

# Leadership starts in the small things

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Littlebourne - 9th March 2025 - 1 Timothy 3:1-13

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*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*

*8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 13 For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

We're firmly in the practical part of this letter to Timothy. In all times and places, the church needs leadership - the Apostles, Paul particularly, write to us about the importance of good leaders. Paul is writing to Timothy in Ephesus - a city where he has left the fledgling church with his young helper Timothy.

In Acts, you might remember that Paul addresses the Ephesian elders as he's returning back to Jerusalem in Acts 20. He doesn't go to Ephesus, but stops off by the coast at Miletus and sends for them to come see him. We have his words to them recorded in Acts 20. (excerpt v28-32):

*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, which he obtained with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. 32 And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

Paul tells them that it's going to be hard in Ephesus - that fierce wolves will attack the church. It will be a time of great testing for that church - strong leaders are required. Evidently, the elders that Paul left that day to shepherd the Ephesian church were not all who were required. We have today's scripture outlining the traits required of an overseer or elder, presumably because more Godly men were needed to lead in that church. It seems, from the problems and solutions we read about later in the letter, that the church is growing and has a growing number of dependents - we know historically that it was a centre for Christianity in the region, being the political capital of the Roman province of Asia, a well connected port city.

## **Overseers, deacons, elders, bishops, shepherds, pastors etc.**

The first thing that might strike us about today's text is that we have some different words going on than we typically use in this church, or that get used elsewhere in the church as a whole. Paul writes about overseers and deacons in this letter. We have elders in the United Reformed Church, and ministers. Elsewhere in scripture we see terms such as shepherd used to describe church leaders. So what's going on and how many jobs are there really?

This passage talks of overseers - ἐπίσκοπος episkopos - literally someone who watches over or visits, related to the word for visiting or caring for someone. Some translations will render this as 'bishop'.

In the other list of qualifications that we have in scripture - Titus chapter 1 - we see Paul use the word πρεσβύτερος (presbuteros) which means elder, senior, literally used to refer to older people.

In Ephesians 4 and elsewhere, we see another word used - ποιμήν (poimēn) - which means a shepherd, literally someone who herds animals. This the word from which we derive our word 'pastor'.

Then the word 'deacon' - in Greek διάκονος (diakonos) - means a servant, someone who renders aid or service. We see the term used both in reference to a specific office, a job or role in the church, and used as more general term. It's even translated as a 'minister' in places, such as 2 Corinthians 3:6 and Colossians 1:23. Paul describes himself as a servant of God, a diakonos. Christ is described as a diakonos too - a servant. But the use of the word in such places doesn't mean they hold just that lower office.

To put it all together then, the view I hold, and I think is upheld by scripture, is that there are two leadership offices in the church - elders and deacons. We might call elders other names sometimes - pastors for example. We might have a special position for a senior paid elder, but that's essentially still an elder. We might not call deacons anything, but we essentially still have people in that position - positions of authority that are lower than elders. What we see is that there is an authoritative role in the church, which is geared towards shepherding and pastoring the flock, the congregation, through teaching and preaching, and a second role, the deacons, who are appointed for other practical purposes - the seven appointed in Acts 6 would be the first example of this, though the passage doesn't actually call them deacons. They were appointed to free up the Apostles to devote themselves to prayer and teaching, and did so by handling the practical matters of aid and comfort.

Well what of bishops and the like? Our denomination has 'moderators' and assemblies and things like that, and all denominations end up with some form of hierarchy. Our Anglican friends today might be wondering whether bishops were a mistake - but hierarchy is inevitable, and in principle no bad thing. So whatever we call them, there is always going to be some form of seniority and structure. We joke about things decided by committee, and the jokes are funny because they are true - things run well when someone is in charge.

Every church will have leaders - whether formally or informally, whether by conscious decision or not, or most importantly, whether good or bad. Paul wants the church in Ephesus, and by extension, us today, to have good leaders, that embody certain godly traits. To the degree we get to choose, let us choose leaders that embody what Paul

outlines for us.

## The Qualifications

Paul gives us two lists of qualifications - one for overseers and one for deacons. A couple of things ought to strike us - first, the great deal of overlap.

The qualifications for overseers vs deacons are very similar. Of the qualifications, the only one that stands out as especially unique to the overseer role is that they be 'able to teach'. Everything else is very similar between the two.

The second thing to notice, is that these are not the sorts of lists we usually make today when we look for person to fulfill a role. If we wrote this today, we might write a list of skills. We might want certificates and experience. These are no bad thing, but Paul writes a list of character traits - the sorts of things you can't pick up from doing a course or taking classes. These are, for the most part, things that are innate, or God given - not that they can't be improved, or worked upon, but you can't just study to become more self-controlled, or more honest. You can't get a certificate in being gentle. That's not how it works.

With the exception of ability to teach, and not being a recent convert, these are things that are matters of character, or at least that derive from matters of character. Particular skills needed to be a good elder or deacon can be learnt, but the character qualifications must be present from the start of such a ministry.

## Basics

Some of these qualifications are pretty basic, and warrant little explanation.

Overseers are to not be given to drunkenness (v3). Deacons should not indulge in much wine (v8).

Overseers are to not be lovers of money (v3), and deacons should not pursue dishonest gain (v8).

Overseers are not to be violent or quarrelsome, but gentle (v3). Deacons must be sincere, or translated more literally, not double tongued (v8).

## Above reproach / well thought of

Some qualifications are a little more complex - we read that overseers must be above reproach, respectable (v2). He must have a good reputation with outsiders (v7). Deacons likewise should be men worthy of respect (v8).

Two ways we might get this qualification wrong - first, we may expect perfection. 'Above reproach' sounds pretty strong. But this doesn't mean without sin, or we'd never have qualified leaders at all.

The second way we might misinterpret this is by taking the 'reputation with outsiders' too far or in the wrong way. We see this in the modern day frequently - the desire to fit in with the culture and be respectable by our societies standards. Now we shouldn't be contrarian for the sake of it, nor be hermits isolating ourselves from the world outside. But the question is always 'by what standard'. By what standard are we seeking to be respectable? As Jesus says, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"

I think what Paul is driving at here, is not to bend to our societies standards instead of God's, but to avoid being open to the attack of hypocrisy. Being respected by outsiders for our godly characters, our stand for the truth. When we bend to the world around us, we might gain acceptance by the world, but do we really gain respect? We want leaders that outsiders look at and say, yes, we disagree, but I know he's honest and principled. That kind of respectable and well thought of. And standing firm on the truth I think gains a lot more respect than we might think.

## Sober minded / self controlled

We're also told that overseers should be sober minded or temperate, and self controlled (v2). At first glance, these seem to be pretty much the same thing, but I think there's a difference.

Self control is the ability to control yourself - to tame your desires and passions, to keep yourself moderated. A commendable trait and one that we're told is a fruit of the Spirit - something that the Holy Spirit works into the character of believers.

Sober mindedness, being somber or temperate, is being not steered by things outside ourselves unduly - being able to act rightly, not caught up in whatever the latest controversy or emotional whirlwind happens to hit us. It's that ability to see things clearly and judge rightly the course of action.

You could say that this is the sort of trait that separates the good leaders from the bad. Great leaders have that ability to see the bigger picture, to have a vision beyond the immediate problems and feelings of the moment and to filter out the wrong influences.

## Not a recent convert / hold the mystery of faith with a clean conscience

We're told in verse 6:

*He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.*

Paul has strong words here - it could be the case that in Ephesus, the false teachers that have been warned about in chapter 1 are those that ascended to leadership quickly, without a foundation of good teaching about the truth. To become proud of the position of leadership is a dangerous thing. Humility is called for.

The very word 'elder' evokes a sense of maturity. Yet we're not given qualifications for age, and Timothy in the next chapter is told (4v12):

*Let no one despise you for your **youth**, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.*

The principle is one of maturity in the faith, rather than mere maturity in years spent on the earth. It takes time and patience to become the sort of person that could be a good church leader. Both elder and deacon need the sanctifying work of the Spirit, which takes time.

Deacons likewise must 'hold the mystery of faith with a clean conscience' (v9). That is, they should be mature in the faith to the degree that they are convinced. A lower bar maybe than what we saw for overseer, but nevertheless a call to maturity.

## Able to teach

Elders also need to 'be able to teach' (v2). This is the qualification that is most like a 'skill', rather than character trait.

In Ephesus, with the problems they're having with false teachers, this would have been of great importance. They need leaders that can refute false doctrine, and teach the truth.

Now this requires a couple of things - first, the ability to teach in the abstract. The skill of giving a sermon or explaining something clearly. Some people have this inately it seems, others can learn it and we can all improve our ability here. Having this doesn't necessarily mean you'll be persausive - through preaching, it's the Holy Spirit that presses the point into the hearts of listeners, but this does go a long way.

The second important thing is knowledge - they have to know what to teach. They need that maturity of having sat under good teaching themselves and the desire to absorb the knowledge that they must pass on. We should be looking for church leaders that know the scriptures, can explain them and can refute false ideas.

The qualifications listed in Paul's letter to Titus tell us this (Titus 1:9):

*9 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.*

Again, we're not looking for perfection - nobody can answer every question or know everything, but the principle is that elders should have a foundation of knowledge and an ability to share it.

## Husband of one wife

Both overseers and deacons are called to be the 'husband of one wife'. A literal translation would render this 'a one woman man'. There's some debate over the exact meaning of this phrase - is this is simple prohibition on polygamy, or is more than that? Does this mean that the unmarried cannot be in positions of leadership? If that's the case, the Roman Catholics have a big problem. And of course, I was up here preaching well before I met Chelsea.

What the phrase is getting at I think is the idea of faithfulness, rather than a particular marital status. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians tells us that singleness is not necessarily a bad thing, he seems to have been single at the time, whilst being a church leader.

But most people in the church do get married, and marriage is to reflect Christ and the church - we're told as much in Ephesians 5:

*23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.*

Then Paul continues talking about marriage, and says:

*... 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*

Faithfulness between husband and wife is a reflection of Christ and the church - a lack of faithfulness in marriage will become a lack of faithfulness in the church, these institutions mirror each other. Jesus puts it like this (Luke 16:10):

*One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.*

By that quote I don't mean to imply that marriage is a very little thing, but you get the idea. These things are related and unfaithfulness in one area of life will show in other areas too.

## Women / Deacon's wives / Deaconesses?

Verse 11 is also the subject of much debate. Some translations put this verse into a separate paragraph as if it's a digression, an aside, about women in general, right in the middle of this section about deacons. Some translations render the word γυνή (gunē) as 'wives', some render it as 'women'. Now the word on its own can mean either - Greek doesn't have a distinctive word for wives like we do in English, which adds to the challenge of how to render this.



But there's three options. This could be an aside addressing women in general, but that seems pretty unlikely in the context. This could refer to female deacons as opposed to male deacons - we might then have the difficulty of why deaconesses have either more qualifications on top of the males if this verse is additive, or fewer qualifications than the males if this is their list separate from the male deacons.

The third option, the most likely I think, is that this tells us about deacon's wives. Both the deacon and his wife are to meet some qualifications.

Marriage is more than just who you live with. Marriage is the joining together of two people into one - we've seen that marriage reflects Christ and the church, that marital faithfulness is an indicator of wider faithfulness.

The specific instructions to the wives of deacons is that they be respectable themselves, not malicious but temperate and trustworthy in everything. These instructions are a subset of what is required from the deacons themselves. The principle here is that how we act reflects on our spouse. We sometimes talk about two becoming one in marriage, but do we take that to its conclusions? Whether we like it or not, one person in a marriage acting badly reflects poorly on the both of them.

This all ties in with the next qualification to examine.

## Managing his household well

An overseer is to 'manage his household well' (v4). Deacons should do likewise (v12).

I mentioned that principle Jesus gives us - that whoever is faithful in little will be faithful in much. Paul echos this in verse 5:

*If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?*

In the secular world, it's quite common for successful businessmen or politicians to have disfunctional families. We can look at some of the most successful people but see family lives that are in pieces.

But the church is run much more like a family than a business. We sometimes call ourselves brothers and sisters for good reason - we all are united into the family of God, adopted as sons, brothers with Christ. What you might be able to get away with in the secular world doesn't work in the church.

If someone cannot keep a healthy family going, how can they lead the family of God?

One trait I also haven't mentioned yet is that of being hospitable (v2), which I think ties in with this idea of managing the household. Have you got a household that you can welcome people in to? Is your household so tied up in its own problems such that inviting someone in is not possible, or are things sorted out such that the love in the house can overflow to others? As in marriage, what happens in the household will reflect on the whole. Which brings us to the last qualification to discuss.

## Children

Verse 4 tells us that overseers 'must keep their children obedient'. Verse 12 tells us that deacons must 'manage their children well', as they do with their households.

The qualifications in Titus go further (Titus 1:6):

*if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, **and his children are believers...***

The principle here is again, that what happens in the marriage, in the household and in the relationship of parent to child, will be indicative of how a leader relates to the church.

How can one tasked with the shepherding of souls be qualified when they fail to shepherd the souls of those they have the most authority over, those who they are closest to, those whose formative years they have the most influence in? Children are a reflection on their parents.

Proverbs 22:6:

*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

Psalms 127:3-5:

*Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!*

The picture is the child being an arrow - directed by the parent, aimed by their hand. As a warrior looses an arrow, so children go forth from their upbringing in the direction their parents set. What children are like is a strong reflection on their parents, and a leader with godly children demonstrates he has the ability to lead and shepherd in that realm, and will thus likely be able to do so in the wider realm of the church.

## **Application**

### **Principles, not perfection**

You might be thinking that these qualifications are not especially 'special'. They are things that really any Christian should be seeking. Faithfulness in marriage, self-control, respectability - these are things that should not be limited to just the leadership in the church. If you had a church where only the leaders embodied these traits, then they're probably not leading very well.

What is called for in church leadership is good Christian living done well. When we look to appoint leaders, we should be looking at these qualifications and whether the person matches up. But principles, not perfection. The only one who embodies these traits perfectly is Christ - and he's already in charge. In that sense, the positions of elder and deacon are not positions for extraordinary people.

Yet, this is supernatural. It doesn't come naturally to any of us to follow these traits well. To really have a faithful marriage that reflects Christ and the church, to be really honest and sober minded and self controlled, to be one that is above reproach - nobody can do this alone. We need the indwelling Holy Spirit to transform us, we need the redeeming work of Christ to renew us. We need to know that when we fail to meet these standards, we are forgiven and we can commit ourselves again to the work given to us, whether that's leading or any other position in the church.

### **Leadership begins at home**

One major principle that flows out of this scripture is that leadership begins at home. Before leadership is exercised in the church, it should be exercised well in the home.

This principle applies to all areas of life - what we do in private affects what we do in public, how we interact with our family affects how we interact with the wider world. How we raise our children affects generations after us. And this responsibility for good leadership at home is not limited to elders and deacons - it's a principle we can all take on.

One of the most influential 'memes' of the past decade might be Jordan Peterson's 'clean your room' advice. The idea is that so often you have people, particularly (though certainly not exclusively) young people, that have no end of opinions about geopolitics and how they would fix the world's problems. Meanwhile, their washing is piling up and they haven't tidied anything away in months. The way he means it is not that we shouldn't care about global problems or politics, but that we should have sense of perspective. There are things we really can make progress on, things we really have direct responsibility for, and in these things we can have an impact. And that impact is more than just complaining. We can do real good on the smaller scale, and those small things add up.

Don't neglect the immediate things in front of you - God has given you responsibility for the things close to you. You might be a husband or a wife, a parent or a grandparent. These positions come with great responsibility, exercise it well. You may have responsibilities at work or in the home, or in the church, and these may be unglamorous. But do them to the best of your ability. What we do in the small things affects the big things. He who is faithful in little, is faithful in much. Be faithful in the little and God may grant bigger responsibilities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, to the extent that you get to choose, choose leaders that embody these qualities.

Hebrews 13:17:

*17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

We can't all be leaders, but we do all have a role to play with regard to leadership - to encourage those above us. We want strong, Godly leadership, and we can all help with this. Whilst leaders are ultimately going to be held to account by God, and we shouldn't feel that our actions are the cause of our leaders failings, still we can help or hinder them in what we do. The writer of Hebrews says to 'let them do this with joy and not with groaning'. We can all strive to be people that don't make our leaders groan.

Verse 1 says:

*Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task.*

We're told (verse 13):

*Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.*

But Paul does not say that these are the only noble tasks, nor the only ways to gain excellent standing and assurance in faith. By definition, not everyone can be a leader - but all have roles to play and responsibilities to carry out.

The way the church will work best, is if we all, leaders or not, seek to do our best at the roles we are given.