

The sermon

Intro

We're going to discuss elders this morning.

I'm a woman and women can't be elders. I guess I can tune out this message. I'm a man and there's no desire whatsoever in my heart to be an elder. I guess I can tune out this message.

Not so fast.

These character requirements aren't for spiritual superheroes. They're expected of every Christian. As we consider each characteristic, you should be asking yourself, is this true of me? Use the characteristics as a sort of spiritual measuring stick. Where do I see evidences of God's grace in my heart? Where is there room for growth? Where is there room for repentance? What should this characteristic look like in my life today?

READ PASSAGE

Body

Flow of thought

Paul's transitioned from what happens when the church gathers (prayer, female apparel, teaching, exercising authority) to offices in the church (official positions). Elders this week. Deacons next week.

Point 1: A noble task (3:1)

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. – 3:1

“office of overseer” (synonymous terms)

Paul's talking about a specific, recognized leadership position in the local church. What we call elders. Palermo Christian Church has four elders: myself, Dennis Keller, Gerald Stillman, Ralph Littlefield.

The words elder and overseer are used interchangeably in the New Testament.

This is why I left you [Titus] in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you- ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. – **Titus 1:5-8**

First Paul calls them elders. Then he calls them overseers. Elders = overseers. Elder emphasizes age, seniority. Overseer emphasized supervision. Note Paul tells Titus to “*appoint elders in every town.*”

Pattern of elder appointment

As the gospel advanced into regions where there was no church, churches were formed. Then the apostles or apostolic delegates like Titus would appoint elders to oversee those churches. As apostles died off local churches would perpetually be led by elders. Our passage answer the question, who should be installed as elder?

“If anyone aspires...he desires a noble task”

Some men in the churches will aspire to and desire the elder office. "*aspires*" speaks of working towards a goal while "*desires*" speaks of internal longing. What if that's you?

Application: to the aspiring

Talk to me. The process here at Palermo Christian Church is:

- 1) The elders observe men in the congregation.
- 2) If a man meets the character qualifications and is able to teach, that man is given opportunities to teach (e.g., Sunday evening, Wednesday evening).
- 3) There is some trial and error. A man may find himself not able to teach and funnel his service elsewhere. A man may be gifted to teach, but requires more maturity before becoming an elder.
- 4) If a man demonstrates ability to teach and sound character over a period of time, the elders recommend that individual to the church for vote at a membership meeting.
- 5) The congregation is given time to share concerns if necessary before the vote takes place.

The congregation may know something we don't. Concerns should be addressed before a public vote. Where is congregation voting in the Bible? Great question. We'll deal with that next week.

If someone approaches me with the desire to elder I have to be balanced. I can't act as if it's as simple as sharing a desire and you're in. And I need to be careful not to discourage those with godly ambitions.

It will always be a case by case basis driven by today's passage. You might wind up an elder in the not so distant future. You might wind up an elder after a long period of growth and training. You might never wind up an elder. Your service may be funneled into another area better suited for your spiritual gifts.

Don't come up to me saying I'm called to be a pastor. Allow the church to measure your aspirations against the biblical requirements.

Point 2: Character required (3:2-3)

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, – 3:2

"*above reproach*" = above criticism. No reasonable charges can be leveled against you.

"the husband of one wife"

Here we must beware of rigid literalism. A common interpretation is "can't have been divorced and remarried." Note divorce isn't mentioned. Note some unfortunate conclusions that come with rigid literalism:

- 1) Need to have a wife = single men like Paul are disqualified.
- 2) Need to have a wife = if an elder's spouse dies, they're disqualified and must step down.
- 3) Can only have been married to one woman = the man whose 1st wife died and then he remarried per God's word is also disqualified by this logic.

He's been married to two women. Interestingly, with rigid literalism, the man who was divorced but never remarried is allowed to be an elder. He's only been married to one woman.

What does it mean? First, elders have to be men. This reinforces 1 Timothy 2:12. Second, elders who are married need to be faithful to their spouse. In Greek, the word for man and the word for husband is the same word. Context determines whether it's man or husband. Same with woman and wife. So it could be translated "*man of one woman*." Meaning a man who is faithful to one woman. Men who aren't faithful to their wife are disqualified from being elders.

What about the man who's been divorced? Case by case basis governed by the biblical qualifications.

Note Paul's concerned about the man's character today. "*not a drunkard*" today. Not he's never been drunk in his life. Why should a man's divorce 20 years ago cancel out the character formation God worked in him the last 20 years?

"sober-minded" = we understand the Bible correctly and know how to apply it well.

"self-controlled" = actions guided by sound thinking, not emotional outbursts.

"respectable" = same word for "*respectable apparel*" we saw last week. Virtuous living that earns the respect of a watching world.

"hospitable" = our homes are open to people.

[We'll skip able to teach for now.]

"not a drunkard" = we don't get drunk. Think drinking enough that you'd be legally intoxicated when driving.

"not violent but gentle" = not a bully, not quick to fight. Rather, merciful, gracious. Able to endure criticism without violence and sharp words.

"not quarrelsome" = a peacemaker. Not bickering and inciting conflict.

"not a lover of money" = not motivated by greed. Content with God's provision. Serving God rather than money. Jesus says you can't serve both.

Application

Elders set an example for the flock to follow. That's why character is critical. Christian, strive for each of these virtues.

If a man's able to teach but doesn't have these qualities, they're unfit to lead God's people. Leadership is more than being excited about doctrine. Leadership requires putting doctrine into practice. Leadership requires public and private lives that honor God. By the enablement of the Holy Spirit these virtues are attainable.

While imperfect, the elder is mature. God has reshaped his heart resulting godly virtues. The elder struggles like you and battles sin and has room for spiritual progress. Several years back at an Immanuel Network Summit, the preacher said elders are "exemplary repenters."

Point 3: Able to teach (3:2)

"able to teach"

Able to interpret the Bible correctly. Able to explain the Bible in an understandable way. Able to apply the Bible in a helpful manner.

This is a matter of gifting. All Christians should live out the character qualifications. All Christians are not gifted by God to teach.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. – **James 3:1**

Teaching is part of the "*noble task.*" As such, we who teach should consider the weightiness of the task. This means taking pains to ensure we've used Scripture accurately. Being careful not to misinterpret and misapply Scripture. I'm serious about getting it right. I take pains to ensure accuracy. You need to get Scripture, not my opinion.

Speaking of elders, Paul says this to Titus:

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. – Titus 1:9

Teaching involves both positive instruction and correcting wrong ideas. Elders must be able to demonstrate why what they're teaching is true to God's word. And elders must be able to prove why false teachings are distortions of God's word.

Ability to teach among elders will differ in degree. Some elders will teach more than others (1 Tim 5:17). We'll see that in chapter five. But all elders will give doctrinal instruction to the church. Teaching settings include preaching Sunday morning, teaching a Sunday school class, teaching on Sunday night, or leading a small group. Don't want bar too high. Or too low.

God's design

Learning takes place when the church gathers. Learning comes through teachers. In God's design, God has gifted some to teach for the edification of the group. Why do we need the local church? Many reasons. One being God has gifted some men with teaching so that the whole group is equipped for ministry.

Women can have the gift of teaching too. Given 1 Timothy 2:12, they use their teaching gift to help women thrive (Titus 2:3-5).

Point 4: Household management (3:4-5)

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? – 3:4-5

One requirement is proven competency in leading his home.

“manage” involves oversight, decision-making, correcting, instructing with God's word, and caring for each household member. Using your influence for positive impact.

“with all dignity keeping his children submissive.”

“dignity” = godly conduct that breeds respect. How a father relates to his children matters. **“keeping his children submissive”** means they're not rebellious. Is he living well? Is his influence positive?

Another caution on rigid literalism. The assumption is a married man in the season of life where he has young children living in the home. One possible season of life. It isn't talking about grown children outside the home. And it doesn't mean has to have children. With rigid literalism, we'd have to conclude no children yet = no elder office. That isn't Paul's intent. Paul's intent is limiting the elder office to exemplary models of Christian conduct, whether a father or not.

Note also the word **“care.”** This word's used twice in a familiar parable.

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' – Luke 10:33-35

The elder candidate isn't a man who just goes about barking out orders and issuing threats. He has compassion on his children. He ensures his children's needs are met. He interrupts his schedule to care for his children. He uses his resources for their good. Convicting I know.

The elder cares for God's people like a good father cares for his children.

Point 5: Not a recent convert (3:6)

He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.
– 3:6

The idea's a new convert is untested and lacks spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is something that happens over time. If a person is put into the elder office before spiritual maturity has occurred, pride is likely. A bloated head.

In doing so, the new convert repeats the pattern of Satan who became proud because of his beauty and exalted himself above God (Isa 14:13-14; Ezek 28:17). Satan was removed from God's presence (Ezek 28:16) and will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:10).

All of us can learn something here. Beware of thinking too highly of yourself! See yourself soberly: finite, limited creature in whom sin remains. Beware of wanting to be on God's level. Submit to his rule.

I would add time is needed to observe whether or not the character qualifications are met. Time is needed to observe whether or not the elder candidate is able to teach and manage his household well.

We do a disservice to new converts by quickly putting them into the elder office. We set them up to fall. Time for spiritual growth is critical.

Point 6: Good reputation in the world (3:7)

Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. – 3:7

The idea's if you put a man into the elder office with a bad reputation in the world, he's going to fall into sin. You're an agent of Satan, setting a trap for him. Satan wants church leaders to fall because of the damage it will do to the church. Fallen leaders questions gospel promises, confuses church members, creates trust issues, etc.

Some of you have been troubled by this. God's design is for your good. You suffered because God's design of character qualifications was ignored.

So the elder office can't be treated casually. Homework needs to be done. One piece of that homework is getting a feel for the world's opinion of that man. Interestingly, Charles Spurgeon, famed Baptist pastor in London during the 1800's, his church required that for church membership the candidate's workplace must be visited to ask about their character and reputation.

What do we mean by a good reputation? The world recognizes the consistency and character of the elder candidate. The candidate is trustworthy, a hard worker, uses his mouth well, kind and merciful to people, etc. We're not talking about a negative reputation because the candidate believes in sin and hell and marriage between a man and a woman. We're talking about a candidate who lies or speaks harshly or mistreats their employees or behaves selfishly. The world is a proving ground for elder candidates. It's assumed elder candidates will have contact with the watching world.

Application

You don't place just anyone in to fill a position. Not everyone is qualified. Not everyone is gifted.

Non-Christian

What does this mean for you? God instituted organized religion. God loves organized religion. The sort of organized religion that is shaped by the Bible, not man's opinions and traditions.

We haven't mentioned Jesus, but we have talked about sin and condemnation and spiritual growth. Jesus died on the cross as a substitute to rescue sinners from a future condemnation. We're all condemned because we've all sinned. We've all broken God's commands.

God offers rescue from judgment through faith in Jesus.

And God isn't just interested in you being forgiven. He's interested in making you new. He wants to change you so that you have a good reputation and you do home life well. The God of the Bible transforms sinners. It all begins with trusting in Jesus, not ourselves.

Conclusion

Palermo Christian Church, value the elder office. Don't take the elder office casually. Christian, pursue these required traits in your own life. Men, is this something you aspire to? Talk with me.