

Good Elders, Good Examples

Titus 1:5-9

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on February 12, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ Last week, Fred began our new sermon series on the book of Titus called “*Good Doctrine, Good Deeds*”. This letter from the Apostle Paul to Titus is replete with references to how sound doctrine in our minds will translate into sound deeds in our lives. Out of right beliefs flow right behavior, and on the flip side, out of bad beliefs / bad doctrine flow bad behavior.
 - So our goal is to help you draw those connections in your own life, but in particular, this morning, I want to demonstrate the connection between good doctrine and good deeds within the lives of our leaders in the church. **[PRAY]**

- ❖ One Sunday morning, a mother went in to wake her son to tell him it was time to get ready for church but he said, “*I’m not going.*” “*Why not?*” she asked. “*I’ll give you two good reasons,*” he said. “*One, they don’t like me, and two, I don’t like them.*” His mother replied, “*I’ll give you two good reasons why you should go to church. One, you’re 59 years old, and two, you’re the pastor!*”

- ❖ This morning our attention will be focused on pastors, or as Paul calls them in our passage ‘elders’ and ‘overseers’. Now because we have these interchangeable terms it can often lead to confusion since different churches use the terms differently or don’t use them at all. So for many Christians, in their minds, ‘**pastors**’ are the church leaders on staff, on the payroll, the ones with seminary degrees. We picture the men up on stage, behind the pulpit.
 - But for ‘**elders**’, we think of older, grey-haired men in the church sitting around a table in a committee meeting. They’re elders because they’re old. They’re usually the longest-standing members of the church, the ones who have been around for years.
 - And as for ‘**overseers**’, well, we don’t even know what that is. We don’t use that term around here. You never hear anyone called Overseer Fred or Overseer David. Most of us are unfamiliar with that term.

- ❖ *So what is a pastor? What is an elder? What is an overseer? And how do they all relate?* This morning I want to shed light on this terminology and to clarify things, but more so **I want to help you understand the particular function and qualifications of those whom God has called to lead his household, to exercise primary leadership in the local church.**
 - Now I realize the vast majority of you are not pastors, elders, or overseers, so you might be wondering what relevance all of this has for you. *Why should you care about leadership positions and leadership structures within a church?*
 - If you get the opportunity to read all of Titus in one sitting, you’ll quickly see why strong, biblical leadership is essential for the health and life of a church.

- ❖ We learn in today’s passage, why the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to Titus, a companion on his missionary journeys. Their journeys eventually brought them to the isle of Crete where fledgling churches had been planted (or were planted by Paul himself). But as Paul moved on to new territory, he left Titus behind to sort out some matters left undone. This particular letter was sent to instruct and assist Titus in carrying out his task.

- ❖ His task, as we see in v5, was to “*appoint elders in every town*”, implying that the churches currently lacked such leaders. **If you read on in chapter 1, you immediately see the consequences of not having qualified elders in a church.** False teachers and immoral leaders were running amok and upsetting the faith of whole families. Bad leadership and the lack of a proper, biblical leadership structure leaves a church in a state of ill health.
- ❖ So ask yourself: *Do you care about the spiritual health of this church? Do you care about your own spiritual life?* If you were to ask Paul what he would do to make sure a church and its individual members are growing in spiritual maturity, his answer would be simple: *Appoint godly, qualified elders to lead the church.*
 - Friends, even if you’ll never serve as an elder in a church, this matters to you. You should know 1) what is an elder?, 2) what do elders do?, and 3) who can be one? – because these are the leaders who are supposed to keep watch over your souls (Heb. 13:17). These are the three questions we’ll consider today.

What Is an Elder?

- ❖ Let’s begin by reading v5 again. Paul instructs Titus, “*This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.*” So what exactly is an elder? There are four observations I want to make.
- ❖ **1) An elder is synonymous with an overseer and a pastor.** This is the first thing we need to clarify because otherwise things get confusing as we study various passages in the NT that address this particular kind of church leader. Wherever you see the title ‘elder’ or ‘overseer’ or ‘pastor’ in the NT, I want you to picture the same office, the same person.
 - Just look at our passage. In v5 we’re introduced to the term ‘elders’. Titus is to appoint them in every town. Then in v6, Paul gives him certain qualifications to look for in a prospective elder. Now in v7 a new term is introduced, an ‘overseer’, but there is no reason to suggest that Paul has suddenly changed subjects between vv6-7. The flow of thought between the two verses is connected, suggesting that the terms elder and overseer are interchangeable.
- ❖ Another example of these terms being used interchangeably is found in **Acts 20:17**. Turn there with me. Here Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders. “*Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.*” He goes on to recount his ministry among them.
 - Then in **v28** Paul says, “*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God.*” So Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Spirit has made them overseers tasked to care for the church, and then he uses imagery where the church is seen as a flock and the elders are shepherds/pastors guarding them from fierce wolves. (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1-2)

- ❖ So whatever ideas you had about pastors and elders and how they relate, you need to evaluate them in light of Scripture. And from what I see in Scripture, I see no reason to draw a distinction between the terms. But this still leaves us wondering: ***Why does the Bible use three different terms to describe the same role?*** The reason is because each term emphasizes something different about the same person who holds that role.
 - **The term ‘elder’ emphasizes the spiritual maturity required of the man.** The language recalls the tribal leadership structure of ancient Israel where men called ‘elders’, by virtue of their age or status, functioned as leaders of their respective tribes. So the NT church, steeped in Jewish tradition, appropriated the term to characterize the spiritual maturity – not just the age – of their appointed leaders.

- ❖ **The term “overseer” emphasizes the governing authority of the office.** This term demonstrates the influence of Greek culture on the early church. The Greeks used ‘overseer’ to describe any office that had superintending functions. It carried the idea of caring for or watching over others. So while ‘elder’ tells you more about the character of the man, ‘overseer’ told you more about the function of his role.
 - **The term “pastor” also emphasizes function, particularly the feeding, nurturing and protecting responsibilities this leader has over God’s flock, the church.** In short, each terms communicates something unique about the role, but for the sake of clarity, I’ll stick with ‘elder’ from now on since that’s what Titus is told to appoint.

- ❖ Our next observation is that **2) An elder is an essential role (office) in the church.** Based on v5, apparently a church is not complete until it has elders. Titus was left in Crete to “*put what remained into order*” – literally “*to set right the things lacking*”. In other words, a church is lacking something if it doesn’t have elders.
 - **That means you don’t appoint elders just because you think it’s a good idea or because it worked for other churches.** No, you appoint elders in a church because it’s biblical. The Bible is saying that having elders is essential for a church to be a church. Otherwise it’s unfinished. It’s lacking.

- ❖ Thankfully, here at HCC, we do recognize and appoint elders. Some them are on staff and are financially compensated for the unique work they do as elders. (I’m referring to those we normally call ‘pastors’). We also have elders who are laymen with full-time vocations outside of church work but are still responsible to carry out the duties of an elder.
 - I realize that we never call our staff pastors ‘elders’ and our lay elders ‘pastors’. But again, what I’m trying to demonstrate from Scripture is that it would be totally appropriate to do so. But regardless of their title, I am very thankful that we recognize the importance of having elders.

- ❖ Our third observation is this: **3) An elder is an appointed leader in the church.** Elders are not self-selected leaders. You don’t just volunteer yourself. You don’t just naturally become one because you’ve been around the church the longest or because you’re a natural leader and well-liked by others.

- Rather, the eldership is an established office in the church to which you are appointed if **a)** you aspire to the task (1 Tim. 3:1) and **b)** you meet certain qualifications, which we'll consider in a minute.

- ❖ But before we move on, some of you may be wondering who is supposed to do the appointing. In our passage, Titus was given the task, but it's safe to say that the selection process was still a corporate responsibility. The fact that elders are expected to be above reproach (to have a blameless reputation) implies that the congregation will have a voice in the process.
 - Now as for exact details on how to select and appoint elders, Scripture doesn't supply explicit instructions. Those details are best left for individual churches to decide so long as the explicit qualifications are heeded.

- ❖ The fourth observation to make is that **4) An elder serves with a team.** This might seem obvious but it's an observation worth nothing. Titus is to appoint elders (plural) in every town, that is, every town that has a church. This is the consistent pattern we see in the way that Paul planted churches.
 - In **Acts 14:23**, we read of Paul and Barnabas going from city to city, preaching the gospel, making disciples, and appointing elders (plural) in every church. What that means is that no church in the NT was led by a single, sole elder. You won't find a pyramid structure in any church where one man stood on the top. Rather, we see a consistent pattern of elders leading churches as a plurality, a team.

- ❖ So what is an elder? An elder is one among a plurality of appointed leaders in the church who are essential to the very make-up of a church.

What Do Elders Do?

- ❖ The second question that naturally flows from the first is, "What do elders do?" What is their role? We've already touched upon it, but let me say two things.

- ❖ **1) Elders oversee the entire church.** As we said earlier, elders are called 'overseers' in v7 and that term carries the idea of *looking out for* the general well being of a body of people, in this case, an entire church. So while a church may have leaders who oversee particular fellowships or small groups, the elders are tasked to give oversight to the church as a whole.
 - Giving oversight would include both *caring for* and *leading* a church. Caring for church members would include praying for them, visiting them, examining prospective members, overseeing the administration of ordinances, and overseeing the process of church discipline.
 - In leading, the elders set the spiritual vision for the church. They oversee the work of deacons and church staff, and they're responsible for mobilizing and equipping the saints for ministry and missions.

- ❖ **2) Elders teach the entire church.** One of the unique qualifications for elders (in contrast to deacons, the other prescribed office of leadership in the church) is the ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2), or as Paul puts it in **v9**, the ability to “*give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*”
 - The elders’ teaching ministry has two fronts. **On one front, elders are guarding the flock from the false doctrine of fierce wolves** (Acts 20:29-30). This is accomplished by exposing unsound doctrine being propagated in popular culture AND by ensuring that what is being taught and practiced in the church by its various teachers and leaders is biblical and in conformity to the church’s statement of faith.
 - **On the other front, in a more proactive vs. reactive manner, the elders are the primary teachers feeding the flock** through preaching, teaching classes, establishing doctrinal positions, biblical counseling and personal exhortation.

- ❖ On one hand, elders are building up the church. On the other, they’re defending her. Just picture those in Nehemiah’s day who were tasked to build up the walls of Jerusalem in spite of the opposition and threat of attack by neighboring nations. It says that each man “*labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.*” (Neh. 4:17) As Spurgeon put it, each man held a sword and a trowel. One to build, the other to defend. That is the task of elders when it comes to teaching the church.

Who Can Be an Elder?

- ❖ So if elders are responsible for the oversight of the entire church as well as its teaching and doctrine, then we can’t just appoint anyone to the task. The spiritual well being of hundreds of souls are at stake. In a very real sense, this is a matter of life and death.
 - So who can be an elder? What are the qualifications? Paul lists out key ones for us to consider in vv6-9. But before we look at it, I want you to notice that practically all of these qualifications are focused on the character of the man. There is nothing about his seniority, his level of education, his work experience, his personal charisma. If you think about it, Paul is just describing a godly, mature man of God.

- ❖ D. A. Carson pointed out, “*The most remarkable thing about these characteristics is that there is nothing remarkable about them.*” They describe a mature Christian who is a good husband, a good father, who doesn’t get drunk and doesn’t lose his temper all the time.
 - So as we go through this list, you’ll learn about the qualifications for elders, but at the same time, you should evaluate yourself in light of this portrait of a mature Christian.

- ❖ The first qualification is **1) Elders are expected to be “above reproach” (ESV) or blameless (NIV).** This word shows up again in v7, suggesting that ‘being above reproach’ is the chief characteristic of an elder. It is the umbrella qualification, and all the other ones simply spell out what it means to be above reproach.

- But before we go on, we need to clarify what it means to be above reproach. **It doesn't mean the prospective elder is to be faultless, otherwise no one would qualify.** Instead, he is to be blameless, literally “without accusation”. There should be no accusation, no reason, to question his integrity and his moral authority to lead.
 - He should be walking in the light without any shameful secrets that he is hiding. He should be the kind of man that no one suspects of wrongdoing and immorality. The kind of man that we would be shocked to hear accused of such things.

- ❖ But again, when looking for elders, we're not looking for a perfect man. We're not looking for Jesus because Jesus is already the head of the Church. He's already our Chief Shepherd/Pastor. We're looking for faithful men to serve as his undershepherds.
 - We're looking for a man whose faults and shortcomings have been covered by the grace and forgiveness found in Christ, who has repented of any known sin in his life, and whose character and behavior over time has garnered the well-deserved respect and admiration from others. That's what it means to be above reproach.

- ❖ In determining that, Paul tells us to look within three spheres of life: a man's family life, his personal conduct, and his doctrine. So we see that **2) Elders are to be above reproach in their family life.** Now why does Paul bring up a man's family life and why mention it first? He explains why in v7, “*For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach.*”
 - Notice an elder is called “God's steward”. What's a steward? In those days, within a home, the most trustworthy servant was chosen as the steward. He was the household manager and the master gave him charge over the entire household.
 - So why should an elder be blameless in his family life? For (because) he is supposed to be God's steward over God's household the church (1 Tim. 3:15). If you expect to lead God's house, then you're expected to lead your own house in a manner that is above reproach. As one commentator puts it, “*The home is the training ground for Christian leaders.*”

- ❖ *What does it look like to be above reproach in the home? First, he must be “the husband of one wife”.* Now some wonder if that would exclude men who have remarried after divorce or widowhood. Some wonder if this means single men who don't have a wife are barred from the office.
 - **But I'm convinced that is has very little to do with a man's marital status and more to do with his sexual purity.** The phrase literally says that he is a one-woman man. That is, if he is married – and Paul could assume in his day that most men were – then he must be a faithful husband.
 - And the concern is not just if he has committed adultery, but rather all his relationships and interactions with women who are not his wife must be scrutinized and judged to be above reproach. That applies to married and single men who aspire to be an elder.

- ❖ **Second, Paul says that we're looking for a man whose “*children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination*”.** Again, questions naturally rise. Does this mean you can't be an elder unless you have children? Again I think Paul is speaking generally. Just as most men in his day were married, most were also fathers. If we were to read this prescriptively, then we would exclude any man who only has one child since the verse says 'children' (plural).
 - *But is Paul saying that if an elder is married with children then all his children have to be Christians?* That will depend on whether you translate the Greek word *pista* as *believing* children or *faithful* children? It could mean either so context will determine it. I lean towards the latter because Paul goes on to describe the kind of children he has in mind, those “*not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination*”. So the emphasis is the children's behavior and not on their eternal status in heaven.

- ❖ If you interpret this verse as requiring elders to have Christian children, then you place an impossible burden on them. For no father, no matter how good and faithful, can ensure the salvation of his children. Salvation is of the Lord. That is God's responsibility. Only God has the power to save.
 - But a father does have the responsibility to lead his home and the power to command the respect of his children. (The word is *tekna* and usually refers to young children in the home still under authority.) **Paul is saying that the behavior of the man's children is a reflection of the man's ability to steward a household.** If his children are being charged and accused of wild living and undisciplined rebelliousness, then the father himself is not without accusation.
 - But I want to stress that we shouldn't expect perfect children or Christian children, for even a child that is spiritually lost can still be obedient and respectful to his/her father.

- ❖ *So is the man above reproach in his family life?* Then consider appointing him as an elder, but there is another sphere to consider. **3) Elders are to be above reproach in their personal conduct.** Look at **vv7-8**. This is a list of vices and virtues, but what stands out are the words '*self-controlled*' and '*disciplined*' because they're almost synonymous, and they apply to all of them. I like how the RSV says the elder should be a "*master of himself*". Now in v7, Paul lists five vices that should not master or control an elder.
 - **a) He cannot be controlled by his pride.** "*He must not be arrogant*". The term literally means self-willed or stubborn. It's describing the kind of person who always insists on getting his way, meaning he's not a team player. But as we said, elders need to work as a team, so a self-willed man won't do. Besides, a steward of a house can't be self-willed since his job is to serve the will of another.

 - **b) He cannot be controlled by his anger.** An elder can't be "*quick-tempered*", a hothead, someone inclined to anger. If an elder's duty is to care for a flock of sinners – where there is guaranteed to be difficult and demanding sheep – then there will be

- plenty of fuel to spark your anger. If a man has a quick temper, if it won't take much to set him off, then he's not fit for the task.
- **c) He cannot be controlled by alcohol or aggression.** He must not be “*a drunkard or violent*”. Drunkenness and violence are strung together probably because they're strung together in life. Where you find one, you usually find the other.
 - Now this verse doesn't require total abstinence from alcohol, but an elder must be above reproach in his use of it, along with any other addictive substance. At the same time, a brawling and violent disposition is not befitting an elder. If a man is always itching for a fight, if he loves to argue, to get in your face, he's not the man you want to tend your flock.
 - **d) He cannot be controlled by his greed.** He must not be “*greedy for gain*”. An elder is not one who imagines godliness as a means of gain (1 Tim. 6:5), meaning he doesn't take on the office of an elder looking to exploit his position for money, power, or ungodly influence over others.
- ❖ So an elder must not be controlled by these five vices but rather characterized by the six virtues listed in v8.
- **a) He is to be “*hospitable*”.** If he is God's steward managing God's household, then he must be friendly and welcoming to members and visitors in God's house.
 - **b) He is to be “*a lover of good*”.** ‘*Good*’ refers to the public good – the good of others, of your community, of society. So an elder who loves goodness loves to do helpful, kind things for others.
 - **c) He is to be “*self-controlled*” and “*disciplined*”.** The terms are related, but the first has more to do with being sensible and sober-minded. The second refers more to a man's mastery over himself. He knows how to control his emotions and his actions. As we all know, a sensible, self-controlled man who lives a godly, orderly life is a respectable man that people will follow.
 - **d) He is to be “*upright*” and “*holy*”.** That refers to being just and devout. An elder is upright and fair in his dealings with people and holy and devout in his attitude towards God. That is a man worthy of emulation, worthy to lead God's people.
- ❖ *So is the man above reproach in his personal conduct?* If he can't even control himself, then why would you put him in control of a church? But if he is self-controlled and self-disciplined, then consider appointing him as an elder.
- ❖ But before you do, consider one last qualification. **4) Elders are to be above reproach in their doctrine.** “*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*”

- In ancient writing, the placement of an item at the beginning or end of a list was a method of highlighting its importance. So here we see that another distinguishing characteristic of an elder is that he is to be completely sound in his theology and able to teach it to others.
- ❖ Paul says that an elder must “*hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.*” The trustworthy word, the reliable *logos*, is not just referring to Scripture in general but to the apostolic teaching – the body of teaching that has been passed down from the apostles. In 2 Timothy 1, Paul calls it the “*pattern of sound words*” that he passed on to Timothy. He’s referring to sound, biblical doctrine.
 - So when looking for elders, we’re not looking for the most creative, innovative teachers, who can teach us something new every Sunday, something we’ve never heard before.
 - **No, we’re looking for trustworthy men who hold firm, who cling tight, to the trustworthy word as they were taught.** Reliable men who contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Faithful men who have been entrusted with sound doctrine and able to teach it to others (2 Tim. 2:2).
- ❖ *So is the man above reproach in his doctrine?* Is there any reason to question the soundness of his theology? And concerning his ability to teach, ask yourself: *Does he know his Bible well enough to explain it and apply its teaching?* Can we trust him to give sound answers and advice if people go to him with questions? Can he recognize and refute false teaching? Will he stand up and rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine?

Conclusion

- ❖ Friends, if you find a man like that, if he aspires to the office of elder and has a blameless family life and a blameless character and reputation, then appoint him as one of your elders and joyfully submit to his leadership, as one keeping watch over your soul.
 - And if you find a man who is almost there but not quite, then encourage him, pray for him, help him see where he needs to grow, and Lord-willing, he will soon be ready to lead.
- ❖ And lastly, please pray for the elders of this church (for the staff elders and lay elders). Pray for our personal holiness, that would be good examples for you in life and doctrine. That we would be faithful in marriage and wise as parents. That we would live above reproach. Pray that we hold firm to sound doctrine and always teach it with clarity and conviction.
 - Pray this regularly for the health of this church and the good of your souls. Pray this for the glory of Jesus and the greatness of his name.