

The Books of 1 and 2 Timothy, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Qualifications for Elders and Deacons

1 Timothy 3:1-16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This chapter sets out God's design for the organization and leadership of the local church, and the doctrinal issue at stake is the New Testament pattern for how Christ's church is to be led and served. Paul gives qualifications for two offices, overseers (also called elders or bishops) and deacons, and he gives them in detail because the flock is precious, bought with the blood of Christ. Your aim is to help the class see that church leadership is not a matter of human preference or cultural convenience, but a God-given pattern delivered through the apostles. These offices are entrusted to qualified men whose proven character fits them for the work, and this is the consistent apostolic pattern (compare Titus 1:5-9; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

At the same time, do not let this become a dry survey of a checklist. The qualifications are almost entirely about character, and most of them describe what every Christian should be growing toward: self-control, gentleness, hospitality, freedom from the love of money, a well-ordered home, a good reputation. So press the chapter into every heart, not only into the hearts of potential leaders. And lift the class to the high, warm vision Paul gives at the end: the church is the household of God, the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth, the family whose task is to hold up Christ before the world. The hymn of verse 16 reminds us that all of this leadership and service exists to magnify Jesus.

Aim, then, at both conviction and formation. Doctrinally, ground your class in the apostolic pattern of qualified male elders and deacons leading and serving the local congregation, and in the church's exalted calling to uphold the truth. Pastorally, stir in them a high view of the local church, a deep respect for godly leaders, a willingness to serve, and a hunger to grow in the very character God requires of those who lead. Let them leave loving the church more, and loving the Christ the church proclaims most of all.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (v. 1). What does this passage teach us about the nature and importance of the work of shepherding God's people, and how does Paul want us to regard this office?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with Paul's opening declaration: "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (v. 1). This is another of the trustworthy sayings of these

letters, marking it as a settled, treasured truth. The word translated “overseer” (episkopos, sometimes rendered bishop) refers to the same office Scripture also calls elder (presbyteros) and shepherd or pastor. These are not three different ranks but one office viewed from different angles: the overseer watches over, the elder is a mature and seasoned man, the shepherd feeds and protects.

Help the class feel the dignity of the work. Paul calls it “a noble task,” a good and beautiful work. To aspire to it rightly is not ambition for power but a holy desire to care for God’s people. This corrects two errors at once: the cynicism that sees church leadership as merely a position to be politicked over, and the false humility that treats the desire to serve as somehow improper. A man may rightly long to shepherd God’s flock, provided he longs to do the work, not to wear a title.

Set the office in its biblical context. Elders shepherd the flock that God “obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28); they will give an account for the souls in their care (Hebrews 13:17); they serve under the Chief Shepherd, Christ Himself (1 Peter 5:1-4). This is why the qualifications that follow are so weighty. The men who do this work are caring for what God purchased at the highest price imaginable.

Draw out the importance for the local congregation. God did not leave His church without a pattern for leadership. He gave it qualified shepherds, appointed in each congregation (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). A congregation led by godly elders is a congregation cared for as God intended. To regard the office highly is to honor the wisdom of God who designed it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The office of overseer, elder, and shepherd as one office under different terms (v. 1; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2)
- The shepherding of God’s people as a noble and weighty work (v. 1)
- Elders caring for the flock Christ purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28)
- The God-given pattern of qualified elders appointed in each congregation (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5)
- Holy aspiration to serve distinguished from ambition for power or title

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul call the work of an overseer a “noble task”?
- How do the terms overseer, elder, and shepherd describe one office from different angles?
- How does remembering that elders care for a blood-bought flock change how we view the office?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul calls the oversight of the church “a noble task” worthy of holy aspiration (v. 1). Whether or not you will ever serve as an elder, how does this passage challenge you to value and support the spiritual leadership of the church rather than take it for granted?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question turns the dignity of the office toward the ordinary member. Most people in your class will never serve as elders, but every member has a relationship to the church’s leadership, and Paul’s words challenge how we regard it. The call here is to value and support spiritual leadership rather than take it for granted or treat it lightly.

Help students see their part. Scripture asks members to respect, honor, and obey their leaders as those who watch over their souls (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). This does not mean blind loyalty to men, but a glad recognition that God has given the church shepherds for its good. A congregation that prizes godly leadership, prays for its elders, and follows their guidance is a healthier and happier family.

Then press for honest reflection. Do we grumble about leaders more than we pray for them? Do we expect to be served without ever supporting those who serve us? Encourage one concrete response: to pray by name for the church’s leaders, to express gratitude to them, or to follow their guidance more readily. Valuing the office is itself an act of obedience to the God who established it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The member’s call to respect and support godly leadership (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)
- Honoring church leaders as a recognition of God’s wise design
- The difference between godly submission and blind loyalty to men
- Prayer and gratitude for leaders as marks of a healthy congregation

Discussion Prompts

- How do you currently regard the spiritual leadership of the church?
- Do you pray for and support your leaders, or take them for granted?
- What is one way you could honor and support the church’s leadership this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

The qualifications for an overseer are overwhelmingly about character: “above reproach,” “sober-minded,” “self-controlled,” “not a drunkard,” “not violent but gentle,” “not a lover of money” (vv. 2-3). Why does Paul emphasize character so heavily, and what does this teach us about what God values in those who lead His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now walk through the qualifications themselves, beginning with the foundational one: “above reproach” (v. 2). This heads the list and in a sense summarizes it. It does not mean sinless perfection, but a life with no glaring, unaddressed fault that would discredit the gospel or give the church’s enemies a legitimate accusation. From this flow the rest: faithful to one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money (vv. 2-3).

Help the class notice what dominates this list: character, not competence. Of all these qualities, only one, “able to teach,” touches on skill, and even that is as much about soundness and faithfulness as eloquence. Everything else describes the kind of man someone is: his self-mastery, his gentleness, his hospitality, his relationship to money, his reputation. God is far more concerned with what a leader is than with what a leader can do.

Draw out why this matters so deeply. A shepherd leads primarily by example, not by performance (1 Peter 5:3). A gifted but ungodly man can do enormous damage to the household of God, while a man of proven, humble character builds the flock up even with modest gifts. The world prizes talent, charisma, and success; God prizes holiness, faithfulness, and love. The qualifications quietly rebuke every worldly standard of leadership.

Apply it broadly. Because these are matters of character, they instruct the whole church, not only its leaders. Gentleness, sobriety, hospitality, and freedom from the love of money are not optional extras for the spiritually ambitious; they are the marks of a maturing disciple. The leadership list is, in part, a portrait of Christian maturity that every member is called to pursue.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Character, not talent, as the primary qualification for leadership (vv. 2-3)
- “Above reproach” as the summary qualification, a life free of discrediting fault (v. 2)
- Leadership by godly example rather than mere performance (1 Peter 5:3)
- God’s values contrasted with the world’s prizing of talent and success
- The qualifications as a portrait of Christian maturity for every disciple

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul emphasize character so heavily over talent or skill?
- What damage can a gifted but ungodly leader do to the church?
- How do these qualifications describe the maturity every Christian should pursue?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says an overseer must be “above reproach” and “well thought of by outsiders” (vv. 2, 7), and many of these same qualities are asked of every disciple. Which of these character qualities is God most clearly working on in your own life right now, and how might you cooperate with Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the character list and turns it inward. Since most of these qualities, above reproach, self-controlled, gentle, hospitable, not a lover of money, well thought of by outsiders, are asked of every disciple, the list functions like a mirror for the whole class. Read it slowly and let each person notice where the light falls on them.

Help students resist two wrong responses. One is to read the list as applying only to leaders and feel exempt; the other is to read it and despair at how far short we fall. The healthy response is honest self-examination that leads to cooperation with God’s transforming work. The Spirit uses such lists not to condemn us but to show us where He wants to grow us.

Then press for specifics. It is easy to nod at “I should be more gentle” and change nothing. Encourage each person to name the single quality that most convicts them, and one concrete way to grow in it this week, an act of hospitality, a guarded tongue, a generous gift, a reconciled relationship. Character grows in particulars, by the grace of God, one obedient step at a time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The qualifications as a mirror revealing where God wants to grow us
- Honest self-examination leading to cooperation with the Spirit, not despair
- Character formed in concrete, particular acts of obedience
- The whole church called to the maturity required of its leaders

Discussion Prompts

- Which character quality on Paul’s list most convicts you, and why?
- How can you cooperate with God’s work in that area rather than just feeling guilty?
- What is one concrete step toward growth you will take this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says an overseer “must manage his own household well” because “if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (vv. 4-5). What does this teach about the connection between a man’s home and his fitness to shepherd the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus the class on verses 4-5, where Paul gives a striking test: an overseer “must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” Paul reasons from the smaller circle to the larger. The home is the proving ground for the church.

Unpack the logic. The way a man leads, loves, and orders his own family reveals the kind of shepherd he will be over God’s family. A man whose home is marked by harshness, chaos, or neglect has shown that he is not yet ready to care for the larger household. This is not about having a perfect family, for no family is perfect, but about a home that is genuinely well led, where faith and order and love are evident.

Note how this honors the family and the local church together. God designed the home to be a training ground for godly leadership and a window into a man’s true character. The qualities cannot be faked at home over the long run; the family sees the real man. This is why the apostolic pattern looks for proven men whose households commend them, not merely men who perform well in public.

Apply it warmly to the whole class. Even for those who will never serve as elders, the principle stands: faithfulness in the small, hidden sphere of the home shapes and reveals our fitness for every larger work. How we treat those closest to us, those who see us at our worst and cannot easily leave, is a truer measure of our character than any public performance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The home as the proving ground for fitness to lead the church (vv. 4-5)
- Paul’s reasoning from the smaller household to the larger household of God
- A well-led home as evidence of genuine, untested-in-public character
- The honored place of the family in God’s design for godly leadership

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul connect a man’s management of his home to his fitness to lead the church?
- What does it say that the home is where character is most truly revealed?
- How does faithfulness in our closest relationships shape us for larger service?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul warns that an overseer must “not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (v. 6). Where in your own life does spiritual pride or impatience to be recognized tempt you, and how does this warning speak to your heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on verse 6: an overseer must “not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” The warning is about pride. A new believer placed too quickly into prominence is in spiritual danger, because the human heart easily swells with conceit, and pride, Paul notes, is the very sin that brought the devil down.

Help students see that this temptation is not limited to new converts or potential leaders. The hunger to be noticed, recognized, and elevated lurks in every heart. We can crave a platform, resent being overlooked, or grow impatient to be seen as important. This question invites honest reflection on where spiritual pride and impatience for recognition tempt us.

Then offer the remedy. The antidote to conceit is the humility modeled by Christ, who, though He was in the form of God, took the form of a servant (Philippians 2:5-8). Maturity is willing to wait, to serve unseen, to let God raise us up in His time (1 Peter 5:6). Encourage students to examine where pride or impatience is at work, and to embrace the freedom of humble, faithful service that seeks God’s approval rather than human applause.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride as a serious spiritual danger, the sin that condemned the devil (v. 6)
- The hunger for recognition as a temptation common to every heart
- Christ’s humility as the pattern and remedy for conceit (Philippians 2:5-8)
- Willingness to wait and serve unseen as a mark of maturity (1 Peter 5:6)

Discussion Prompts

- Where does spiritual pride or impatience for recognition tempt you?
- Why is pride such a dangerous sin for those in spiritual life and leadership?
- What would it look like to embrace humble, unseen service this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul turns to deacons, who must be “dignified,” “tested,” and proven “blameless,” managing “their children and their own households well” (vv. 8-13). What does the office of deacon add to our understanding of how God designed the church to be organized and served?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now turn to the second office: “Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain” (v. 8). The word deacon means servant. Where elders shepherd and oversee, deacons serve, attending to the practical needs and ministries of the congregation. The pattern likely traces back to Acts 6, where men of good

reputation were appointed to serve so that the apostles could devote themselves to the word and prayer.

Walk through the deacon qualifications. Like elders, deacons must be men of tested, proven character: dignified, honest, not addicted to wine, not greedy, holding “the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (v. 9). They are to “be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (v. 10). And like elders, each must be “the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well” (v. 12). The same emphasis on proven character and a well-ordered home governs both offices.

Note the wisdom of God’s design. The church has both shepherds who lead and oversee, and servants who attend to its many practical needs. This is not bureaucracy; it is the body of Christ ordered so that the work of ministry is shared and the congregation is well cared for. Both offices, filled by qualified men, allow the church to function as a healthy household.

Help the class appreciate the dignity of serving. Verse 13 promises that “those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith.” Faithful service is never wasted or unnoticed by God. The deacon who quietly meets needs is engaged in honored, faith-strengthening work, a reminder that in God’s household, to serve is to be great (Mark 10:43-45).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The office of deacon as a God-given office of service in the church (vv. 8-13)
- Deacons, like elders, required to be men of tested, proven character (vv. 8-10)
- The likely roots of the office in the appointing of servants in Acts 6
- The church ordered with both shepherds who lead and servants who serve
- The dignity and reward of faithful service (v. 13; Mark 10:43-45)

Discussion Prompts

- What does the office of deacon add to our picture of how God organized the church?
- Why does Paul require that deacons be “tested first” before serving?
- How does verse 13 dignify the work of humble, practical service?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul says those who serve well “gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith” (v. 13). Whatever your role, how is God calling you to serve His household faithfully, and what holds you back from serving more freely?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the deacons' example of service and turns it toward every member. Paul says those who serve well gain "a good standing" and "great confidence in the faith" (v. 13). Service is not only for those who hold an office; it is the calling of every Christian, for the whole body grows as "each part is working properly" (Ephesians 4:16).

Help students see that everyone has a place to serve. Not all are elders or deacons, but all are members of the household with gifts to use and needs to meet. The question gently asks: how is God calling you to serve His family, and what holds you back? Often what holds us back is fear, busyness, a sense of inadequacy, or simply never having been asked.

Then encourage a concrete step into service. Faithful service strengthens our own faith, just as Paul promises; we grow by giving ourselves away. Invite each person to name one way they could serve the church more freely, teaching a class, caring for a member in need, opening their home, taking on a quiet task, and to overcome whatever holds them back by trusting that God uses willing servants.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The calling of every member to serve in the household of God (Ephesians 4:16)
- Spiritual gifts given to be used for the building up of the body
- Service as a means by which our own faith is strengthened (v. 13)
- Overcoming fear and inadequacy by trusting God to use willing servants

Discussion Prompts

- How is God calling you to serve His household right now?
- What holds you back from serving more freely?
- What is one concrete way you could begin serving the church this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul tells Timothy how to behave "in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (vv. 14-15), having just laid out the offices of qualified male elders and deacons. What does this passage teach about the New Testament pattern for organizing the local church, and about the church's calling to uphold the truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal climax of the lesson, and it gathers the whole chapter into one breathtaking statement. Paul tells Timothy he is writing so that "you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (vv. 14-15). Having just laid out the offices of qualified elders and deacons, Paul now names the

nature and calling of the church they lead and serve. Slow down here and let the class take in each phrase.

First, establish the pattern of church organization Paul has delivered. The whole chapter assumes and teaches a definite structure: each local congregation is to be led by qualified overseers (elders) and served by qualified deacons, men whose proven character fits them for the work. This is not Paul's private preference but the apostolic pattern repeated across the New Testament (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Philippians 1:1). God did not leave the organization of His church to human invention or to the shifting fashions of the age. He gave a pattern, and faithfulness means following it. These offices are entrusted to qualified men, as the qualifications throughout the chapter make plain, and a congregation honors God by being ordered according to His design.

Then marvel at the names Paul gives the church. It is "the household of God," His own family. It is "the church of the living God," not a dead institution but the assembly of the living God Himself, who dwells among His people. And it is "a pillar and buttress of the truth." In Ephesus, the great temple of Artemis was held up by towering pillars; Paul borrows the image to say that the church is the structure that holds the truth of the gospel up before the watching world. The church does not invent the truth or stand in judgment over it, but it guards, supports, and displays it, so that the world may see and believe.

See how leadership and truth belong together. This is precisely why the qualifications matter so much. Elders and deacons are not running a social organization; they are leading and serving the very household whose calling is to uphold the truth of Christ. Sound leaders guard sound doctrine (recall lesson one); a church well led by godly, qualified men is a church able to hold the truth steady before the world. Weaken the leadership and you weaken the pillar.

Finally, lift the class to where Paul lifts them, to Christ Himself. Paul closes with what reads like an early hymn: "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (v. 16). This is the truth the church exists to hold up: the incarnation, vindication, and exaltation of Jesus. All the careful instruction about offices and qualifications finally serves this one glorious end, that the household of God might faithfully proclaim its Lord. Let your class feel that church order is never an end in itself; it exists so that Christ may be magnified before the nations.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The apostolic pattern of qualified male elders and deacons leading each congregation (vv. 1-13; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Philippians 1:1)
- Church organization as God's given design, not human invention or cultural fashion
- The church as the household and family of the living God (v. 15)
- The church as the pillar and buttress of the truth, guarding and displaying the gospel (v. 15)
- The inseparable link between godly leadership and the church's guarding of truth

- The mystery of godliness, the incarnation and exaltation of Christ, as the truth the church proclaims (v. 16)
- Church order existing to magnify Christ before the nations, not as an end in itself

Discussion Prompts

- What does this chapter teach about the New Testament pattern for organizing the local church?
- What does it mean that the church is “a pillar and buttress of the truth”?
- How does the hymn of verse 16 show that all this church order finally serves to magnify Christ?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this whole chapter, from the noble task of the overseer, to the proven character of God’s servants, to the church as the pillar of truth and the hymn to Christ. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, and one concrete step you will take because of it.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the whole chapter. Paul has moved from the noble task of the overseer (vv. 1-7), to the proven character of deacons (vv. 8-13), to the church as the household of the living God and pillar of truth, crowned by the hymn to Christ (vv. 14-16). The thread running through it all is a high, warm vision of the local church: God’s own family, ordered by His design, led and served by qualified men, holding up the truth about Jesus before the world.

Invite students to look back and name what God has stirred. For some it will be a renewed love and respect for the church and its leaders. For others it will be conviction about a character quality God wants to grow. For still others it will be a fresh willingness to serve, or fresh wonder at the Christ whom the church exists to proclaim. The goal is for each person to leave with something specific.

Then press for one concrete step. It might be praying for the church’s elders by name, pursuing growth in a particular character quality, stepping into a place of service, or simply committing to love and support the local congregation more deeply. Help your class turn the truth of this chapter into a single act of obedience this week, trusting that Christ, the One the whole church proclaims, is forming them through His word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A high, warm view of the local church as God’s household and pillar of truth
- Respect for godly leaders and willingness to serve as fitting responses
- Growth in Christlike character as the call of every member

- Christ as the center and goal of all church life and order (v. 16)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the single most important thing God has shown you in this chapter?
- What is one concrete step you will take this week because of it?
- How can this class help one another love the church and grow in the character God desires?