

The Call to Lead the Church--Elders, Part 7

Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:6–7

Code: 54-24

INTRODUCTION

A. The Standards for Spiritual Leaders

God requires elders to be men of integrity, wisdom, dignity, and virtue. But even though the standards are very high, God doesn't require perfection. If He did, no one would be qualified to lead the church because we all fail.

James 3:1-2 says, "My brethren, be not many teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment. For in many things we all stumble. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body." Only a perfect man doesn't stumble and offend. Therefore we shouldn't rush into church leadership without first giving careful consideration to the severe judgment that comes upon leaders who fail.

Such warnings, however, should not discourage us from leadership if God has called us to that task. Even though we aren't perfect, by God's grace and the Spirit's power we can meet His standards. But it would be dishonest for any church leader to hold himself up as a perfect example of godliness, as if he had no spiritual struggles, sins, or failures in life. Our fallen human flesh limits to some degree the success of our work, and we experience struggles just like every other believer.

B. The Struggles of Spiritual Leaders

In reflecting on my own life and ministry I can identify several struggles that are common to many church leaders.

1. Discouragement

a) Over our own failures

Falling to the temptation of discouragement is very easy for those in ministry because we have high hopes and expectations for ourselves. I have self imposed standards for my own preaching, study, self-discipline, and leadership responsibilities. And when I fail to meet my own standards, I tend become discouraged.

b) Over the failures of others

Discouragement can also come when you have high hopes for your people's spiritual growth, yet you see them falling short of God's will.

Discouragement is very common among church leaders. It has nothing to do with the size of your church because it usually comes not from a desire to have more people, but from a longing to see your people respond to God's Word as they should.

2. Indifference

After you have lived with discouragement for awhile, the tendency is to shield yourself by developing an attitude of indifference. You say to yourself, What's the difference? They get only a few of the things I say anyway. Half of them are asleep and the other half don't care.

Many older pastors whose ministries have been wonderfully blessed by God have become bitter and very distant from people because they've been hurt so many times. They've built a wall between themselves and people so they can't feel the hurt anymore. That's always a temptation to one degree or another in the ministry.

3. Busy laziness

a) By avoiding priorities

"Busy laziness" is my term for the times when we are very busy but aren't accomplishing anything of real significance. It's easy to be busy in the ministry, but business can be a form of laziness when we are doing what we want to do rather than what needs to be done. It's a matter of priorities, and a good test of our commitment and character is our ability to discern what's most important and do it. It's always a temptation to follow the path of least resistance and stay busy doing good things but not the priority things.

b) By pursuing recreation

There's also the temptation of saying to yourself, There's so many souls to bring to Christ, so many ministries to do, so much work, so many Christians to instruct, and so many things to teach! You can get tired just thinking about it, so you may think, I can't do it all. I need a break. I've got to get away. Obviously we need a certain amount of relaxation, but we must avoid the temptation to it as an excuse for neglecting our responsibilities.

I remember speaking at a conference where there were over 1,000 pastors in attendance. The conference organizers brought in several motivational speakers and we were all told to say something that would stir those men to commitment. They wanted to get them excited about the Lord and their ministries so they would return to their churches with a renewed zeal.

We were having a great week of meetings, and the men were responding enthusiastically. Then came the final speaker of the conference. His topic was the pastor's need for recreation and leisure time. That single message drained the enthusiasm and energy out of everything we had accomplished throughout the week! By the time he was finished everyone was saying, "Yeah, that's what I've been waiting to hear that's what I need: a break, a vacation."

Sometimes we want to hear that we're overworked, but that can be the flesh talking and our busyness may be accomplishing very little of eternal consequence. It's tempting to be busy doing things that don't amount to much, then telling ourselves how much we need a break.

4. Compromise

I'm not here referring to gross moral or doctrinal compromise, but to the subtle temptation to refrain from speaking God's truth for the sake of pleasing others and gaining popularity.

Most of us desire approval we like to have people applaud us. So the temptation is there to limit our message so we can gain acceptance and be better liked in our community.

5. Pride

Pride is a constant temptation, especially where God has graciously blessed a man's ministry. Pride can lead him to think, Look what I've accomplished. It is sinful self-gratification.

Besides all those things, there's always a multitude of general temptations that beset a spiritual leader. That's why we have to "put on the whole armor of God" (Eph. 6:11). Satan is unrelenting in his attempts to cause Christians to sin, and the prominence and influence of a spiritual leader makes him a prime target for the enemy's attacks.

In light of all those temptations, what elder could remain sinless? We all fail. Somewhere in the spiritual battle we're going to feel like giving up, or we'll become indifferent or prideful. Perhaps we'll say unkind words to someone. There are so many areas in which a leader can fall, and we are far from perfect. The qualifications for spiritual leaders are very high, but they're not so high that everyone is disqualified. By His grace God can make us what He wants us to be. Our task is to faithfully pursue His standards.

REVIEW

I. AN ELDER MUST BE BLAMELESS IN HIS MORAL CHARACTER (vv. 2b-3)

II. AN ELDER MUST BE BLAMELESS IN HIS FAMILY LIFE (vv. 4-5)

LESSON

III. AN ELDER MUST BE BLAMELESS IN HIS SPIRITUAL MATURITY (v. 6)

"Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil."

A. The Definition (v. 6a)

1. He must be humble

Humility is a very important spiritual characteristic that has not yet been mentioned in our consideration of leadership qualifications. Although Paul didn't specifically mention humility in this passage, it is the obvious point of contrast in his caution against spiritual pride.

2. He must not be a recent convert

The Greek word translated "novice" (neophutos) means "newly planted." The idea is that an elder should not be a new convert or newly baptized. This is the only occurrence of neophutos in the New Testament. It is used in its literal sense outside the New Testament to speak of planting trees in the ground (Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], p. 623).

3. He must be spiritually mature

The opposite of a new believer is a mature Christian. An elder must be mature in the faith. Of course maturity is relative, so the standard of maturity will vary from congregation to congregation. The point is that an elder must be more spiritually mature than the people he leads.

B. The Rationale (v. 6b-c)

1. To avoid pride (v. 6b)

The Greek word translated "lifted up" (tupho[ma]o) means "to wrap in smoke" or "puff up." In its figurative sense it means "to be beclouded with pride" (Rienecker and Rogers, p. 623). We don't

want new Christians to get puffed up with a false sense of spirituality. We don't want their thinking to become clouded with prideful thoughts.

The issue in restricting a new convert from spiritual leadership is not his ability to teach he may be a fine Bible teacher. It's not that he isn't a good leader he may have strong leadership characteristics. It's not that he has inadequate knowledge of God's Word he may be a diligent Bible student. But if you elevate him to spiritual leadership alongside mature godly men, he's going to have a battle with pride.

He may fulfill the qualifications of 1 Timothy 2-3 by having a blameless life and a marvelous family. But if he's a relatively new Christian, the tendency will be for him to feel proud about having been elevated to the level of leadership occupied by older more mature men who have been in the church for many years.

a) The situation at Ephesus

The Ephesian church had been in existence for several years and had trained their own elders. In fact, the first group of elders were personally discipled by Paul for three years (Acts 20:31).

By the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy, several years had passed, so there was a high level of maturity in that church. Consequently the role of pastor or elder was reserved for very mature men.

Admittedly some leaders in Ephesus were not qualified, such as Hymenaeus and Alexander, who were delivered to Satan to learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:20). I believe they were two of the leading pastors in that church. And there were others who needed to be rebuked (1 Tim. 5:20), but that didn't change the fact that elders were to be spiritually mature. To have placed a new Christian in that level of leadership would have tempted him to think more highly of himself than he ought to have.

b) The situation at Crete

Titus ministered on the isle of Crete, and Paul instructed him to "ordain elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). The situation there was different from that at Ephesus. The Ephesian church had been in existence for many years but the church at Crete was very young, so there weren't many mature believers there. Consequently, if a relatively new convert became an elder, the temptation toward pride was not so great because all the other elders were fairly new converts also.

To become an elder in Ephesus would give him the idea that he had instantly reached a level of spiritual maturity that took the other men years to obtain, but not so in Crete.

The primary issue in eldership is not the length of time a man has been a Christian, or his physical age (although maturity in years is implied in spiritual maturity), but his maturity level as it relates to the congregation he leads. Often the maturity level of a congregation is directly related to the age of the church.

c) The situation at Grace church

Grace Community Church is a mature church by comparison to many other churches. That's not a boastful statement it's simply a matter of longevity and ministry priorities. Grace Community Church has existed for over thirty years and has taught God's Word throughout that time. Consequently we have many third, fourth, fifth, and sixth generation Christians in our congregation. Our elders are mature men who know and teach the Word in great depth, and have spent many years preparing for that kind of leadership.

If we made a relatively new Christian an elder, he would struggle with the temptation to see himself as having arrived at that high level of spiritual leadership rather rapidly, and could easily fall into the sin of pride.

On the other hand, suppose you are a missionary who had led people to Christ in a primitive part of the world, established a church, ministered there for six months, and then had to return home. Before leaving you would have to select someone to be its pastor. That person would be a new Christian, but you'd look for someone who is mature in comparison to the rest of the congregation. It might take that same man ten years to become an elder at Grace Community Church, but he's rightfully

pastoring a church because of the relative nature of what spiritual maturity means in any given congregation.

We have young seminary graduates ministering here who are not elders because the church's perception of elder leadership is so high. Many of those men are excellent teachers and are qualified in their moral character and family life, but to place them into that level of leadership so soon in their ministry experience would tempt them to be prideful.

Many of our young men have left our church to pastor other churches without ever having been an elder at Grace church. But they were seen by those churches as men of spiritual maturity who could lead and teach them in God's Word. So spiritual maturity is a relative thing.

We must protect such men from the temptation of pride. The issue isn't how long they've been believers but how they'll handle being placed into a high level of spiritual leadership too soon. Some men can handle it properly, but others will become prideful. Paul warned Timothy not to expose a man to that temptation.

2. To avoid condemnation (v. 6c)

You might expect Paul to say that prideful leaders will become ineffective or fall into sin, but instead he says they will fall into the "condemnation of the devil." That's a very serious situation.

a) The source of that condemnation

What is the condemnation of the devil? Some people think that means a prideful leader will be condemned by the devil, but Scripture never portrays the devil as a judge who condemns people. Since Scripture presents God as Judge, it's best to understand the condemnation of the devil as a reference to the judgment that God pronounced on the devil. A prideful leader will incur that same type of condemnation. That conclusion is supported by the context, which deals with the issue of pride, and Scripture teaches that God opposes a proud man (James 4:6).

b) The nature of that condemnation

The condemnation of the devil was a demotion from high position on account of pride. God will do the same to any man whose thinking is clouded with pride and whose perception of his own spirituality is distorted because of a premature rise to spiritual leadership.

c) The history of that condemnation

A brief review of the devil's fall from spiritual privilege will help us understand the seriousness of Paul's warning.

(1) The existence of angels

The Bible talks about various kinds, ranks, and functions of angels: cherubim, seraphim, archangels, principalities, powers, and rulers.

(2) The names of angels

Some angels have higher ranks and capacities for service than others. Cherubim are the highest-ranked angels and are often seen around the throne of God (cf. Ex. 25:18-22; Ezek. 1:5 26; 10:15, 20; Rev. 4:6-8). They possess surpassing beauty and power.

We know three cherubim by name.

(a) Gabriel

Gabriel revealed and interpreted God's purpose and program for His Kingdom (Dan. 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26).

(b) Michael

Michael is the commander in chief of the heavenly armies (Dan. 10:13; Jude 9).

Gabriel and Michael are common names for children because they represent two wonderful angels.

(c) Lucifer

The most beautiful, powerful, and glorious angel of all was Lucifer. His name means "son of the dawn," "son of the morning," or "morning star." Even though that is perhaps the most lovely name among the angels, it is despised because of what he became.

(3) The fall of Satan

Lucifer's sin was pride, for which God cast him out of heaven. We see his prideful character on display in Isaiah 14:12-14: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, who didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north, I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High."

He wanted to usurp God's authority. Five times he said "I will," but God said in effect, "no you won't": "Yet thou shalt be brought down to sheol, to the sides of the pit. They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, and consider thee, saying, Is this the man who made the earth to tremble?" (vv. 15-16).

Satan was humiliated rather than exalted. To avoid exposing a man to that kind of condemnation, we must avoid placing him into spiritual leadership too quickly. It's not that a leader who becomes prideful will lose his salvation, for that is impossible, but he will lose his esteemed position.

Are You a Diotrephes?

I believe God deals harshly with any Diotrephes in the church anyone "who loveth to have the pre eminence" (3 John 9). That's why we must exercise great caution in placing a man into spiritual leadership. We don't want to lift him up only to have God bring him down. God will do what is necessary to protect His church from the influence of prideful leaders. He loves His church and is committed to the people He has purchased with His own precious blood (Acts 20:28).

Of course the safeguard against spiritual pride is humility. Jesus said, "Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matt. 20:27). That's the sign of a mature leader, and that's what the Lord wants His church to have. In fact, His standard of maturity could rightly be called His standard of humility because a mature leader will be a humble servant.

As a man grows into more responsible leadership roles within the church, he must be protected from any position that will breed spiritual pride.

IV. AN ELDER MUST BE BLAMELESS IN HIS PUBLIC REPUTATION (v. 7)

"Moreover, he must have a good report of them who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

A. The Quality of His Reputation

The Greek word translated "good" (kal[ma]os), as discussed previously, embraces the ideas of internal and external goodness. An elder must have a good internal character and a good external reputation or testimony.

The Greek word translated "report" (marture[ma]o) is the word from which we get martyr, but its basic meaning is "a certifying testimony." An elder's character must be certified by the testimony of other people.

B. The Evaluators of His Reputation

"Outside" has reference to those who are not in the church. An elder must have a reputation for integrity, love, kindness, generosity, and goodness among those in the community who know him.

That doesn't mean people will agree with his theology. In fact, there might even be some antagonism toward his Christian convictions, but he is seen as a man of character.

That's an important qualification because an elder can't have a godly influence on his community if it has no respect for him. That would bring reproach on Christ.

C. The Consequences of His Reputation

1. The potential for disgrace

The Greek word translated "reproach" means "disgrace." It's sad to consider how many men have disgraced the Lord and His church because of their sins. That's why an elder must be blameless in his reputation.

Incidentally, that qualification isn't limited to sins committed as an elder. It also includes any sins in the past that have given him a bad reputation. A man's ongoing reputation in the community must be considered before he is placed into spiritual leadership.

The importance of a good reputation in the community is illustrated throughout the New Testament.

a) Romans 2:24

Paul said to Israel, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you." Israel's sin brought reproach upon their God, and it's no different for us.

I'm constantly aware that many people know who I am and what I do. Consequently I must carefully guard my testimony in the community. For example, I was in a store recently with my family and we were discussing the purchase of a few furniture items. The salesman waited patiently as everyone contributed their comments and opinions about the various options available. When we had reached a consensus I told the salesman we were ready. He smiled and said to me, "I know who you are." I immediately thought, Oh no, what impression have we left on him? He then said, "I appreciate your ministry very much." I was relieved that our somewhat lengthy family discussion had not hindered our testimony.

Every Christian has to deal with some level of visibility. And people need to see a blameless life.

They may not agree with your beliefs, but they must see your godly character.

b) Philippians 2:15

Paul wanted the Philippians to be "blameless and harmless, children of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation . . . [shining] as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life." The quality of their lives would bear witness to the reality of their God. That's a high calling and a sacred responsibility.

c) Colossians 4:5

Paul said, "Walk in wisdom toward them that are outside [unbelievers]. . . . Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man." A good reputation includes wise words as well as godly deeds.

2. The potential for entrapment

Elders need a good reputation with those outside the church so they don't fall into "the snare of the devil." Satan tries hard to entrap spiritual leaders so he might destroy their credibility and integrity.

He's like a roaring lion seeking to devour (1 Pet. 5:8), and spiritual leaders are a primary target. "The snare of the devil" obviously refers to the traps set by the enemy because God doesn't entrap believers (James 1:13). We all must be very cautious.

Like all Christians, elders have areas of weakness and vulnerability, and they will sometimes fall into one of Satan's traps. Only a perfect man doesn't stumble (James 3:2). Elders must be particularly discerning and cautious to avoid the snares of the enemy rather than becoming victimized by them. Then they can be effective in leading others away from his traps.

Conclusion

God has identified the moral character, family life, maturity, and reputation He requires of elders. For the church to be all that God designed it to be, it must be led by qualified men. God requires qualified leadership for His church because He wants to mediate His rule through holy vessels, and because they are the models of what every believer should be. So the qualifications apply to every believer, but the congregation will learn only what they see modeled in their leadership. It must begin with them.

The Ephesian church needed to examine its leaders, and it's the same for us. The future of the church depends on the quality of today's leaders.

Some years ago I gave my sons this poem by an unknown author to illustrate how God molds His leaders:

When God wants to drill a man And thrill a man And skill a man, When God wants to mold a man To play the noblest part; When He yearns with all His heart To create so great and bold a man That all the world shall be amazed, Watch His methods, watch His ways! How He ruthlessly perfects Whom He royally elects! How He hammers him and hurts him, And with mighty blows converts him Into trial shapes of clay which Only God understands; While his tortured heart is crying And he lifts beseeching hands! How He bends but never breaks When his good He undertakes; How He uses whom He chooses And with every purpose fuses him; By every act induces him To try his splendour out God knows what He's about.

I believe God is building such men, and we must identify them, place them into leadership, pray for them, and follow their example. In so doing we will bring glory to God.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What warning does James 3:1 give to prospective teachers and why?
2. What are two sources of discouragement for an elder?
3. Why are elders tempted to be indifferent toward people?
4. Define "busy laziness".

5. Compromise can be defined as the temptation to refrain from speaking God's truth for the sake of _____ and gaining _____.
6. How can an elder shield himself from Satan's attacks (Eph. 6:11)?
7. What does Paul mean by "novice" in verse 6?
8. The opposite of a new believer is a _____.
9. What does "lifted up" picture.
10. What was the Ephesian church's perception of an elder?
11. How did the leadership situation at Ephesus differ from that of Crete?
12. What is "the condemnation of the devil"?
13. How does God respond to a proud man (James 4:6)?
13. What are the highest ranked angels?
14. Who are Gabriel and Michael?
15. What does "Lucifer" mean?
16. What was Lucifer's sin (Isa. 14:12-16)?
17. Who was Diotrephes (3 John 9)?
18. What is the safeguard against spiritual pride (Matt. 20:27)?
19. What does it mean that an elder must be of "good report" (v. 7)?
20. Who are the outsiders referred to in verse 7?
21. What does it mean for a leader to fall into reproach?
22. What kind of impact did Israel's reputation have on the Gentile nations (Rom. 2:24)?
23. What admonition does Paul give in Philippians 2:15?
24. What does it mean to fall into "the snare of the devil" (v. 7)?
25. How do the qualifications required of elders apply to the congregation?

Pondering the Principles

1. We have seen that discouragement is a common problem among church leaders because they have such high expectations for themselves and their congregations. Apparently Timothy struggled with discouragement and needed encouragement from Paul (2 Tim. 1:6-7). Perhaps the greatest source of encouragement for a church leader is an obedient and responsive congregation. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 and Hebrews 13:7, 17. How does God want you to respond to your leaders, and what will be the results if you obey Him? Pray that God will make you a continual source of encouragement to your spiritual leaders.

2. "Busy laziness" is a term describing activities that accomplish little of real significance. Take time to rethink your priorities. Are you neglecting important tasks for the sake of the trivial? It might be helpful to make a list of personal, family, and ministry goals, then evaluate your daily activities in light of those goals. Commit your time and energy to the Lord each day in prayer, asking Him for wisdom and discernment in doing the most important things first.

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