

The Body of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Shepherds and Servants: Elders and Deacons

1 Timothy 3:1-13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson sets out the New Testament organization of the local congregation, and it carries real doctrinal weight. Christ has given His church a definite shape: a plurality of qualified elders (also called overseers, bishops, and shepherds, the same office under different terms, as Acts 20:17 and 28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2 show) who shepherd and oversee the flock; deacons who serve; and members who follow, honor, and work alongside them (Philippians 1:1; Hebrews 13:17). This is not a human arrangement to be reorganized at will, but the pattern revealed in Scripture. What is at stake is the authority of the New Testament pattern for how the church is led and governed, against both unstructured chaos and unbiblical hierarchies. Be ready to show that the qualifications are overwhelmingly about character, which tells us that leadership in Christ's church is moral and pastoral, not corporate or political.

Two doctrinal points require particular care. First, the office of elder is the office of shepherd and overseer; teach the terms together so the class sees one God-ordained role of pastoral oversight, men who keep watch over souls and will give an account (Hebrews 13:17), under the Chief Shepherd, Jesus (1 Peter 5:4). Second, and most sensitively, the New Testament restricts the offices of elder and deacon to qualified men. The text itself requires each to be "the husband of one wife" who leads his household and children well (vv. 2, 4, 12). This reflects the consistent New Testament teaching that men and women have distinct and complementary roles, and that the work of authoritative oversight and teaching over the congregation is given to qualified men (1 Timothy 2:11-12). Handle this as God's good design, taught plainly but without harshness, and always alongside a robust affirmation of the indispensable service and dignity of women in the body.

The formational aim reaches every student, not only present or potential leaders. The qualifications Paul lists, above reproach, self-controlled, gentle, hospitable, free from the love of money, faithful at home, are simply the marks of mature Christian character to which every believer is called. So this lesson forms the whole congregation: it calls the qualified to aspire to the noble work, calls all to honor and follow their shepherds, and calls everyone to grow into the Christlike character described here. Keep the tone one of marveling at the wisdom and tenderness of God's design for His blood-bought church, and of honest self-examination, rather than mere instruction about offices.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (v. 1). What does it tell us that the work of an elder is described as a good and noble task to be desired, and what does the very existence of this office reveal about how Christ intends His local congregations to be organized and led?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul opens by calling the overseer’s work “a noble task” that one may rightly aspire to (v. 1). The very existence of the office tells us Christ intends His congregations to be led, not left leaderless or run by personality or popularity.

Establish the terms. The overseer (bishop) of 1 Timothy 3, the elders of Acts 20:17, the shepherds (pastors) of 1 Peter 5:2, and Acts 20:28 are the same office viewed from different angles: elder speaks of maturity, overseer of the work of oversight, shepherd of pastoral care. This is one God-ordained role.

Note the plurality. In the New Testament, elders are appointed in each congregation as a group, not a single ruler (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Philippians 1:1). The flock is shepherded by a plurality of qualified men, which guards against both one-man rule and leaderlessness.

Stress that the work is good and to be desired. Leadership in the church is not a grasping for power but a willingness to take up a noble, demanding, largely unseen labor of caring for souls.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The God-ordained office of elder, overseer, and shepherd as one role.
- Christ’s intention that congregations be led, not leaderless.
- A plurality of elders in each congregation, not one-man rule.
- Eldership as a noble task to be desired, not a grasp for power.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the existence of this office tell us about how Christ organizes His church?
- Why does the New Testament speak of a plurality of elders in a congregation?
- How is desiring this work different from grasping for power?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul says the desire for this work is noble, yet he immediately fills it with the weight of high character. When you consider serving Christ and His church in any capacity, is your desire matched by a willingness to be shaped in character? Where do the two not yet line up in you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question takes the noble desire of verse 1 and tests it against the character that must fill it. Paul ties aspiration immediately to qualification; desire alone is not enough.

Help students apply this beyond eldership. Any desire to serve Christ, in any role, must be matched by a willingness to be shaped in character. We often want the work or the standing without the formation it requires.

Expose the gap honestly. Where does the student's desire to be useful outrun their willingness to be changed? The gospel calls us to want both the service and the sanctification.

Aim for one area where character needs to catch up with aspiration, and a step toward letting God do that work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Desire to serve matched by willingness to be shaped.
- Wanting the work or standing without the formation.
- Honest examination of the gap between the two.
- Submitting to God's character-shaping work.

Discussion Prompts

- Is your desire to serve matched by willingness to be changed?
- Where do aspiration and character not yet line up in you?
- What step would let God close that gap?

Question 3

Student Question:

Almost everything Paul requires of an elder is a matter of character rather than skill: above reproach, self-controlled, hospitable, gentle, not a lover of money, not a drunkard (vv. 2–3). Why does God set character, rather than talent or success, as the qualification for leading His church, and what does that say about what leadership in the church actually is?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a key doctrinal block. Survey the qualifications of verses 2 and 3: above reproach, faithful husband, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard or violent, gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. Nearly all are character, not skill.

Draw the conclusion: leadership in Christ's church is fundamentally moral and pastoral. God is not assembling a board of talented executives but appointing shepherds whose proven godliness fits them to care for souls and to set an example (1 Peter 5:3).

Note the one ability named, “able to teach.” Even this is in service of feeding and guarding the flock with sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), not impressive oratory. The elder must be able to hold and impart the truth.

Apply it to how a congregation chooses and esteems leaders. We are tempted to value charisma, success, or wealth. God values character. A church that selects by the world’s measures rather than God’s will be poorly shepherded.

Connect to the blood-bought flock (Acts 20:28). Because the church belongs to God and was purchased at the cost of Christ’s blood, its care is entrusted only to those whose character can be trusted with something so precious.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Character, not talent, as the qualification for leading the church.
- Leadership in the church as moral and pastoral, not corporate.
- Ability to teach in service of feeding and guarding the flock.
- Choosing and esteeming leaders by God’s measures, not the world’s.
- The preciousness of the blood-bought flock entrusted to elders.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God make character, not talent, the qualification for leadership?
- What does that reveal about what leadership in the church really is?
- How are we tempted to choose leaders by the world’s measures instead?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says an elder must be “hospitable” and “gentle,” not “quarrelsome” (vv. 2–3). These are tests anyone can apply to their own life, not just leaders. Where in your relationships is gentleness most tested, and what would growth there look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question lifts two qualifications, hospitable and gentle, not quarrelsome, that any believer can apply. Paul’s list of leader-qualities doubles as a portrait of mature Christian character.

Focus on gentleness, since it is so often tested. Gentleness is strength under control, the refusal to be harsh, combative, or quarrelsome even when provoked. It is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23) required of all.

Help students locate where gentleness fails them: at home, under stress, online, with people who disagree, with those who irritate them. Naming the place is the start of growth.

Aim for a concrete practice of gentleness in the most-tested relationship, and a hospitality that opens life and home to others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gentleness as strength under control, required of all believers.
- Hospitality as an open life and home.
- Locating where gentleness most often fails.
- Concrete practice of these graces in daily relationships.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is gentleness most tested in your relationships?
- What would growth in gentleness look like there?
- How could you practice hospitality this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul requires that an elder “must manage his own household well” and asks, “if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (vv. 4–5). What is the connection Paul draws between the home and the church, and why does proven faithfulness in the small sphere of the family qualify a man for the larger sphere of the flock?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul grounds qualification in proven faithfulness at home: an elder must manage his household well, “for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (vv. 4–5). The home is the proving ground.

Explain the principle: faithfulness in the smaller, harder-to-fake sphere of the family demonstrates fitness for the larger sphere of the flock. The home reveals a man’s true character over time, where no performance can hide it.

Note that this is not about having a perfect family but a well-led one, a man whose leadership, love, and faith have borne visible fruit in those closest to him. Character is tested where we are most known.

Apply the broader truth to all. God generally entrusts larger responsibility to those proven faithful in smaller things (Luke 16:10). The way we handle our present, ordinary responsibilities is preparing us, or disqualifying us, for more.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The home as the proving ground for fitness to lead the church.

- Faithfulness in the smaller sphere as evidence for the larger.
- A well-led home, not a perfect one, as the requirement.
- God entrusting more to those faithful in little (Luke 16:10).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does proven faithfulness at home qualify a man for the flock?
- What does the home reveal about character that public life cannot?
- How is your handling of present responsibilities preparing you for more?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul warns that a new convert may “become puffed up with conceit” (v. 6), making pride a disqualification for leadership. Where does pride still show up in your own walk, and how might God be using time, testing, and humbling to mature you before He entrusts you with more?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question follows the warning against the new convert being “puffed up with conceit” (v. 6). Pride disqualifies, and the antidote is time, testing, and humbling.

Help students see pride as the perennial danger of the maturing Christian. It can attach to knowledge, gifting, service, or progress itself. Even spiritual growth can become an occasion for conceit.

Reframe waiting and testing as God’s kindness. The seasons in which we are not yet given more responsibility are often God maturing and humbling us, sparing us the fall that pride brings (v. 6).

Aim for honest self-examination about a specific area of pride, and a posture of patient submission to God’s maturing work rather than grasping for recognition.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride as a disqualification and a perennial danger.
- Conceit attaching even to spiritual progress.
- Testing and waiting as God’s kind, maturing work.
- Patient submission rather than grasping for recognition.

Discussion Prompts

- Where does pride still show up in your walk?
- How might God be using waiting and testing to mature you?
- What does patient submission to that work look like?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul turns to deacons, who must likewise be “dignified,” tested, and proven, “holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (vv. 8–10), and he describes the work of elders as shepherding the flock God bought with His own blood (Acts 20:28). What is the God-given role of deacons as servants alongside the shepherding work of elders, and how do these two roles together give the congregation its New Testament shape?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question opens the office of deacon (vv. 8–13) and sets it alongside the shepherding work of elders. Deacons (the word means servants) are qualified, tested members who carry out the practical service and ministry of the congregation under the oversight of the elders.

Survey the deacon qualifications: dignified, sincere, not addicted to wine, not greedy, holding the faith with a clear conscience, tested and proven, faithful in marriage and home (vv. 8–12). Like elders, deacons are qualified by character, and they must first be tested (v. 10).

Distinguish the two roles while showing their harmony. Elders shepherd, oversee, and teach; deacons serve, organizing and carrying out the practical work that frees the body to function (compare the pattern in Acts 6:1–6). Together they give the congregation its New Testament shape: shepherds, servants, and members.

Stress that both offices exist for the flock, not over it for its own sake. Elders care for souls; deacons serve needs. Both are forms of service, modeled on Christ who came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45).

Apply it to the congregation’s order and health. Where qualified elders shepherd and qualified deacons serve, the body is cared for and the work gets done. This is God’s wise provision for the life of the local church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The office of deacon as qualified, tested servants of the congregation.
- Deacon qualifications rooted in character, with testing required.
- Elders shepherding and overseeing; deacons serving practical needs.
- The New Testament shape: shepherds, servants, and members together.
- Both offices as service modeled on Christ (Mark 10:45).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the God-given role of deacons alongside the elders?
- How do these two offices together give the congregation its shape?
- How are both offices forms of service rather than status?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul says those who serve well as deacons “gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith” (v. 13). How does faithful service, in any role, actually grow a person’s own faith and standing before God, and where might Christ be inviting you to serve in a way that would stretch and grow you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question follows verse 13: those who serve well “gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith.” Faithful service grows the servant.

Explain the principle. Serving stretches our faith, deepens our dependence on God, and confirms His faithfulness to us in experience. We grow not by waiting until we feel ready but by stepping into service.

Counter the myth that we must be mature before we serve. Often service is the very means by which God matures us. Standing and confidence come through faithful doing, not before it.

Aim for one way to serve that would stretch the student, with the expectation that God will grow their faith through it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithful service as a means of growth, not only an outflow of it.
- Service stretching faith and deepening dependence on God.
- The myth that maturity must precede service.
- Confidence and standing gained through faithful doing.

Discussion Prompts

- How does faithful service actually grow a person’s faith?
- Where might Christ be inviting you to serve in a stretching way?
- What keeps you from stepping in, and what would the first step be?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul restricts the offices of elder and deacon to qualified men, requiring each to be “the husband of one wife” who manages his own household and children well (vv. 2,4,12; compare Titus 1:6), reflecting the consistent New Testament teaching that men and women have different, complementary roles in the church. How should we understand and teach this design, that only

men serve as elders and deacons, in a way that honors both the authority of Scripture and the full dignity and vital service of women in the body?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest and most sensitive doctrinal block. The text restricts the offices of elder and deacon to qualified men: each must be “the husband of one wife” who leads his own children and household well (vv. 2, 4, 12; Titus 1:6). Teach this plainly as the meaning of the passage.

Set it within the broader New Testament teaching. Paul grounds distinct roles in the created order and in the church’s life (1 Timothy 2:11–13). Authoritative oversight and public teaching over the assembled congregation are entrusted to qualified men; this is the consistent witness of the New Testament, not a cultural accident.

Frame it as God’s good and wise design, not as a statement about worth. Men and women are equally created in God’s image, equally redeemed, equally heirs of grace (Galatians 3:28). Different roles do not mean different value. The issue is function and order in the church, not dignity or ability.

Affirm robustly the vital service of women. The New Testament honors women who labored in the gospel, showed hospitality, taught women and children, served the saints, and adorned the body with godliness (Romans 16:1–6; Titus 2:3–5; Acts 18:26; 2 Timothy 1:5). A faithful church depends on the indispensable work of its women. Restricting two offices to men in no way restricts women from a full life of service, influence, and ministry within God’s design.

Teach pastorally and without harshness or apology. Some students, shaped by the surrounding culture, will find this hard. Lead with Scripture’s authority, with the equal dignity of men and women, and with a genuine celebration of all that women contribute, so that the truth is heard as God’s wise order for His household, not as a slight against half the body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The offices of elder and deacon restricted to qualified men (vv. 2, 4, 12).
- Distinct, complementary roles grounded in the New Testament (1 Timothy 2:11–13).
- Equal dignity and worth of men and women (Galatians 3:28).
- The indispensable service and ministry of women in the body.
- Teaching this as God’s wise design, plainly and without harshness.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the text itself require regarding who serves as elder and deacon?
- How do we hold together different roles and equal dignity?
- How can a congregation honor and depend on the full service of its women?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across 1 Timothy 3:1–13. Whether God is calling you to aspire to leadership, to serve as a deacon, to support and follow your shepherds, or simply to grow in the character described here, name one specific way Jesus is shaping you through this passage, and what is the first step?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the capstone, drawing the whole passage toward each student's life, whatever their role. The lesson has shown God's design for leading and serving His blood-bought church.

Tailor the response. For some, the call is to aspire to the noble work of an elder or to serve as a deacon. For others, it is to honor, follow, and pray for their shepherds (Hebrews 13:17). For all, it is to grow into the Christlike character the passage describes.

Press for a concrete step that fits the student: a commitment to support the leaders, a willingness to be shaped toward future service, a specific character quality to pursue.

Close on the wonder of God's design. Christ shepherds His church through under-shepherds, serves it through servants, and matures it through every member. Invite the student to love and live within that design.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Responding according to one's calling: leading, serving, or following.
- Honoring and following one's shepherds (Hebrews 13:17).
- Growing into the Christlike character the passage describes.
- Loving God's wise design for His church.

Discussion Prompts

- How is Jesus shaping you through this passage, given your situation?
- What is one concrete step in response: to aspire, to serve, to follow, or to grow?
- What is the first step, and when will you take it?