

## Choose the Right Elder [Slide 1] 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Today we want to consider the qualifications for those who would serve as elders. A church's health rises and falls on the quality of its leaders and so one of the most important things the membership of a church can do is to make sure that those who lead are godly people. This is particularly important in the case of elders and the Bible describes for us the qualifications a man should have in order to be an elder.

As we consider this list you should think of it as a description of a godly person, because that is what it is. Even if you're never an elder in the church, Paul provides you with a description of the kind of character you should be striving to achieve. I invite you to turn to our passage for today, 1 Timothy 3:1-7. 1 Timothy is about three fourths of the way through the New Testament just before you get to the big book of Hebrews. 1 Timothy 3:1-7. As I read this passage, think about what items in the list you would like to improve in. Read.

You may wonder if an overseer or bishop is the same thing as an elder. Paul uses the words as synonyms. In Titus 1:5 Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every city, but when he proceeds to describe their qualifications in verse 7 he refers to them as overseers. Some denominations use the term bishop to mean something other than an elder, but the way Paul used the term it referred to a leader in the local church, not some leader who ruled over many churches. So, we are talking about elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

[Slide 2] Paul begins in verse 1 by commending the office of elder to those who would consider serving. He calls it a fine or good work. The Greek word, *kalos*, which is translated as "good" refers to a work that is attractive and desirable to others. Those who serve as elders are doing a good thing. They are shepherding and leading God's people. They play a key role in the health and effectiveness of a church. If a person desires to serve as an elder, it is a good thing they desire.

[Slide 3] Paul identifies a number of qualifications necessary for an elder. The first one in the list most generally describes an elder and the other qualifications flesh out the first one. An elder must be above reproach. An elder is without blame. He gives no cause for reproach. This does not mean that an elder is sinless, but it does mean that when he fails or sins he quickly confesses and repents so that he remains blameless in others' eyes. He is a man of integrity.

The second qualification is the most uncertain in the list because there exist numerous suggestions as to what it means. The NASB translates the phrase as the husband of one wife, but literally the Greek says "a one-woman man." Whatever we understand this phrase to mean it has to be consistent with its companion phrase in 1 Timothy 5:9 where it says a widow can be put on the list for church support if she is not less than sixty and a one-man woman.

At least five different suggestions have been made as to what is a one-woman man. One view held by some Roman Catholics is that the woman is the church and that the priest or bishop should only be married to the church and not to a woman, hence the idea of a celibate priesthood. This takes woman in a very figurative sense to refer to the church. That seems like a real stretch to justify their view of the priesthood. We know that Peter had a wife because Jesus healed his mother-in-law. Peter referred to himself in I Peter 5:1 as a fellow elder. So, if Peter, supposedly the first pope, was not a one-woman man according to this interpretation, how was he qualified to be an elder?

The second suggestion is that this verse prohibits a polygamous man from being an elder. Now, in parts of Africa polygamy is a real problem even today, and I think we all should agree that a polygamous person should not be an elder, but is this what that term meant? In 1 Corinthians 7:2 Paul prohibited polygamy for all Christians when he said that each man was to have his own wife singular and each woman was to have her own husband singular. It hardly seems necessary then to say that elders cannot be polygamous when it was already forbidden to all Christians. Also the corresponding requirement for widows being one man woman would mean that she could not have committed polyandry, be married to multiple husbands, and qualify for church support. Polyandry was nonexistent in those days and besides if she had more than one husband, how likely was it for her to be a widow?

A third view is that an elder could not remarry if his first wife died. Nowhere in Scripture is there any suggestion that if your wife dies that you are doing something wrong by marrying again. In the case of the widows, Paul actually encouraged the younger widows to remarry.

A fourth view takes a one woman man as referring to a man who is completely faithful and loyal to his wife. It is certainly understandable that you would want elders completely faithful to their wives, indeed you would want all husbands to be completely faithful to their wives. But you'd have to do a bit of mental gymnastics with the comparable term for widows. They can't be completely faithful to their husband now because he's dead. You'd have to say they were a one man woman, not that they presently are a one man woman, so the parallel is not exact.

The fifth view and the one I hold is that the elder cannot be divorced and remarried. The remarriage caused him to become a two woman man rather than a one woman man. This would also mean that a widow who was divorced and remarried and lost her second husband could not claim material support from the church. You could include view 4 within view 5 and say that not only must an elder not divorce his wife and marry another woman, but he should also not commit adultery or any other act of disloyalty to his wife.

An elder must be temperate. The word temperate refers to someone who is fully rational, and in full use of their faculties. He must not be clouded in his judgment by drugs, alcohol or other mind altering substances. He is mentally healthy and sound in his thinking.

An elder must be prudent. He must be wise and discreet. He knows how to skillfully apply God's truth to a situation.

An elder must be respectable. He orders both his inner and outer life well so that he earns the admiration and approval of others.

He is hospitable. He welcomes people into his home and into his church. He is open and approachable. He doesn't intimidate people, but rather makes them feel comfortable in his presence. He goes out of his way to put people at ease, especially those who are new to him. He welcomes the stranger which is what the Greek word literally means.

He is able to teach. He does not have to have the gift of teaching, but he does have to be able to explain the doctrines and commands of the Bible. Thus he has to have a certain level of Bible knowledge.

He can't be addicted to wine or, I would add, any drug or substance where he loses self-control and rationality.

He's not pugnacious. He's not quick-tempered and ready to fight or given to physical violence. He doesn't bully or push people around. He's not argumentative or contentious. Instead he's gentle and peaceable. He's mild and considerate of the feelings of others. He has a calming effect on a situation, bringing peace to a conflict. He's gracious, kind, forbearing, considerate, and magnanimous.

He's not greedy. He's free from the love of money.

Verses 4 & 5 teach us that the potential elder first needs to demonstrate the ability to rule his family well before he can be considered for a position of ruling the church family. What does that look like? The father conducts himself with dignity. He doesn't scream at or threaten his children. Certainly he disciplines them, but he is not physically or verbally abusive. His children respect him and submit to him in healthy submission, not in craven fear. We can't expect them to all be believers because that is not something the father can cause or control, but we can expect his children, particularly his adult children to be decent, respectful young men and women.

The family is the testing ground for spiritual leadership. A man should demonstrate some kind of spiritual leadership at home before being considered for leading the church. In all these qualifications we are not looking for perfection, but rather for a certain level of mastery, where we can see that the person is moving in the right direction and has achieved a level of competence that allows us to trust him with oversight.

The elder should not be a new convert lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the Devil. One of the great things about growing old is that you realize that you're not as fantastic as you thought you were. Some of those great ideas you had fizzled and flopped. You've made enough blunders and lost enough battles that you're less tempted to conceit. When you're young and haven't had too many failures it's very easy to overestimate yourself, even to overestimate your spiritual maturity and effectiveness. New believers should not be put into leadership positions right away and they definitely should not be made an elder.

The Bible does not set an age minimum for an elder. You can have a pretty young man that is very mature spiritually and emotionally. What you want is a man who has been traveling the Christian life long enough to have worn off some tread on his tires.

What is the condemnation or judgment of the Devil that he might fall into? There are two choices. One is that we are talking about a condemnation that the Devil brings upon the new convert when he tries to lead as an elder and becomes conceited and makes mistakes. The other choice is that we are talking about the kind of judgement God leveled on Satan because he became proud and conceited and tried to take God's place. The difference revolves around who is leveling the judgment: the Devil or God.

To make a decision we also need to consider verse 7 which says, "Read." The snare of the Devil could refer to the trap the Devil lays to ensnare you or the snare of the Devil could refer to the Devil's pride which ensnared him. The phrase "the snare of the Devil" also occurs in 2 Timothy 2:26 which I have recorded on your outline. Let's read that verse. In this verse the snare is a snare that the Devil has set to capture people. I think then that what Paul is warning us about is that the Devil goes after church leaders. He tries to trap them with pride or temptation or deception or by other things. More mature believers are more equipped to avoid his snares versus new converts. When you appoint a man as an elder, you place him in the heart of spiritual warfare and that is a dangerous place to be for a new believer.

The elder must also have a good reputation with those outside the church. I remember a conversation Julie and I had with a Senior Pastor from a large church of about 2,000 people. He said they once chose a man to be elder, but they did not check on his reputation at work. It turned out that he had a bad reputation at work. That elder had an affair with another man's wife and ended up murdering his own wife. As you can imagine, that development wreaked havoc on that church for a while.

I have never gone to any man's direct supervisor at work and asked for a character reference. We live in a small enough town and many of you work for the same company that a bad work reputation is going spread and we'll hear about it. Also, we have an informal requirement at Hope Fellowship that a man must have already served and led in another church ministry before we will consider him as an elder. In this size church we have had an opportunity to get to know a man pretty well before we nominate him as an elder.

We have never had a problem with men prematurely seeking to be an elder. In fact, my uniform experience is that men don't seek to be an elder. We always have to ask people to consider being an elder. It may be that men rightly realize how serious a commitment it is to serve as an elder so they don't jump at a chance to become one.

Yet we have been blessed in my almost 21 years of being here of having had great elders. The Lord has been very kind to us.

As you look at this list, you certainly want to keep it in mind when you are asked to vote on an elder candidate. But as I said earlier, most of this list describes any mature Christian and so you can ask yourself, which qualities are you strong in and which do you need to work on.

I thought that a good way to wrap up this sermon was for you to hear from our elders so I have invited them to come up and join me on stage. Kerry Hughes is out of town, so I invited Mike Cheatham who just finished serving a term as elder to also join us on stage and I wanted to ask you men to answer a couple of questions for the congregation today.