

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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Sept. 20th, 2026

Sermon Title: Elders and Deacons

Sermon Text: 1 Timothy 3:1-13

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

1Tim. 3:2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

1Tim. 3:3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

1Tim. 3:4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,

1Tim. 3:5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

1Tim. 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.

1Tim. 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.

1Tim. 3:8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

1Tim. 3:9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

1Tim. 3:10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

1Tim. 3:11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

1Tim. 3:12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.

1Tim. 3:13 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.

Main Point: God grounds the health of His church in qualified, servant-hearted men who prioritize the noble work of shepherding and serving over the desire for title or status.

Outline:

1. Elders (3:1-7)
2. Deacons (3:8-13)

Introduction

At the beginning of this month, the session announced that we were opening nominations for the office of elder and deacon here at Evergreen. It's been a number of years since we did that, and the session thought it would be prudent for me to preach on this important topic. Our hope is to give you solid instructions from Scripture so that you as a church can know what it is you should look for in prospective elders and deacons.

It's easy to look at men in the church who seem to have it together, or who have been successful in various ways and to think, "He would make a good elder." Sort of like how King Saul had all the looks and appearances. He was tall and handsome, and people thought, "He'd be a great king." And we are reminded in the life of King Saul that while man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart. The things we should care about are not just skin-deep.

And so I chose this morning's passage in particular because in it Paul is showing us just what it is that a church should look for when it comes to the office of elder

and deacon. But also because he gives us a good look at what is expected of both offices.

1. Elders (3:1-7)

First, in this passage Paul speaks of elders. So briefly, I want us to remember two things from Scripture about elders: the first is the qualifications, and the second thing is the work they are called to.

In verse 2, Paul says an overseer (one of the words he uses for ‘elder’) must be above reproach. Some translations use the word “blameless.” We’re not talking about sinlessness here. Instead, think of the elder as someone who, as a sinner is quick to repent when he is caught in a sin. What you don’t want is someone who thinks he is blameless (even at times when he is not). An elder won’t be sinless. But he will be the kind of man who – if you confront him – is willing to be honest about his own heart and say, “I thought about what you said, and you’re right. I’ve sinned. Or I’ve slipped. Or I’m drifting from my calling.”

This is someone who isn’t sinless but is quick to turn and seek Jesus Christ. He isn’t sinless, but he is someone who doesn’t have a laundry list of notorious sins that have been left unconfessed but that everyone seems to know about except him. Calvin says he should be someone who isn’t marked by something infamous that would lessen his authority. Calvin says, it’s one the thing to be blemished with ordinary vices; it’s another thing to have a disgraceful name. An elder shouldn’t have a disgraceful name. One of the ways we remedy a disgraceful name is by repenting, and a man who won’t even do that would be a dangerous elder.

Paul says the elder should be a husband of one wife. I won’t dwell on this since I’ve preached about it in the past already, but in every instance in Scripture we find that it is always and only men whom the Apostles appoint to be elders and Pastors. There not only are no female pastors or elders or deacons in the Bible. And in fact, the Bible actually says really clearly in numerous places that elders should be men. I just simply do not consider this to be controversial, so I won’t dwell on it more.

Paul says it should be a man. But not all men. It takes more than just having the physical body of a man to be an elder. The question is, what type of man? Paul

says, “a husband of one wife.” This doesn’t mean that you must be married in order to be an elder (otherwise even Paul couldn’t be an elder). But it does mean that the elder should be known as a one-woman-man. He shouldn’t be a philanderer, a cheater. Someone who honors the seventh commandment, who cares about his own chastity and the chastity of others. He should be someone with a good reputation in the area of marriage.

[By the way, I want to take a quick pot-shot at the Roman Catholic church, which requires its overseers and all in church hierarchy to be single. If Paul says that an elder should be “a husband of one wife,” then we can at least say that Paul isn’t commanding ministers to be perpetually single their whole lives. It is a terrible burden which the Roman Catholic church places on its leaders when it requires them to live without matrimony, especially when their requirement goes *far* beyond Scripture’s commands. I just had to mention that. Priestly celibacy is a man-made invention which the Bible knows absolutely nothing of. Thank you for bearing with me!]

Paul says an elder should be a one-woman man.

But he also says the elder should be “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable.” The picture Paul is painting here is of someone who is serious about the things of God, and who doesn’t let his worst features run loose. Instead, Paul says, this is a man who is self-controlled.

It is easy, if you are not self-controlled, to have the sort of respect and authority that comes with being an elder and to take that as permission to let your urges run loose. You can start to think, “well if I think this thing is good, it must be God using my desires to show me what is right,” or it’s easy to think, “my shoot-from-the-hip nature is part of what perhaps makes me a good elder,” which then means it’s easy to stop being on guard against your worst impulses.

You want a man as an elder who is so serious about God, and because of that is so suspicious of his own heart, that he lives with self-control... a suspicion about his own heart and motives... who doesn’t let his worst impulses run loose, but is instead asking, “What would bless God’s people? What has God said in his word? What would please my master instead of just me?”

Paul says an elder shouldn't be a drunkard. This goes hand in hand with someone being self-controlled and suspicious of his own heart. Alcohol is not a sin to drink. The Psalms say that God gave wine to gladden the hearts of men. Jesus made wine. He gave us the Lord's Supper with wine.

So drinking alcohol is not a sin. But drunkenness is. If you have a man who is known as a drunkard, you have someone who trusts in himself, doesn't have his guard up regarding his own heart, and who is willing to give up self-control in order to drink to excess. That man is a danger to the church, because his appetites drive him.

Paul says an elder must not be violent, but gentle, and not quarrelsome. I don't think "violent" here necessarily means someone who is quick to throw a punch. Calvin says, really this is someone with what he calls a "fierce disposition." This is someone who manages and controls others by threats and intimidation, and has what Calvin calls a "warlike temperament."

I'm sure I don't have to tell you that there are some pastors out there who are like this. I am sure there are elders like this as well. Some churches even think that this "warlike temperament" makes a man a better leader – and we've become so confused about masculinity in our day that some think that it is even *manly* to be like this—to have this sort of temperament. But in fact, it is childish and disqualifying for elders in God's church.

I want you to notice how all of these things are part of the same type of disposition. These things Paul is forbidding have a lot of overlap with each other. Someone who is violent and quarrelsome is someone who isn't self-controlled, and isn't suspicious of his own heart. This is someone who lets his appetites run rampant, and who wants his own way whatever it takes.

Paul says an elder must not be a lover of money. It isn't money that is the danger, but it is dangerous to be driven, motivated, and fixated by money. It is dangerous to be the sort of person where money is what one cares about and talks about more than anything. And this is tough, because someone who has his finances in order will often seem to be a good candidate for the office of elder. Here is a guy who seems to have his head on straight, he knows how to work hard or run a

business. This is a guy who keeps up appearances, but who underneath may be appetite driven rather than spirit-driven.

Paul says an elder must manage his own household well. This doesn't mean his children or his wife are perfect, but it does mean that at least for the children who are under his roof, they are obedient to their Father, that he disciplines when necessary, and is following his responsibility to God's calling for the family.

Paul calls elders to manage their home well. But you will notice that what he calls for is modest. He doesn't require that a man's children all be believers. Especially once they are no longer living under his roof. Once they are of age, they aren't even in his household any more.

Think about this: we have been studying the doctrine of election as we go through Romans 9. Paul calls all men to bring their children to church, to raise them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but no man can cause his children to be elect or to follow the Lord. Ultimately these things are in God's hands. But a man who manages his own household well does what God calls him to do, but isn't accountable for what he cannot do. One of my seminary professors, who is also a well-known pastor who teaches at Ligonier ministries is also broken hearted that his oldest son is an atheist. It tears him up. But he isn't disqualified from the ministry simply because (as far as we can tell) his son shows no sign of being elect. These things are in the Lord's hands.

There are some who feel that a man whose children are not all professing Christians shouldn't be an elder but to that I say, "you go far beyond Scripture," and like the Roman Catholic church that calls men to be celibate even though Paul does not and will not, why create new burdens for church leaders that God hasn't given us?

He needs to manage his household well. The reasoning Paul gives is that if a man won't keep his own home in order, he will also let the church sail by without much care or concern, either. It's very easy to let the status quo stay the status quo and to refuse to lead in the home. But a home that is spiritually adrift and a church that is spiritually adrift have one thing in common: a leader who is abdicating his calling.

Finally, Paul mentions that the elder shouldn't be a recent convert. Now, he doesn't put a time frame on this. Some believers might be new but also very mature. Others can be believers for a long time, and yet be very childish and not take their spiritual life seriously.

So I would say really what Paul is striving for here is real maturity and experience. But there is nothing wrong with having a man in his 20s or 30s become an elder. You do not have to be elderly in order to be an elder. I have known men in their 20s who I would say are qualified to be elders, and I have seen men in their 80s who are not. It is not really about age, it is about maturity.

[Transition: Desire the work, not the title or honor]

This is something really interesting that John Chrysostom pointed out, 1700 years ago: he says that no one should covet the office of elder. Because he says, if someone wants the office, then they want authority and they want honor. And Chrysostom says it's a terrible temptation, especially for someone with ambition and pride... to think, "I deserve this." To have that attitude misunderstands what it means to be a servant. But it also misunderstands in a sense what the call is to. An elder serves. He serves God, and he serves the church: not himself.

Now, Paul says, if someone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Is Chrysostom saying the opposite? No. He points this out: that we are to aspire to the work, not to the honors and authority that come with it. How do we know? Look more closely: "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." It is a task, a work: not really the office itself that we are supposed to desire.

I have heard this wisdom before, and I think it's true: when you are looking for someone to serve as an elder, what you don't want is someone who cares about appearances, and wants to be seen, and has a sense that they deserve attention or honor. Instead, you should actually look around your church for men who are already doing some of the very things that an elder will end up doing. Things like shepherding of others, teaching of others, praying for others... and who are investing in the church and doing it without the title, without the authority,

without the attention, and are just doing these things because the need is there and they want to serve.

Leadership isn't a means to authority. Authority is not an end in itself, it is a context for service. If you want to be a church officer because you think you'll get something in the process, run far away from the office for the sake of your church.

I won't embarrass our most recent elder by mentioning him by name, but the last time this congregation put forward a man for elder, I was already very convinced that he would be a good elder, because I saw a lot of love and maturity in him before his name was ever put forward, or before we had even opened officer nominations. After church I would see him visiting and praying with people. He was already doing the sort of thing that an elder should do. He was here for the church, and not for himself. You want a man in this office who just gets to do more of what he was already doing.

So Chrysostom says, an elder is someone who should desire the *work*, not the honor and authority that comes with it.

[What is that work the elder aspires to?]

So what is this work? Very briefly, because I want to talk about the office of deacon as well. But in verse one Paul calls the elder "one who watches over." Some translations use the word overseer. This work is spiritual vigilance, watching out for the souls and spiritual health and doctrinal safety of the church.

The work also involves shepherding care. In verse 5 Paul asks, "How will he care for God's church?" Paul is saying that an elder does this: he cares for God's church. Think of the good Samaritan who saw a wounded person and cared for him until he was healed. Being an elder is not cold administrative work. It is primarily a work of caring for peoples' spiritual wounds and keeping them healthy by making sure they are faithfully and regularly being cared for by the ministry of God's Word in Christ.

The work of an elder involves teaching. This is why Paul says in verse 2 that an elder should be "able to teach." They may not do much teaching, but they will be teaching. Even if not in a group setting but just in personal situations. They will

need to explain what God's word says and correct wayward people. They may have to explain to people why we do what we do in worship. Or why we don't do other things that people seemingly expect. That does require some teaching.

James 5 tells us that elders are called to the work of prayer. Prayer for the sick. Intercession for the church. In Acts 6 we find that the priority of the leaders of the church was the ministry of the word and prayer. Around half of our session meetings are spent in prayer. Half of it we pray. Half of it we are dealing with administrative and shepherding questions related to the church. Prayer is a significant part of the calling of an elder.

2. Deacons (3:8-13)

Second, Paul speaks of deacons in our passage as well.

He turns to deacons in verse 8. The word deacon really just means "servant." Lots of people get called a "deacon" (at least in the original Greek) in the New Testament. Often these aren't office holders, but they are people who are serving the church in some way. Jesus is called a "deacon." Caesar is called a "deacon." There is a woman named Phoebe whom Paul honors for her service to the church and he calls her a "deacon." But every time someone is called a deacon but it's not referring to the office, our modern translations eliminate the confusion altogether by translating "deacon" as "servant." This is what the office of deacon is: fundamentally the deacon is an ordained man in the church who is called to love, mercy, and service.

And the office of deacon is an office of sympathy and service. It is an office that comes with authority, but it's an authority to serve, and an authority to lead the church in its own acts of service.

We will be spending quite a bit of time in Acts chapter 6 next week, so I won't have you turn there today. But in that passage, the whole motivation for the creation of the office of deacon was, you had elders of the church where they were caught up in *administrative* work, and works of service. They were willing to do those things because they had servant-like hearts. But the problem is the elders were sacrificing the work of prayer and ministry of the word. So they were in

danger of becoming almost like a service organization instead of a group that was centered around evangelism and preaching and praying.

So the diaconate was introduced by the Apostles to serve the church, and to make sure that the church actually has elders who do the work of eldering.

This means that deacons care for the church property, they deal with the specifics of the finances, they also identify people in the church who might need material assistance of one kind or another. They serve the church in whatever ways are needed.

If you ever find yourselves thinking that the elders of Evergreen are serving you well, you should know that we could not do so without the deacons. The deacons are less front and center by design, but let me tell you: they are the reason that we are able to spend so much time in prayer. They are the reason why we are able to spend our session meetings talking about shepherding people, about the preaching of the word, about discipleship ministries in our church. It's why we can focus on what we are called to: because the deacons are called by God, they are serving well, and they are allowing your session to do the work of elders.

You will notice that when Paul talks about qualifications for deacons, they have a LOT of overlap with the elders, so I'll dwell a little less on this. But just consider that deacons are supposed to be servant-like, not selfish or greedy. A greedy man and the office of deacon aren't compatible, according to Paul.

The picture you start to see with both offices is of men who are mature, who can be confronted with their sin and who will respond with repentance. It is of a man who is serious about the things of God, and who love God's church. But it is never a man with ambition to become something great... somebody who sees church office as a shortcut to gaining respect.

Conclusion

In the remainder of September and through October when our church has an open time of nominations for elders and deacons, I'd like you to think over this text: who are the men in our midst who embody these things?

Part of embodying these things might mean that some men who are qualified may feel so intimidated by this passage that they decide they aren't. Almost every time I preach on elders and deacons, I hear from our elders and deacons that the sermon made them feel guilty, and helped them to remember their calling. That is the sort of man I want as an elder or deacon: someone who desires the work but who doesn't feel sufficient for these things.

We often estimate ourselves wrongly. We think we are mature when actually we aren't. Or we think we're not mature enough when everyone else around us feels the opposite.

And so next week we're going to talk about a second part of qualifications for office: namely the vote and calling of the local church. How does God call men to the office, and use the local church to make that calling clear? We'll look at that next week.

For the time being, I want you to be encouraged by two things. First, this is God's church. That's why he gives *his* qualifications for office. These are his undershepherds, and they serve under him. All elders and deacons serve under God, and are governed by his word. They may have authority, but it is a limited, delegated authority, only within the bounds of what God has said in Scripture.

Second, God provides his church leaders in his own time. God raises men up and prepares them, and this is not something we should rush. Maybe you see someone who is elder material, but you think he's not quite there yet. Pray for him, and wait upon the Lord to do the long work of shaping and maturing him.

Let's pray.