

The Position of a Bishop

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Introduction.

- A. The last time I preached on Sunday night, we began a discussion about the leadership that this congregation requires in order to be as effective in the Lord's work as possible. We agreed that we have an immediate need for deacons, and we looked at the ways in which our men need to prepare themselves to become deacons.
- B. As important as the diaconship is, though, we also need to recognize that it is not the only church office for which the Christian man needs to prepare himself. I refer, of course, to the office of elder. There are many ways that the Bible describes this office. In different translations and in different places, the elder may also be called a presbyter, a bishop, an overseer, a pastor, and a shepherd. We need to remember not to be confused by these different names, and recognize that they are all the same office with the same requirements.
- C. In this congregation, we are truly blessed to have two men who are able to fill this office for us. As the preacher especially, I am daily thankful that our elders do their jobs so capably because that leaves me free to do mine. However, friends, as wonderful as they are, we need to recognize that Joe and John are not going to be eternal overseers. Unless the Lord comes back first, both of them will cease to be elders. Unless the men here prepare themselves for that day, at that point, this congregation will cease to have the leadership that God has provided for His church. Friends, I do not make the point too strongly when I say that it is a disaster for a congregation to lose its eldership. It sets the work of that church back by years, perhaps even decades.
- D. We cannot allow that disaster to happen in our congregation. As men, we have a solemn responsibility to equip ourselves to take on the work of an elder. Once again, this is not something we can do for ourselves by snapping our fingers. If a man determines to take on the work of a shepherd, it will take him literally decades to prepare himself for the task. I hope and pray that our current elders will remain in office for as long as possible, but as men, we need to use all the time we have been given to ready ourselves to replace them. To this end, let's turn to the requirements of the office listed in 1 Timothy 3, to discern how we can order our hearts and our lives to fit ourselves for the position of a bishop.

I. Blameless.

- A. Specifically, we find these qualifications listed in the first seven verses of 1 Timothy 3, but these are some of the densest verses in the Bible, so today, we're only going to look at 1 Timothy 3:1-3. First and foremost, this text tells us that the elder must be **blameless**. Just as was true of deacons, the first qualification on this list is basically a subject heading. It sums up in one word everything that the elder must be. This is something of a difficult word to unravel. The Greek word that is here translated "blameless" is only used two other times in the entire Bible, and neither time is particularly illuminating, so comparing contexts isn't much of a help.
- B. Instead, we have to turn to the definition of the word itself. It literally means "not to be laid hold of," as in someone whom the authorities have no reason to arrest. It's someone who hasn't given the police any reason to bother them. By extension, when this word is being used in a moral sense, the blameless man is a man whom no one can charge with wrongdoing. The blameless man has nothing in his spiritual life to criticize.
- C. This tells us that the man who wants to be an elder has to be an all-round spiritual powerhouse. It reminds me a little bit of the Olympic event of the decathlon. In the decathlon, the competitors go through a series of ten tests of their athletic skill. The one who wins the decathlon is the one who has the highest average score through all ten events. In the same way, the elder must be a spiritual decathlete. He has to be good at everything a Christian does, so that he is without blame. If we want to be elders, that has to be our goal.
- D. Before we go on, though, there's one more thing we need to mention. When a congregation assesses an elder's blamelessness, they must be absolutely honest about what they see. If a so-called Christian determines beforehand that he doesn't want to see some man appointed elder, he can always come up with some pretext for arguing against that man. That's not what the Bible calls us to. We need to look for elders, not for Jesus Part Two. This standard is a high one, but it is a standard that good men can and do meet.

II. Temperate, Sober-Minded, Respectable.

- A. The first virtue that is a part of this standard, the first event of the spiritual decathlon, if you will, is the idea of being **temperate**. In our language, this word has two related meanings. First, a temperate man is one who doesn't consume alcohol, as in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, one of the organizations behind Prohibition. A temperate man is also one who does not engage in excessive displays of emotion and who remains free from confusion. Interestingly, both of these meanings are involved in the Greek word too.
- B. In both of these cases, the ideal is one of being clear-headed. The elder must be a man who can keep his head while everyone around him is losing theirs. We develop this trait as we develop wisdom. Instead of reacting irrationally to some situation, we learn to use self-control, even in times of crisis.

- C. Similarly, the elder must also be **sober-minded**, which is the next event in the decathlon of blamelessness. Just as temperance tells the elder what not to do, sober-mindedness tells him what he IS to do. Sober-mindedness is what causes the elder to be reasonable and sensible. It leads him to make good decisions.
- D. We see an example of the way these two virtues combine in the story of Solomon's wisdom in 1 Kings 3. Two women come before Solomon with one child, each claiming the child for her own. We see Solomon's response in 1 Kings 3:23-27. Remember, folks, all this takes place long before DNA testing. The right answer here is not obvious, but Solomon is temperate and refuses to panic. Instead, he soberly considers the situation, realizes that he can use the genuine love of the true mother to resolve the case, and devises a scheme in which only the true mother will express her love. He uses good judgment, based on temperance and sobriety.
- E. Next, Paul informs us that the elder must be **of good behavior**. I don't normally tell you what the Greek words involved in Scripture are, but this one is cool. Ever heard the universe—stars, planets, and so forth—described as the cosmos? That word cosmos comes from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means "order." We use it to describe outer space because of the order of God that is so evident in the movement of heavenly bodies. The word translated "of good behavior" here is the adjectival form of that Greek word *kosmos*. Basically, just like the heavens display the order and beauty imposed on them by the will of God, so too the life of the would-be elder needs to display the order and beauty imposed on him by the word of God.
- F. This kind of order, this kind of smooth functioning as a Christian, is the result of long dedication to doing what is right. If we want to make this evident in our lives, we need to make sure that our attitude toward Scripture is right. Too often, Christians treat the Bible as something that isn't a part of them, as this alien force that tries to make them do things that they don't want to do. If we wish to become elders, we need to make the Bible ours. We have to internalize its rules for our lives, so that we abide by them naturally.

III. Hospitable, Able to Teach, Not Given to Wine, Not Violent.

- A. The fourth area in which an elder must be blameless is in being **hospitable**. The Greek here simply means "loving strangers." To understand what this means, we need to understand that in the ancient world, there were no hotels for travelers to stay at. If they were passing through a city, they had to find some normal inhabitant of the city who would give them food and shelter for the night. The hospitable man was one who would take these strangers in and care for them, even though he'd never seen them before.
- B. This doesn't happen a whole lot anymore, mainly because in our culture, travelers would rather go to the Motel 6 than knock on doors looking for an impromptu host. However, this concept is still important for would-be elders because what's at the heart of it is the idea of caring for those who don't have someone to care for them. For example, my parents live in a college town. Every fall, there's an influx of new students at the church who have just begun studies at the university. They're away from home for the first time, and the only people they know in town are their drunken, immoral classmates. What my parents do in response is host half a dozen or so students every Sunday for Sunday dinner. This gives the students one good meal a week, which they BADLY need, and it also shows them that someone at church cares about them. It's Bible hospitality.
- C. Fifth, the would-be elder must demonstrate his fitness by being **able to teach**. This aptitude in teaching can reveal itself in any number of areas. The elder who excels in personal Bible studies is just as able to teach as the elder who can preach a fiery sermon, and both are qualified for the eldership. In order to fulfill this requirement, however, we must not only have the capacity for teaching, but we must also have the knowledge of what to teach. We need to know the word of God first before we can present it effectively to others.
- D. Next, Paul reveals that the elder must **not be given to wine**. This is a similar idea to what Paul says of deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8, which we discussed at some length several weeks ago, so we don't need to go into depth in exploring this topic. "Wine" is just an example here. If we want to be elders, we cannot be "given"—the sense here is of being excessively given—to anything. There must be nothing in our lives that prevents us from seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness first. Anything that does is something we need to put away before we can become qualified for the office of elder. Only then can we be without blame.
- E. The last event in this decathlon of blamelessness that we're going to look at this evening is the idea of being **not violent**. As has been true of many things in this list, this is both a literal and a figurative attribute. Obviously, the elder cannot be someone who loves to engage in physical violence. This is not as goofy as it sounds, even in this day and age. I know a brother who grew up in the Ozarks of Missouri, and he told me about a custom in the area called "Scripture-whipping." Essentially, whenever the preacher said something that stepped on the toes of a man in the congregation, the man would confront the preacher in the parking lot, tell him, "Preacher, you Scripture-whipped me," and proceed to take out his frustration by trying to beat up the preacher. To be quite honest, I'm glad that this is not a prevailing custom in northern Illinois.
- F. It is just as important, though, for the aspiring elder to not be figuratively violent either. If we want to be elders, we cannot be men who delight in confrontation, in intimidation, and in forcing our opinions on anyone with whom we disagree. We need to strive to be mild-mannered and peaceable. Consider Paul's admonition in Romans 12:18. There are times when conflict is necessary, but we should not seek it.

Conclusion. If you've been falling short of God's standards for your life, repent and return to Him.