

The Books of 1 and 2 Timothy

Lesson 4: Qualifications for Elders and Deacons -- 1 Timothy 3:1-16

Every family has a feel to it. Walk into one home and you sense order, warmth, and trust; walk into another and you feel tension in the air before anyone says a word. Paul has been writing to Timothy about the church, and now he calls it by a tender name: “the household of God.” The church is not a building or a club or a religious corporation. It is a family, God’s own family, and like every household it needs shepherds and servants who will care for it well. So Paul turns to the men who will lead and serve, and he sets down with great care what kind of men they must be.

Notice first how Paul speaks of the work itself. “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (v. 1). This is not a position to be grasped for the sake of power or prestige. It is a noble work, a beautiful and weighty labor of caring for souls. The men who shepherd God’s people are not climbing a ladder; they are taking up a burden of love. And because the flock is precious, bought with the blood of Christ, the qualifications matter enormously. Paul will not let just anyone do this. The list he gives is long, and almost all of it is about character.

Read the qualifications slowly and you will notice something striking. Paul says very little about talent, charisma, or education. He says a great deal about character: above reproach, faithful to one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, hospitable, gentle, not a lover of money, managing his own household well, not a recent convert, well thought of by outsiders. The man who would shepherd God’s family must first be a man whose own life and home are in order. What a person is matters more than what a person can do. The church is not looking for performers; it is looking for proven, godly men.

And then, at the end of the chapter, Paul lifts our eyes from the qualifications to the One the whole church exists to proclaim. He calls the church “a pillar and buttress of the truth,” and bursts into what may be an early hymn about Christ: “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.” This is why elders and deacons matter so much. They guard and serve a household whose task is to hold up the truth about Jesus before a watching world. Come and see how God orders His family, and why every part of it points to Christ.

Group Discussion: Paul calls the work of an overseer “a noble task” and the church “the household of God.” How does thinking of the church as God’s family, rather than as an organization or an event we attend, change the way we view its leaders and our own place in it?

Personal Reflection: The qualifications for elders and deacons are overwhelmingly about character, not talent, and many of them, such as self-control, gentleness, hospitality, and a well-ordered home, are meant to mark every Christian. As you read the list, which quality most convicts you, and what would it look like to grow in it this week?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 20:28, elders shepherding the flock bought with Christ's blood; Titus 1:5-9, the parallel list of elder qualifications; 1 Peter 5:1-4, elders shepherding under the Chief Shepherd; Acts 6:1-6, the appointing of servants to meet the church's needs; Ephesians 4:11-16, leaders given to build up the body.