as immature or a lightweight. He must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. In other words, he has to know what the Bible teaches about his conduct and his relationship with God, and he must not be aware of anything in himself that would lead God to condemn him. Finally, the deacon must be blameless when tested. He has to be a man who has already performed the tasks that the church has set before him in a way that is beyond reproach. Only then is he ready to be a servant.

Once more, there are several traits that a man cannot possess if he wishes to become a deacon. First, he can't be double-tongued. Some men are like mirrors. They don't have the character to take a stand for themselves, so they just do their best to reflect the opinions and desires of those they're talking to. They're perfectly willing to rip a brother up one side and down the other when he's not around, but they say nothing but soft words to him when he's present. That's being double-tongued, and it's what a deacon cannot be. Also, just like elders, deacons can't be addicted to wine or anything else, and they can't be lovers of money. To put it another way, there should be nothing in their life that Satan has control of, nothing that would lead them to put it before God. The Lord wants His servants to serve Him first.

From there, we shift our attention to the shortest of these three lists, the list of qualifications for the wives of church leaders. Even if a man meets every one of the qualifications for elder or deacon with flying colors, he can still be disqualified by the flawed character of his wife. First, she must be a woman of dignity, someone whom others respect. Second, she must not be a slanderer. We've all known women who take great pleasure in being malicious gossips. They always want to be the first to repeat some juicy rumor, whether it's true or not. The church leader's wife, though, cannot enjoy the taste of gossip on her tongue. Likewise, she has to be sober-minded, not flighty or unreliable. Finally, she has to be faithful in all things, faithful to her life responsibilities, faithful to her husband, and faithful to her God.

Once again, these two lists should lead us to appreciate the deacons and leaders' wives that we have here, and they should also lead us to examine ourselves if we don't fit in either group. These are character traits that we should be working on anyway, but once we recognize that we have to form them if we want to be of greater service to God, that should really inspire our dedication. The church cannot have too many people who are qualified to serve and lead.

The Church.

Paul concludes this chapter with a brief discussion of the church. This appears in 1 Timothy 3:14-16. In this portion, Paul gives us some insight into his reasons for writing. He wants to be in Ephesus with Timothy to help him put the church there in order. However, if he isn't able to come, he wants to tell Timothy these things so that Timothy will know how the church ought to be ordered. This is important for several reasons. First, it gives us the context for everything Paul says in the entire book. When he says that women ought not teach or exercise authority over men, for example, that's not generally. That's just in the church. Second, it tells us that we today can use Paul's writing to order our churches. Just like two homebuilders following the same blueprint will produce identical houses, if we follow this divinely inspired blueprint, we will produce a church that is identical to the church of the first century, a church that practices the truth and is able to teach it to others. If we don't follow the blueprint, we won't have God's church at all.

Of course, the ability of the church to support the truth is meaningless without the truth of the gospel itself, which Paul describes in the last verse of this chapter in what may be an early Christian hymn. The system of faith we serve is not a myth. The Son of God did indeed come in the flesh. His divinity was attested both by the works of the Holy Spirit and by those who followed Him, which is enough to lead us to believe in His glorious ascension and return.