

An Introduction to Elder Qualifications

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Bible Verse: Titus 1:6-9
Preached on: Sunday, November 28, 2021

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Well, for those of you that are visiting with us, perhaps joining us over the live stream and not being acquainted with the life of our church, it is a significant day for us as we anticipate at the close of the service installing a new elder in our body, and we're very grateful to God for the opportunity that is before us. And what we've done last Sunday and today is that we wanted to spend a moment or two examining the office of elder in the New Testament church to have a sense of appreciation for what is about to take place. Last time from Titus 1:5, we introduced the idea of elder leadership and I invite you to turn to Titus 1 with me as we study God's word and we see what God has established and what God intends for the structure and the order of a New Testament local church.

Last time we looked at verse 5 and we saw this where the Apostle Paul said, "5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you." And I'm not going to take more than a moment to just quickly summarize what we saw last time. We saw that God intends elders which is just a term for church leadership, the men who hold the office of church leadership, God intends elders to be a blessing to the church through their oversight, through their teaching, and through their spiritual example. So elders carry a high responsibility before God and before the body in order to fulfill the functions that the office entails. And you might ask the question, "Well, how serious is spiritual leadership in the local church?" You could think about it and measure it this way: Jesus Christ before he appointed the 12 apostles, he spent an entire night in prayer before that significant occasion in the course of his ministry. You can read about that in Luke 6. So spiritual leadership is a matter of great importance to God, great importance to a local church, and it's not surprising, then, that God has given us clear and direct instruction on how to recognize a man that should be installed into the office of spiritual leadership, into the office of an elder. It's not for everyone, not every man is qualified to be an elder, that's why the standards are set forth for us in the Scriptures that we're going to look at today.

So we ask the question, today we want to ask and answer the question: who is qualified to be an elder? Who is qualified to, as it were, represent Christ, to teach his word and to have responsibility to oversee the flock? Who is qualified for such an office as that? Well, Scripture gives us the answer as we continue on in Titus 1 as we look at verses 6 through 9, if you'll look there and put your eyes on the text with me. Paul had just said in verse 5 that he wanted Titus to appoint elders, and then he gives him instruction under the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit as to what kind of man it is that is to receive the office, and in verse 6 Titus hears Paul saying this where the apostle wrote,

6 namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. 7 For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, 8 but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, 9 holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

And as you look at this text and as you compare it with the parallel passage in 1 Timothy 3, you can break this down in an introductory way into two primary sections. First of all, there is the primary standard, which we'll look at in a moment, and then, secondly, we'll see the specific applications of that primary standard laid out before us. So there's an overarching standard that Paul sets forth and then he sets down details as to what exactly that standard means.

So let's look, first of all, at the primary standard for elder qualifications and if you're taking notes, that's the first point here this morning, the primary standard, and the primary standard as we look at Scripture is this, it is that an elder must be above reproach. He must be above reproach. Look at it there in verse 6 where Paul says as he talks about the appointment of elders, he says "if any man is above reproach." That's the overarching standard. That's the cornerstone by which everything else is an illustration and so we need to just consider what it means for an elder to be above reproach.

Now let me just state from the outset, from the beginning, is that, you know, as Andrew was commenting to me afterwards last week, Andrew being one of our other elders, that elders are going to be fallible men, that's all that we have to work with. Elders are not perfect. Elders have the capacity for being mistaken and so we're not talking about a standard of perfection here that no man could meet, otherwise there wouldn't be any elders anywhere in any church at any time. That wouldn't work. Rather, so what does the standard mean? What does "above reproach" mean? Well, what Scripture is indicating here is that a man being considered for spiritual leadership should be a man of unquestioned integrity. There is no valid accusation of wrongdoing that could be brought against the man. There is not a defining scandal in his life that is immediately associated with him in the minds of the people. There's nothing like that that mars his life. And so an elder is not a man of sinless perfection, no one makes that claim that has any biblical sense about them. 1 Kings 8:46 says that there is no man who does not sin, and so we're not elevating elders to a standard that no one meets, and we're not making a claim for ourselves that, you know, is easily refuted by those who know us. No, rather it's simply talking about that the perspective elder is a man of unblemished reputation. Elders must exemplify a proven pattern of moral character because they set a pattern for others to follow.

Now think about this. We talked about it last week, that one of the aspects, one of the duties of an elder is to exemplify Christian living. Well, a man who has disqualified himself, who does not manifest that, can't be an example for others to follow. It doesn't mean that he can't be forgiven. It doesn't mean that he can't be a genuine Christian. It doesn't mean that God won't forgive him, but if there is that kind of black mark in the life of a man, he's been set aside from the office of an elder because the standard, the elder is a reflection of what the character of a Christian should look like, and as a result of that, there shouldn't be something that is immediately obvious about his life that would disqualify him from being an example for others. The truth of the matter is, is that ungodly elders discredit ministry, and over a few decades in ministry, I've known elders who have disqualified themselves, elders who have committed adultery, elders who have been caught up in other matters of scandal and things like that, elders who abandoned their post and left the flock hurting and left them behind. And everyone, let's put it this way, anyone that is in the context of a local church realizes just how damaging and how wrong that is because we all have this sense that if someone is holding an office of spiritual leadership, there ought to be an integrity about him, and when an elder fails in his responsibility or fails in his moral qualifications, it has a very damaging impact on a local church and on the testimony of Christ, more importantly. So we find that there is this moral standard, there is this proven character that Scripture calls for, something that has been observed over time and in different circumstances by many different people where there have been witnesses to the man's character over time and over the course of life that gives a sense that there is no valid accusation of wrongdoing or spiritual disqualification that should be brought against the man, that could legitimately be brought against the man.

So this is the standard and you see Paul repeat it there in verse 7 when he says, we're skipping over, we'll come back to the details found in verse 6, you see him repeat it again in verse 7. He says, "For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward." And so you see that double emphasis, verse 5, "above reproach," verse 7, "above reproach." That's the emphasis. That's the guiding light. That is the spotlight that sets the standard for everything else. That's the primary standard. He should be above reproach.

Now that standard also starts the list in the parallel passage about elder qualifications in 1 Timothy 3, and I invite you to turn over there with me. 1 Timothy 3:1 and 2 says, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach," same standard listed there in the parallel passage.

Let me just make a statement here. I knew a man in the past many many years ago that claimed that he was anointed by God to be a spiritual leader and he made no secret of that boast, that he was anointed by God to be a spiritual leader, and this is a man later in life who was saying this, but there was an obvious disconnect, a sad disconnect in what he was saying and in what his life was actually like because the fact of the matter was the man had never held an office in spiritual leadership, you know, in a biblical church, and the people that were around him did not affirm him for that office as well, and that shows us something important about the nature of the office of an elder. A man may desire the

office and that's a beginning qualification, that a man desires the office, but alongside of that there is a role for the local church, there is a role for the people, the people in the pew, to either affirm or to deny that. There is a role for the church to say, "Yes, we recognize this man. We affirm him as well. We recognize that his life approximates the character that Scripture speaks about." And so there is an affirmation that takes place. What's the point here that I'm making? A man doesn't simply appoint himself to that office. He doesn't simply claim to be anointed by God and everybody has to bow down and defer to that simply because the man says so. There is a place and there is a role for a congregation to affirm that and for there to be a recognition, a corporate recognition that, yes, the man has the desire, and, yes, we affirm him in it as well. And that's why we approached the appointment of Nathaniel like we did. The elders put Nathaniel's name out there and we gave our membership an opportunity to affirm that, and said if you have any objections, any concerns about that, go and speak to Nathaniel and make that known.

Well, that's a very significant aspect of the process because when the membership is invited to come and the membership is called to witness to what the elders, what the existing elders have said we recognize and what we affirm, and so we put a man forward and then we ask the congregation to affirm it as well so that there is a multiple layer affirmation going on. The man has the desire in his heart and, you know, before we appoint an elder, appoint deacons, we go to the man's wife and we ask them, "Do you affirm him for this office? Is this something that you support?" Because the wife knows the man better than anyone does, right? At least she should. So the wife says yes, and the elders say yes, and then we come to the congregation and the congregation says yes in one way or another. And there were no dissenting voices when we put Nathaniel forward to you.

So what I want you to see is that the way when this is rightly done, this is not a man stepping forward and making himself, appointing himself as an elder, this is not something that is done simply by fiat from the existing elder board, there is a participation of family life, elder leadership, and the congregational life that all goes into this, and in that process we have a sense of confidence that the Lord has led us and the Lord is in the midst of this, that that unanimous affirmation is an expression of the will of God that here is an elder for the local church. It's very significant. It's very profound and it's something that has a corporate dimension to it that we are about to recognize toward the end of the service, but all of this, you know, and the effect of it in a church like ours is, it means that there are literally hundreds of eyes on the man before he is affirmed and elevated into the office. Another thing that we did, and for those of you that are visiting, just bear with me in some, you know, some private church life matters here as I talk about this, my perspective when we put forth a man for the office of elder, and we don't do it very often, there should be a sense of, the congregation when a man is put forward, that there is a collective sense of, "Well, yes, of course. Obviously that's right." It should never be a surprise. It shouldn't be somebody saying, "Well, I don't even know this man." Or, "Where did this come from?" Or nothing like that. There's a sense that he's put forward after he's already established himself as an elder, he's recognized as an elder rather than somebody who is put in the office and you hope that he grows into it. That's a backward way of looking at it. And that's why, as I said last time, and these little points

of practice are based on serious doctrinal concerns, when we brought Nathaniel in 11 months ago or whatever it is now, we did not immediately install him into the office of an elder and we did that for this specific reason, so that you as a congregation would have an opportunity to observe his life, to hear him teach, to watch him interact, to get to know his family, and now a year afterwards, you know, afterwards, then you're in a position where you can knowingly affirm him with a sense of experience and acquaintance that makes that affirmation meaningful. And even prior to that, I would want you to know, prior to that that as elders we were getting to know Nathaniel for several years before we ever called him and asked him to come onto our staff, so that there's a very long track record here. Now that doesn't mean that Nathaniel is going to be perfect, it doesn't mean that he's going to do everything right as an elder, but it means that we've honored the process in a way that gives us a sense that we can knowingly say with the help of the Holy Spirit, we recognize a man who is above reproach and install him on that basis.

So those things are very very important and it sets a pattern for the way that church leadership is addressed. And stated differently, we take church leadership seriously here because we realize that as leaders go, so a church is going to go also, and we want to take that seriously. It doesn't mean that we would never make a mistake but it means that we don't make a mistake simply because we were careless or hasty with the process, and that's part of the way that we try to honor this primary standard than elder be above reproach.

Now secondly, second section of the message here and we'll break this part down a little bit more, let's look at what Scripture says about some of the specific applications. The specific applications of that standard. You say a man is to be above reproach, well, what is it that you look at, what is it that you look for in order to make that determination, in order to make that collective judgment as Christ leads his church? What do we examine to see if a man is above reproach? And we're going to see three things from the remainder of this passage in Titus 1:6-9 and, first of all, the first thing that you consider is his family life, his family life as we read on here in verse 6. Look at verse 6 with me. It says, "if any man is above reproach," there's the general overarching standard, then Paul goes into his family life, he says, "the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion." Now this standard could be a series of messages by itself and we're not going to try to answer every question that could be raised in this matter, so we just want to make some general observations here.

First of all, notice something that would be easy to overlook. Paul says, "if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife." Well, those words are showing us, first of all, that church leadership is restricted to men. I do not care how politically incorrect that statement is. It is a biblical statement that church leadership is restricted to men. Women are not to be elders in the church and if you are in a church that has women elders, I would just encourage you to reconsider your commitment to a place like that because this is fundamental. And yes, it's countercultural but the church of Christ is not to adapt itself to the spirit of the world but to be faithful to the spirit of Scripture. There is no way that you can look at this text, any man being above reproach, the husband of one wife, there is no way that you can look at this text and say, yes, a woman can be an elder in a church.

And so the prominent women teachers who come and teach men and take positions of leadership in a church, that is unbiblical. It is wrong. It is a sin against God and his Scripture and so we need to be clear on that aspect of it, church leadership is restricted to men, the office of elder is restricted to men.

Now having said that, the husband of one wife. Look at it there again in verse 6, "if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife." That phrase that is translated there "husband of one wife," in the original language it literally reads "a one-woman man." He's a one-woman man. What this qualification is indicating is this: an elder's life should display an unquestioned pattern of relational fidelity to one woman and a pattern of sexual purity that is unblemished by sexual sin.

Now let me say something very very very important in my opinion. This is not merely a question of counting whether a man has been married more than once. Let me say that again: this is not merely a matter of counting whether a man has been married more than once. That may be part of it but the question is whether a man can fairly be said to be devoted to one woman. Is he free from adultery? Is he free from a flirtatious wandering spirit? Now there are conceivable situations where a man perhaps was married early in life, divorced through no fault of his own, and remarried and establishes a long pattern of fidelity to his new wife, and within the discretion of elder leadership, within discretion of the church body, a man under those circumstances could be considered for the office of elder because he's manifesting the fact, he's manifested a life pattern that he's devoted to his current wife. Now, you know, a man with more than one marriage would have to be examined more carefully on this stage but it's not an automatic disqualification depending on the circumstances. The thing that is so important to recognize here is that if you just limit it to that standard, you could miss the whole sense and the whole spirit of what it's saying. Is the man flirtatious? Is the man playing games with other women and toying with their affections in his office?

You know, one of the things in order to try to protect myself in this realm, when we started Truth Community Church 10 years ago, nearly 10 years ago, one of the things that I was very firm on was the fact that I did not allow women to come up and hug me. I did not allow women to initiate that kind of physical contact with me and, honestly, it took a little bit of adjustment for some of them because they were apparently used to pastors who did something else, probably a few people's feelings got hurt. That's okay. That's okay. It's more important that there be a clear distinction and a clear indication that the pastor is someone who is not trying to flirt with the wives of other men, with single women, or things like that. You honor the standard with those kind of practical things. Now if a woman has lost her husband and I'm at the funeral, I might put my arm around her and console her in that way but as a matter of routine interaction in church life, no. That's not appropriate. That's not a way a church leader, an elder, should be because it leaves him open to misunderstanding at the very least, leaves him open to the suggestion that perhaps he's flirtatious.

One of the things that I thought about, I remember thinking this in the first week of my involvement here, was the last thing that I want is for the husband to be looking at me

and saying, "Why is he hugging my wife? Why are you hugging my wife?" I don't want that. I don't want him to think that and I don't even have any desire to hug another man's wife. I don't have any desire for that. I don't want that. But, you know, these things have practical implications and men who are aspiring after the office of elder need to think through these things and how they conduct themselves with, you know, with the church of God and around other women. You know, we put up fences in order to protect ourselves in these ways. This is part of the family life that a man is a one-woman man.

Now as we consider his family life, you go on in verse 6 and you see this, you see "if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife," then he goes down a generation and addresses the matter of his children, "having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion." Now this standard "children who believe," this comes from a Greek word that means "believing or faithful," and there's a difference of opinion among some commentators, some thinking it means an idea that they are believers and that they are genuinely born-again Christians and that every child of every elder must be a born-again Christian for that man to hold the office. The word can mean also simply faithful in a broader sense in that they're faithful to their parents. So the question is: must an elder's children all be born-again believers in Christ or should this be taken in a broader sense that they are children who are faithful to their parents? Very important question.

Now there are some good men that I respect deeply that hold a view different from what I'm about to say to you. These men think that all elders' kids should all be Christians. In my judgment, they make this verse say more than it actually does, and if you think about it, how would you ever be able to apply this standard knowingly? The reality of conversion is something that is inward to the believer and inward to an individual, and especially as an elder is dealing with children that are maybe in their teenage years, you know, there's never going to be absolute clarity on where every single child is, you know, because their faith hasn't had a chance to be tested. They've grown up in a Christian home, they conform outwardly, they make confessions, but is it real? Is it genuine? There's no way for us to know that infallibly, to know it without possibility of error.

I believe that what Paul is saying is explained by what he goes on to say in verse 6, and so while it says "children who believe," that word can be understood as faithful, and Paul goes on to say and expands on and explains what he means by that term translated "faithful" or "believing." He says "having children who believe," that is, you could say, "they're not accused of dissipation or rebellion." The idea here is not to have an elder held to a standard that he doesn't even control because an elder does not control whether his children come to Christ, and this may be shocking to some parents that hear this message, you do not have control over whether your children believe. To say that you do is to contradict the very nature of New Testament salvation. We believe that conversion is a supernatural act by God, that you must be born-again, that you must be born from above, and none of us hold that power. God alone holds the power of salvation in order to bring about genuine conversion. God alone must extend an effectual call to the heart. The Holy Spirit must draw that one to himself. And while an elder should be in some manner teaching his children and training them and praying for them and all of that, at the end of the day the final results are up to the Lord, not to us.

So we can't evaluate the hearts of young people to know whether they are truly converted or not, so then what are we left with with this standard? Well, there is something far more objective that we can look at and say. When it says that children should not be accused of dissipation or rebellion, it's saying this: an elder's children should not be open to the charge that they are wild or disobedient. You should be able to look at an elder's family and simply say, "Do you know what? His house is in order. His children line up under his authority. Are they all believers, have they all been saved? You know, I don't know that I can say that especially at their young age, but I can tell you this, that his children obey their parents. There is a pattern in the family that is manifest that shows that there is a sense of order about the family."

Look over at 1 Timothy 3 and this is going to have, you know, and this has theological ramifications. 1 Timothy 3:4 speaking in the qualifications of an elder says in 1 Timothy 3:4, "He must be one who manages his own household well," and look at what he says going on that verifies, as Scripture interprets Scripture, this gives us confidence that we have our interpretation right. Verse 4, he keeps "his children under control with all dignity." The elder's children are under control. Verse 5, "but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?" So the idea is that the elder has shown that he leads in his home in a way that shows that his children are under control and that becomes a training ground, it becomes a proving ground to show to give you a sense of what his leadership will be like in the church. You know, it says in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that in the church all things are to be done decently and in order. Well, the home of a developing man, of a Christian man, of a man who aspires to the office of elder, the home is the training ground, the proving ground, to see whether he can lead people in that manner or not.

So there's this sense that he has his children under control and that that is something that is manifest, and so as we look to identify elders and to verify whether they are above reproach or not, we are not looking simply for a profession of faith in his children which may or may not be valid and that we won't be able to, you know, to say infallibly is true or not, rather we ask a question that can be verified by observation. Are his children under control? Do his children honor their parents with a sense of affection that is consistent with the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother," because the man's home leadership is a prediction, it is an indication of what his spiritual leadership will be like. Is his family under control? Is he devoted to his wife? Are his children under control? His family life is an indication and is one of the things that you look for in order to verify whether the man is qualified for the office of elder.

Now secondly as we consider these specific applications. We look at his family life, secondly, we look at his personal life by which I mean, we look at his character. Go back to Titus 1. As Paul writes to Titus, he first defines the man's family life and then he looks at the man's character, and in his character he says this in verse 7, he says, "For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward," then having restated the overarching standard, he goes on and gives detail about the man's character and he starts with negative statements, what should not mark an elder's character. Verse 7, he says, "For the overseer

must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain." So the elder is a man who is not arrogant. He is not inclined to anger and outbursts of wrath. He is not a man who is reliant on alcohol to get him through the day. He does not enjoy arguments and conflict. He doesn't enjoy that. He engages in it if he has to but he's not out looking to fight with people. And he's not greedy. One of the consequences of that, of a man who has his spirit under control, who is not trying to dominate people, one of the consequences for this for elder leadership is that a true elder leads by example, not by force. He leads by his life, not by trying to control people with commands.

So the elders, true elders, those who are qualified for the office, they desire the office for what they can give to Christ's sheep rather than what they can get from them, and they're not on a power trip, they're not trying to have an army of lieutenants that are at their disposal in order to cause them to do what they want to do. I've mentioned this example from the past. I was traveling many years ago and I was in the state of Maine on a Sunday morning, and so one of my daughters and I went to visit a church. During the course of the announcements, the pastor was announcing a prayer meeting for that coming week, and the way that he announced it was quite disturbing to me in that he said it like this, he said, "As the God-appointed leader of this flock, I am not asking you to come to the prayer meeting, I am commanded you to come." Oh, that just took my breath away, for a man to speak like that to a people where he's supposedly a shepherd, concerned for the flock and dealing with them in the tender compassionate way in which Christ does? To assert himself like that and to speak of command for what should obviously be an optional activity, that was very disturbing and it's contrary in my opinion, it's contrary to what this passage is pointing us to, talking about a man who is there to lead by example, not a man who's trying to control people for his own purposes and to make sure that the attendance numbers are up to his satisfaction. That's not the way to do it. That is not consistent with the character of an elder to be argumentative and forceful and have a fighting spirit about you like that, you know, and I would like to think that maybe I just caught him on a bad day and that he wasn't always like that, but that is not the way elders should lead.

What should mark an elder's character? What should mark his conduct? Well, look at verse 8. We've seen the negative, we see a positive here. Verse 8, "but," by contrast he should be "hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled." How can we summarize these things? Again, you could take these individual words and do entire messages on the individual words, we're just trying to treat this in an introductory way. What is this saying? Well, an elder should be a man who is approachable. He's a man whose life should show biblical affection. There should be a pattern in his life where you can look at and say, "His life has been directed by biblical affections to one way or another. He's a man of sober judgment. He's not rash in his decisions. He's not rash in his words. He obviously pursues a godly life that is marked by discipline and self-control." That's the standard. Again, we're not talking about a man who's perfect in this, we're not talking about the perfection of his life but the direction of his life.

And let me just say this, especially maybe for some of you who are newer to our church and all of that. You know, if you expect an demand perfection, utter perfection from your elders, you're going to be disappointed with them because we're all fallible men. We all fall short of the glory of God. The elders are not excluded from James's statement that we all stumble in many ways. The question is what's the pattern, what's the direction? So it's important for you as a member, as an attender of Truth Community Church, to know what standard to expect from your elders. You know, there will be pockmarks of imperfection in his life. There will be times where an elder meaning the best but maybe he doesn't respond to you in the best way that you had hoped, or that he doesn't, you know, he didn't call when you expected him to or when you wanted him to. You know, that's, you know, you just need to be aware of what your expectations and what the standard is when you consider an elder. You know, no one is up here professing perfection but rather we're just setting forth what the biblical standards are and what a church does is looks for men who have a pattern of that in their lives. So, you know, we work these things out as we walk through life together over time.

There's another way that you could look at it, another way that you could state this, to state it a little bit differently: a perspective elder is a man who has manifested consistent sanctification over time. Consistent sanctification over time. Look, when it comes to biblical ministry in the local church, that's what we're trying to do, that's what we're trying to cultivate in the lives of the people of God, the people that belong to Christ, is to develop in you a pattern of developing consistent sanctification in your life. We understand that you're going to fall short and we don't club you with, you know, with a blackjack when you do. I held a blackjack earlier this week in my hand and that's why that came immediately to my mind. There's this sense of patience and grace and an understanding that you grow over time. Well, in order for that to work out, you need a man leading you who has manifested something of that in his own life; he's shown that over the course of his life and invites you by his life to lead in the same way. That's the biblical pattern that God is looking to establish.

Now let's just state a negative here. What we're saying here is that an elder is recognized for his character, for his family life, not by worldly success, not by worldly attainment, not by worldly wealth. You know, and we all know that there are churches that, you know, that they look for the most successful man in the business community and make him an elder. Well, a lot of times that doesn't work out too good because the man doesn't have the character, the Christian character. He's got outward worldly success but not the inward character that is to mark an elder. So we just have to apply all of God's standards and view these things biblically and not by earthly concerns. So elder qualifications are not assessed by earthly wealth and status. You do not look at a man and say what has he done in his career and then decide whether he's qualified to be an elder. No, you come to Scripture, you understand what Scripture says about it and then you consider the man based on who he is and what his life is from what can be observed.

So his family life, his personal life, there's a third aspect to being an elder, a third aspect of elder qualifications, let's say, and we could call this his doctrinal life. His doctrinal life. Look at verse 9 with me where it says, "holding fast the faithful word which is in

accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." So you've seen his family life there set forth in verse 6, you've seen his character set forth in verses 7 and 8, and then you see in verse 9 the doctrinal considerations, and you see the pattern, you see how this all fits in with the nature of what the office of the elder is to do. Last week we said the elder's responsibility is oversight in the church as mirrored by his family life to qualify him. He's to be a spiritual example as shown by his manifested character. He is to be a teacher and that is shown here in this verse 9 in his ability to handle the word of God.

So let's look at it one more time there, verse 9, "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." What should we say, what can we say about a man who is being considered for the office of an elder? You should be able to say this in addition to the other two aspects, you should be able to say that the people of God grow under his instruction, they grow under his biblical teaching, and the content of what he teaches should be consistent with apostolic doctrine, it should be consistent with the teaching of Scripture so that it's not simply a matter of whether he's a dynamic speaker because most of us aren't, it's not simply a matter of whether he entertains you or you find him appealing because that is a standard that can lead you astray with smooth talkers who have an ability to, you know, to control crowds with their, you know, with their eloquence. That's not the standard. The standard is a doctrinal one. The standard is a sanctifying one. Do the people of God grow under his instruction? Does he teach in a way that teachable people in the congregation better understand the word of God when he's done than when he started? This teaching role is central to the position of an elder.

Go back to 1 Timothy with me, 1 Timothy 3 and 5 here. 1 Timothy 3. And by the way, there are lots of different ways that an elder can manifest the ability to teach. He doesn't have to be someone who can carry a pulpit long-term. There are those that do that but this qualification, this ability to teach is sometimes manifested in small group or in private instruction. You know, I've known elders who didn't prefer being on the platform but they have an immense ability to counsel people, to point them to the word of God, to encourage them, to exhort them, when necessary to rebuke them, and showing their ability to teach in that setting in a way that may not always translate from a pulpit but in that private interaction is showing an ability to teach and to instruct in a way that people grow from it.

So in 1 Timothy 3 you see, "An overseer, then, must be above reproach," look at the end of the verse there, he must be "able to teach." He has to be able to teach. If a man does not like to teach, if a man is not competent to teach, if people just do not receive his teaching, he should not be an elder. There may be other places where he can serve very effectively in the church but the teaching office, the teaching function is central to being an elder.

Now with that said, go to 1 Timothy 5 where you see this emphasized as well. 1 Timothy 5 in verse 17 where we read this, "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." There is this

teaching aspect to the office of an elder. He gives instruction so that teachable people grow under his ministry.

Going back to Titus 1:9 now with me, understand that this is more than just being able to say things in front of people or say things to people, there is a doctrinal element to it. The content of what the man teaches is essential. What does he teach about the nature of man? What does he teach about the nature of Christ? What does he teach about the nature of sin? What does he teach about the nature of salvation? What does he teach about repentance and faith? What does he teach about sanctification? What does he teach about glorification? These content things matter because these are the core issues of biblical Christianity. He must be able to articulate those and so he is able to teach, verse 9, in accordance with the teaching of God's word, and then he has the corresponding ability "to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict," to be able to come alongside someone and say, "This man is wrong for these reasons, for these Scriptures," and be able to do that with a sense of clarity that guards and protects the sheep of Christ.

John Calvin said this, he said, "The pastor ought to have two voices, one for gathering the sheep, and another for warding off and driving away wolves and thieves. The Scripture supplies him with the means of doing both, for he who is deeply skilled in it will be able both to govern those who are teachable and to refute the enemies of the truth." I don't mean to give, you know, a homely example here but you think about calling people in and sending people away, and there's an aspect of the pastoral voice that says, "Come," and speaking to those that are Christians, speaking to those that are teachable, speaking to those that want to learn, there's this warm, inviting spirit that says, "Come and let's consider the word of God together." However, that voice is inappropriate, you need a different voice, which is what Calvin was saying, when you have teachers of error coming in, when you have destructive divisive influences coming into the church. The office of the elder has the responsibility and the prerogative to say, "No! Go out. If you will not repent, if this is the way that you insist on conducting yourself, you must go. You cannot be here." You cannot be a shepherd watching over sheep in the fold and knowingly allow a wolf to come in that's going to devour them. That is a betrayal of the office of a shepherd and the office of the shepherd is an illustration of the spiritual office that an elder holds, caring for the sheep, protecting them, feeding them, leading them, but when a threat comes, when someone makes it known that they want to lie, that they want to be divisive, that they can't be trusted with young children, then in one way or another they're sent away if they're not willing to repent. This is part of the protective office that an elder has and that's why he has to be able both to teach and instruct and to refute those who contradict.

So what can we say in summary about this? Scripture requires the office of an elder to be filled by men who have proven over time in the private and public arenas of family life, character and teaching, and one of the things that's helpful to remember is what Jesus said as we talk about these things and having proven these things in these private realms, Jesus said, "He who has been faithful in a little will also be faithful in much." If you see a pattern of faithfulness in a man's life in smaller things, you can have a sense of confidence that he's going to be faithful in greater things as well.

So to be an elder is a noble calling. For a church to install an elder, as we are about to do, is a high moment in the life of that church. But let me just say by way of caution and reminder is that this is not done lightly and it cannot be done lightly. And just from the man's perspective, a verse that, you know, that hangs over my own life, James 3:1 says, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." Nathaniel is about to embark on that which will bring him to a greater sense of accountability before the throne of God in what he's about to undertake. There is a stricter judgment for men who hold this office. And let me just say to you, it's easy to be critical of elders. I'm glad to be in a church that's not like that but it's easy to find fault, to pick at men in leadership, but understand that what the office calls for is not your criticism but your prayerful support. These men, Nathaniel, they're embarking on that which brings forth greater accountability before God and if there's any Christian sympathy in your heart, any recognition of the fear of God, anything of the love of Christ, there should be a sense of sympathy for the man, a desire for his well-being that motivates you to pray for him, "God, that You would strengthen him and help him so that he would stand well before You in that final day." I hope you pray for me that way. I certainly need it.

Another passage from this that's a caution to us as a church, a caution to us as elders, 1 Timothy 5:22. You don't need to turn there but 1 Timothy 5:22 warns the church, warns the people of God, "Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin." That's in the context of spiritual leadership. Don't elevate a man to that office too quickly. Don't elevate the man before you have an opportunity to observe him. Don't elevate the man before he's ready for it because there are risks, there are pitfalls that you don't want to share responsibility for. So as we take these things slowly, we take these things carefully, it's because we want to do everything that's in our power not to do this in a way that would bring judgment upon our own heads, bring the discipline of God upon us and upon the man. That's why we seek to honor these principles as we do.

Now one final word. There's a word to the body more directly here and, you know, one of the things that I'm mindful of as you sit in on a message like this and you're talking about an office that, you know, you may not even have any interest in personally, it's easy to just look at it from the outside and think about, "Okay, that's what he's responsible for. That's what he must be like." And to have a sense that, you know, the word of God hasn't really addressed you particularly here. Well, let me just say a word to the body. 3. Point 3 here, let me just say a word to the body. It's always uncomfortable for me to speak and share the things that I'm about to say because I know how easy it is to be misunderstood and to say these things in a way in which they're not intended, but there's still the word of God to be addressed here and this isn't about me or my feelings or anything about that but it's about what the word of God says and what the word of God would say to you as a congregation, what he would say to you individually in light of the office of an elder.

So let's just take a moment to consider a word to the body. God intends elders to be a blessing to the congregation. That is clear. Through their family life, through their

character, their oversight, their teaching, God intends elders to be a blessing to the body and he intends to manifest his own blessing and care for the body through the men that lead in a local church and that is our responsibility. But there is a corresponding responsibility for you as well, and even for me as I deal with my fellow elders. Understand this, beloved, God intends you to be a blessing to your elders. God intends you to be a blessing to your elders. Scripture speaks very definitively to how a congregation is to respond to its leaders.

Look at 1 Thessalonians 5 and notice the gentle way in which Paul says this to that local church in Thessalonica. 1 Thessalonians 5:12. He says, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another." This is part of the responsibility of a local church, of the body to respond in esteem and love for those who hold the office.

A similar statement is made in Hebrews 13. You can turn over there with me. It's good for us to let the text of Scripture go through our eyes and into our hearts. Two verses here. We looked at one of them last time. Hebrews 13:7, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." And in verse 17 it says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them," and he's talking about spiritual leaders here as you can tell, not political leaders by what follows. "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

I am grateful, truly grateful that Truth Community Church does this, that this is the pattern, this is the character of our church to respond to Scripture in this area in the way that you do. I'm very grateful for that and I am a privileged recipient of divine favor to be an elder in a body like this, and I know that the other elders would say the exact same thing. We love you and we're grateful and we appreciate you for being just like Scripture calls you to be.

Well, let me add just one brief word of perspective that needs to be said from time to time. One of the things that this means, and I'll just view this from, you know, taking it from the opposite direction, one of the things that this means in the life of a local church is that a church member, someone who is involved in the life of a body, is that someone like that should not speak badly about an elder anymore than they would speak badly about a parent, a spouse, or a child. There should be a tinging of love and respect with the way that you speak with each other privately about elders. And if, I've said this in different contexts about church unity more broadly, if you happen to hear someone speaking badly about an elder, critical of certain things or whatever it may be, if you hear someone speaking badly let me just give you an easy word that can be gently, politely said in response to that and that I believe is part of your responsibility of being in a body like ours. If you hear someone speaking badly about them, simply ask them this question, ask them whether they have spoken to that elder about their concerns. "Oh, have you spoken to the elder about that?" And the true answer every time, the true answer is going

to be, "No, I haven't." But the answer that comes out will be, you know, a sheepish, "Well, yeah, sort of." And you can just say, "So you mean to tell me that if I went and asked that elder did you talk to them about that, that they would say yes? They would agree with you that you talked with them about that?" And just in a loving, gracious way have that kind of interaction and collectively we can cultivate an attitude of unity and respect and love for one another where it's going both ways, and we protect each other, and this is one of the ways that you love an elder in response is to be careful about not only what you say but what you're willing to hear, and to not let someone cultivate division and discord by whisperings like that that take place in private conversations. You know, if you love Christ and you love your church, this would be a glad responsibility for someone to embrace. We don't have to be contentious but we also don't have to let people say things that should not be said in light of what Scripture says to the body.

And what can we say, what can we expect God to do for us over time? We can be confident that a church that follows these biblical principles for spiritual leadership can have confidence that Christ himself is with them, Christ himself is for them, Christ himself is at work in their midst. As a body, we aim to do that. As a body, that's what we desire and what we pray for and to the extent that God does that in response, we give him thanks and give him all the glory.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for Your wisdom in establishing the order of a local church. We pray that Your Spirit would be greatly at work in our midst and we pray for the sweet time just ahead as we will install Nathaniel as an elder. Bless us, keep us, and help us to be faithful to every aspect of Your word that we would not neglect any known duty and that we would not harbor any known sin either individually or corporately. Father, just have Your way with us, purify us, sanctify us in the truth. Your word is truth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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