

The Body of Christ

Lesson 7: Shepherds and Servants: Elders and Deacons -- 1 Timothy 3:1-13

If you have ever watched a real shepherd work, not the gentle figure on a greeting card but an actual herdsman in a hard country, you know it is not a romantic job. It means early mornings and late nights, walking the rough places, counting the flock, watching for the sick one and the wandering one, standing between the sheep and whatever wants to eat them. A good shepherd smells like the sheep because he is always with them. The work is mostly unseen, mostly unglamorous, and absolutely essential to whether the flock lives or dies.

When God describes the leaders He wants for His church, this is the picture He reaches for. He does not call them executives or bosses or celebrities. He calls them shepherds, elders, overseers, men who tend the flock of God. Paul tells the Ephesian elders to “care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Think of the weight of that. The church belongs to God, bought at the highest price imaginable, and He entrusts its daily care to ordinary men who meet His qualifications and are willing to do the unseen work of shepherding souls.

That is why, when Paul writes to Timothy about the leaders of the church, he says almost nothing about talent and everything about character. He does not ask whether a man is impressive, wealthy, or charismatic. He asks whether he is above reproach, faithful to his wife, self-controlled, hospitable, gentle, not a lover of money, able to teach, and proven at home before he is trusted with the family of God. The same goes for the deacons, the special servants of the congregation. The qualifications God cares about are the qualifications of a holy, tested life.

This lesson is about the way Christ organizes His church, and it matters more than we often think. The New Testament gives the local congregation a simple, sturdy shape: qualified elders who shepherd, deacons who serve, and members who follow and work alongside them. It is not a corporation and not a democracy of personalities; it is a flock under shepherds, all under the Chief Shepherd, Jesus. Whether you are called to lead, to serve, or to support those who do, this lesson invites you to love and honor God’s design for the family He bought with His own blood.

Group Discussion: Think about leaders you have genuinely respected, in any setting. What was it about them that earned your trust and made you willing to follow? How much of it was their ability, and how much was their character?

Personal Reflection: Whether or not you are or could ever be an elder or deacon, the qualities Paul lists, self-control, faithfulness, gentleness, freedom from the love of money, are marks of a mature Christian. Which of these is God most clearly working on in you right now?

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-13

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 20:28, care for the church of God which He obtained with His own blood; 1 Peter 5:1-4, shepherd the flock, not domineering but as examples, and receive the crown from the Chief Shepherd; Titus 1:5-9, appoint elders who are above reproach and hold firm to sound doctrine; Hebrews 13:7,17, remember and obey your leaders who keep watch over your souls; Philippians 1:1, the saints with the overseers and deacons.