

The Elder's Character and Conduct

1 Timothy Series

By Dr. David P. Murray

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: 1 Timothy 3:1-7
Preached on: Sunday, September 14, 2014

Free Reformed Church of Grand Rapids
950 Ball Ave NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Website: www.frcgr.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/frcgr

Turn again with me to 1 Timothy 3. We're going to look at verses 1 through 7. Let's just read together verse 1, "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desires a good work." There is really no need for me to think up an introduction to these verses this evening because this passage has its own incomparable introduction. These words, "This is a true saying," is actually the same phrase we find in chapter 1, verse 15, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." This is a faithful saying. That itself, surely, is a sufficient hook, a sufficient enticement to give attention to these words.

Notice, first of all, the vital importance of these verses from that saying, "This is a faithful saying." There are five of these faithful sayings in Timothy. This is the second of them. And as we saw from what I just read, the first one introduces, maybe we can call it, the most amazing statement in the Bible. "This is a faithful saying, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Obviously that introduction is meant to draw concentration and attention to these amazing words and therefore it's no coincidence that these words of verses 1 to 7 in chapter 3 are introduced in a similar way, in an identical way. This too is amazing. This too is worth total concentration and focus.

People might look at chapter 1, verse 15, "a faithful saying," and say, "Well, you know, that's about soteriology. It's about the doctrine of salvation. It's about how a soul is saved and, well, of course that's fascinating." Then maybe come to chapter 3 and say, "Well, this is ecclesiology. This is about doctrine of the church. This is about how a church organizes itself. This is about office bearing, elders. It's not so interesting, is it?" And I believe that's why Paul is inspired to introduce these words with, "This is a true saying." He's saying, "This is equally important. This should not be belittled. It should not be disregarded. It should not be relegated but it should be held equally importantly."

Why is that? Well, it's because church history shows that if we get our ecclesiology wrong, our soteriology will also eventually go wrong. If we go wrong in this area of how the church is to be run and organized and led, then ultimately we will lose the other faithful saying as well. That's how vital and important this is. As the leadership of a church goes, so the church goes too. You lose this faithful saying, chapter 3, verse 1,

you'll lose the other faithful saying in chapter 1, verse 15. Leaders replicate themselves in the church therefore these words are of vital importance to all of us.

If you read any books on eldership, often they'll begin with an apology, a defense, an argument of why you should read this book. Obviously writers realize this is not a subject that's naturally interesting to most people. One book I read gave these reasons why to give attention to this. 1. To restore eldership to its biblical position in the church. To avoid clericalism. To avoid hierarchies developing. Secondly, to challenge false traditions, recognizing that over time biblical imperatives and instruction about practical matters like this can be, as it were, pushed out by human traditions, often going in the opposite direction. The third reason is to revitalize present elders. The fourth reason is to challenge future elders. And the fifth reason was to encourage submission to such elders as are described in these verses. So all-in-all I think a number of reasons there to see how important, how vital these verses are.

Secondly, I want to note the huge responsibility in these verses. The huge responsibility. "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop." Let's just remember how we've got to chapter 3 over recent weeks and months. Remember in chapter 2, Paul has started to speak about how a church should be ordered and especially towards the end of chapter 2, about who should and shouldn't lead in the church and one of the prohibitions was on women leading over men. But it really leaves the question hanging: well, then who is to lead? What are these leaders to be like? And what are these leaders to do?

Well, this evening our focus is really upon what these leaders should be like, their character and conduct. In a future sermon, we hope to look at the particular duties of the elder in a congregation like this, but let's just pause for a moment and just give a little attention to what the elder is to do and it's really summed up in this word translated in our version as "a bishop." Now, maybe that conjures up ideas of men in colored silky vestments with tall strange hats holding crooks and things like that, if you're any familiar with Anglicanism and their use of bishops. That's not what's in view here obviously. The word underlying this word is simply the word for overseer. An overseer. And Paul uses that word frequently but also interchangeably. He speaks of this office in terms of overseeing, in terms of shepherding, in terms of pastoring, in terms of being an elder. All these terms are the same person, the same office. In other words, Paul is saying a bishop is an overseer, is a pastor, is an elder, is a shepherd. In other words, he's saying every elder is a pastor. Every elder is a shepherd. Every elder is an overseer. Every elder, if you want to use the old word, is a bishop.

Now, they may function in the office of overseer differently and we'll notice that, especially when we get to 1 Timothy 5, but their authority is equal. There is no hierarchy. There is not like the call to pastor like myself who preaches, it's not as if I should have any more authority than the other elders in this congregation. No. There is to be a plurality of elders and a parity, an equality in terms of authority although we may exercise that function differently depending on our particular callings and gifts.

But this word "overseer" involves observing. Elders need big eyes and ears in a congregation. It's literally, the word is "to overlook." It's often visiting someone almost in a watchtower looking down upon the congregation with care and concern, observing character, observing conduct, watching out for dangers, for backsliding, for slippage, continually thinking, "How can I help these sheep? How can I guard them better? How can I guide them better? How can I feed them better? How can I lead them better?" This is a full-time office. It's not something that's just done on a Sunday. This is something that is characteristic of these men every day of the week. They are in office 24/7. So this is a huge responsibility. It's massive. It's no small deal. You look at all that's involved and in a future sermon I hope to do that more, you're just saying, "Who is sufficient for these things?" It's a huge responsibility.

Notice thirdly here, the powerful desire in these verses. The power desire. It says, "If a man desire the office of an overseer, and elder." Now, if you didn't know the rest of the sentence, how would you maybe complete it? "If a man desires to be an elder, if he has an ambition to be an elder," I think you might complete it by saying, "Well, that's him disqualified. Well, that's him ruled himself out. Surely if somebody actually wants this office, then they are automatically excluded from it." But a part of that is we see people seeking political office for selfish reasons often, if not almost always. We see the way the selfishness results in abuse of such office. In fact, in the early days of America, to actually desire to be President was to be excluded. People campaigned for President by seeking to prove how little they wanted to be President. And sometimes we might think, well, that should be the right attitude in the church. It should only be men who are so self-effacing and reluctant and hesitant that they would never ever desire to be an elder. But that's not how Paul completes the sentence, is it? He says, "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desires a good work." And this is no small desire. It's literally, "If a man stretch for the office of a bishop. If he reach out." This involves a striving, an aiming. It's intentional and it's deliberate.

This is therefore a powerful desire and yet Paul says it's a commendable desire. "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desires a good work." Now, of course, it's ruling out those who want such office for purely selfish aims, just out of ego or a lust for power. Of course that's ruled out here. Jeremiah 45:5 says, "Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not." But here Paul is envisaging a seeking of great things, not for self but for the service of others and Paul says here that's a good desire. That's a godly desire.

So we should be looking for men who want to be elders, who look on the vital importance of this task and see the huge responsibility involved and yet say, "I want this in order to serve my God and his people best." He desires a good work. In fact, you could say if a man does not want to be an elder, he's excluded from that work. He's not called to that office.

So, men, I challenge you on the basis of God's word to cultivate this holy ambition; to ask God to give you this holy desire. And remember in these days, this is part of the reason Paul says this. To actually take office in the church in these days was to more or less guarantee suffering and that's one of the reasons why he says it's such a good desire, so

commendable, because it's saying, "I'm willing to sacrifice. I'm willing to give up." We don't yet have such circumstance in our nation but, still, it does require sacrifice. It does require giving up spare time, energy, talent, self-interest. It's a powerful and a pure desire.

Listen to this quote from Rick Phillips, his commentary on these verses. He says this, "Too many young men desire to become ministers. Too few aspire to be elders." Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had that greater aspiration? And an aspiration that leads to training, learning? You want a job down the road, you get qualified, don't you? You start learning. You start reading. You start studying. You double effort. You dedicate yourself. This really, again, is implied in these verses. You may think, "Well, I'm so young," but not too young to start, to commit yourself to the study of God's word, to be a man of prayer, to ask God for discernment, to study especially eldership and seek to be ready should the call one day come. A powerful and a pure desire in these verses.

Fourthly, notice the worthy work in these verses. He says, "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desires a good work." There is work, sure. There's work, the sweat. There is effort. There is toil. There is stress. There is strain involved in being an elder but the apostle says it's good and it's literally beautiful work or elegant work, admirable work. To see it as this, not something to be avoided or endured or just suffered or barely tolerated but something that God says here in his word is beautiful and admirable. It's worthy work.

Fifthly, notice here the uncompromising imperative in these verses. The uncompromising imperative. We've said, 1. The vital importance of these verses. 2. The huge responsibility. 3. The powerful desire. 4. The worthy work. Given all that, given the importance of this work, given the responsibility of this work, given the worth of this work, given the potential of this work, there are rigorous qualifications set down here for such office.

Notice it says, "A bishop," an overseer, an elder, a pastor, "then must be." It doesn't say, you know, ideally we would like this, this and this, or you know, in a perfect world we would like an elder to be like this. It doesn't say if possible. No, it doesn't say that. There is an uncompromising imperative. It's blatant. It's clear. It's undebatable. A bishop then, must be. There is an uncompromising standard involved here and the implication of this is if these qualifications, which we're about to look at, are not there, then an elder is not there. It's not, "Well, we'll make do with something less until something better comes along." No, we wait until the better comes along. If we really believe, this is so important, this is such a huge responsibility, that this is such a good work, a worthy work, then we will hear this "must" and say, "Well, we're not passing this. We're not just skipping over this. We're not going to take second best."

Let's look then, sixthly, at the beautiful self-control in these verses. It begins by saying, "he must be blameless." And it's interesting, it's really a bit of a catch-all. There are two sort of bookends to this list that we're about to look at. It begins verse 2, "must be blameless," and then it ends, verse 7, "he must," again notice that, "he must have a good report of them with are without." Just a catch-all. It begins and ends with this.

Blameless does not mean perfect. Literally it means uncatchable or unassailable. It means that, sure, people will throw accusations at an elder, especially from outside the church, maybe also inside the church, but the accusations don't stick. They don't catch onto him. He has such character and conduct in the eyes of the congregation that when things are thrown at him, he's like Teflon, it just falls off him.

We'll come back to this, the need for this good testimony both within and outside the church but what I want you to focus on here is the self-control, the self-discipline that's really at the root of just about every qualification here. When I say self-control, self-discipline, I don't mean somebody who is doing this in their own strength, by their own power, with their own will and resolution. No, it's Spirit-given self-control, Spirit-given self-discipline that is manifested in a number of different areas.

Notice, first of all, it's manifested in sexual matters. It says he is "the husband of one wife," and it's literally a one-woman man. This is somebody who is faithful in his relationships with women. He has one wife at a time. It's not saying an elder cannot be biblically divorced and remarried and have office. It's not saying that. It's saying that he is faithful in his relationship with his wife. He's a one-woman man. Self-controlled in sexual matters. 2. Self-controlled in his behavior. In general, he is to be "vigilant" or temperate. It means restrained or moderate. Not given to excess. Well-balanced. He's also self-controlled in his thinking. Not just in his actions but in his mental processes. You look at that next word "sober" or sober-minded, it may be translated. He's not rash. He's cautious. He's clear-headed. Self-controlled in his thinking. Self-controlled also with regards to money. You'll notice that in verse 3 it speaks of him not being "greedy of filthy lucre, not covetous." The way he spends and saves his money is disciplined and self-controlled. He is self-controlled in his use of addictive substances. Notice that it says here that he is, "Not given to wine," or any other kind of addictive substance. And he's self-controlled in situations of conflict. It says here he's "not a brawler, he's patient." He's not "a striker." He is gentle.

So you see here this person has been looked at and what is to characterize him is beautiful self-control. This is somebody who with the Holy Spirit's work in him has subdued his passions and is living in a beautifully self-disciplined way. He doesn't need external forces. He doesn't need people to be watching and judging. He doesn't need the threat of punishment or laws. This is a control that comes from within, that is personal and it's beautiful, really, when you see it.

Then, seventhly, notice here the useful service. We've looked at character but what about what he does. Okay, he doesn't do this and he doesn't that and he doesn't do the next thing but what does he actually do? Again, in a future sermon we'll try and gather together the Bible's teaching on this from various places but there are two emphases in this chapter. The first is that he's hospitable. He's hospitable. "He is given hospitality." He's warm and welcoming to others. He's a friend of strangers. He has people in his own home for dinner, for supper, for fellowship. He is seeking to build relationships, not just in church on Sunday but through the week as well. He is hospitable.

Secondly, he's able to teach or as it's put here, "apt to teach." This really is speaking of somebody who is able to communicate the teaching of the Bible. It's not necessarily saying you've got to be a preacher but in formal or informal settings, this person should have an ability to communicate an appropriate amount of information in appropriate ways appropriate to the audience at appropriate times. Teachability. Hospitality and teachability. A useful service in these verses. The positive service in these verses.

Then notice, eighthly, the testing ground in these verses. Verse 4, "One that rules well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)" Paul is saying here there are parallels between a man's house and God's house, between a man's family and God's family, and he's saying you can tell how a man will be in God's house, in God's family, by how he is in his house, in his family. He's saying this is a man who when you go into his own family, he rules well.

"Having his children in subjection with all gravity. (For if a man know not how to rule his own house," the logic is impeccable, isn't it? If you can't do it in the lower place, you're never going to be able to do it in the greater place." It's interesting too, the word here for "take care" is a pastoral word that's not in visiting somebody who rules with a rod of iron and has his children, yes, in subjection but through fear and intimidation. Notice it's somebody who rules well, who rules winningly, who rules persuasively, who rules out of a care and concern for the children of his own home. This is a testing ground. This is where we look when we are trying to decide if a man is suitable for office, where God tests him.

But notice, ninthly, the fearful danger in these verses. The fearful danger. Verse 6, "Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil." Well, if you didn't know already, you know now in verse 6, choosing elders is a serious business with serious consequences if we get it wrong. Serious consequences for the church and serious consequences for the person chosen. Paul just gives us one scenario here. Here is somebody who he describes as a novice, a new convert. It's not necessarily saying a young person. It might be an older person too. It's more speaking about spiritual maturity. You can have a spiritually mature young person. You can have a spiritually immature older person. It's not necessarily age but obviously in most normal circumstances, age does come into it with the benefit of experience in life.

But here he paints a situation where this novice, this new convert, here is someone who has shown a lot of promise, who has not long been converted, and yet seemed to have grown very rapidly in knowledge and maybe spiritual liveliness and the attention of the church is focused on him and people begin to think, "Well, wouldn't this be a wonderful young man to bring into office." So he's put into office and what happens? He's not only lifted into this office, he's lifted up with pride and the lifting up with pride results in a fall into the condemnation of the devil. It's interesting "lifted up with pride" literally means be clouded with vanity or we might say filled with hot air. It's somebody who elects this

election almost, as it were, pump them up with vanity and pride and conceit and it's a spiritual disaster zone.

It's similar to what happened to the devil when he aspired to office that was not his due and his right and God punished the devil by casting him down, by condemning him. He's saying this is a possibility if we get this wrong. You don't do the novice, the new convert, the untested Christian any favors by elevating them into office, instead you expose them to this dreadful possibility of falling into the condemnation of the devil. It's just a fearful danger.

And lastly, notice the evangelistic act or the evangelistic aim of these verses. The evangelistic aim of these verses. Verse 7, "he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." What is one of the devil's greatest snares? What is one of his most successful traps? It's this: he discredits church leaders and thereby discredits the whole church and its message. And he has used that trap and he's still using it to this day, isn't he? Time and time and time again, he's got a specially big target on the back of elders in this church because he knows that if he can stick a few arrows in there, then he sticks a few arrows in the whole church and kills the church's message.

Paul here is concerned especially for the public honor of the church. He says he must have a good report of those that are outside. He's saying the man's neighbors, the man's colleagues, the man's friends, they've got to be able to look at this life and see a consistency; that this man is the same on Sunday as he is Monday to Saturday; that he behaves in the church in the same way as he behaves in the office and in the community and in the club and in the sports field. And the word here for "good report" is a beautiful report. It's the same word as "a good work." He's saying let there be a beautiful work and let there be a beautiful witness, a beautiful report about this man so that he can take up this beautiful work.

What does this mean? Well, it might mean before you elect somebody to office, you should visit his workplace. It might mean you go into his neighborhood and talk to his neighbors. It might mean you talk to his family. The people he goes on vacation with or plays sport with. Find out. Does he have a good report of them that are without.

It's interesting here, Paul has a concern for the views of outsiders in selecting men for office. He explains why. If this man does not have a beautiful report, there is this danger, he falls into reproach and the snare of the devil. He's saying what happens if we elect to office men who are one thing on Sunday and something completely different the rest of the week, this is what happens, he falls into reproach. He's mocked by the outsiders. They despise him even more.

And of course, reproach is brought on the Gospel as well. People think less of the church that that man is an elder at. This too is a snare of the devil. The devil rejoices. When unfit and unqualified men are elected to office, he sees this trap just snapping shut. He says, "I got them again."

But the opposite is also true. Just as the bad report brings reproach on the Gospel and to the church, a good report brings credit. In other words, what Paul is saying is electing men to office is an evangelistic act. It's part of the church's own evangelism. It sends a powerful message about what that church stands for and believes in and practices. It means that people look at these elders and say, "That's the Gospel in action, in flesh." Yes, there is a fearful danger but there's also a huge potential, a huge evangelistic aim here.

And remember the context again in chapter 2 as Paul's prayer for the worldwide advance of the worldwide Gospel and he's saying part of that, an essential part, a huge part of that is this whole boring area of ecclesiology, as people might call it. He's saying, "You want all men to be saved, you want the Gospel to go out with power into all the world? Elect the right men to eldership." That's how important it is. You can't skip this. You can't belittle it, make it a secondary matter. Choosing elders is an evangelistic act.

But what if you're here tonight and you're not a Christian? You can't foresee any time that you would be an elder? Does this passage have anything to say to you? Well, it does. It does. First of all, you need an elder in your life. You need an overseer. If you have any spiritual concern, any spiritual desire, any hope ever to be saved, here is one of the means God uses: a godly man. You should be going to our elders in this church and saying, "Be my mentor. Come alongside me. God has honored you with this tremendous responsibility where there is beautiful work. Come and practice it in my life. Come and shepherd me. Come and pastor me. Come and guard me. Come and guide me." There is not an elder in this church who wouldn't rejoice to hear such a request and, oh, how much good could be done to your own soul. These are God's appointed shepherds, God's appointed men.

But it's also important to study a passage like this to recognize how far short we fall. These are lofty standards for anyone to attain to and this isn't saying elders are to sort of be super-holy. Everyone is called to be as holy as God is holy so as you hear this and you envisage this person forming in your mind, you should also be thinking of how far short you fall from this yourself. Go through these. Are you blameless? Are you faithful in sexual matters? Are you self-controlled? Are you rash or cautious? Are you hospitable? Are you a drunkard? Are you a glutton? Are you a bad tempered person? Are you covetous? Is your family in a mess? These are all sins, not just for elders, for everyone. These will bring you into the condemnation of the devil. And if a believer who's an elder can err and suffer such serious consequences, how much more you? You who have no shepherd on earth or in heaven?

As you see this, you should be calling upon the Great Shepherd of erring, wayward, lost sheep and saying, "I need you! I'm far away from this! I've broken the commandments of God. I've sinned and sinned in every area of life and the devil's got me in his snare. I am as condemned as the devil." But the wonderful thing is for those who are in Christ Jesus there is no condemnation. All of your failings, all of your shortcomings, all of your commandment breaking is gone forever as soon as you have faith in Jesus Christ. "There

is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." You are safe and saved. These verses should point you to the great Overseer, the great Pastor, the great Elder, the Shepherd and Bishop of your soul. Seek him. Call upon him. Pray to him. Ask him to come into your life in this way and also, yes, to send others into your life who can be under-shepherds and under-overseers. Amen.