

Elder Qualifications

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Bible Text: Titus 1:5-6

Preached On: Sunday, July 9, 2017

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Over the next few weeks we will be looking at Titus 1 verses 5 through 9. Today, we will touch on verse 5 again but then we will also look more specifically at verse 6. And as I read verses 5 and 6, I'll be reading and preaching from the modern English version. I want you to see the grace of God at work in his church through godly, yet human elders. To see the grace of God at work in his church through godly, yet human elders. The word of God says this: "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city, as I commanded you: any man who is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children who are not accused of being wild or unruly. For an overseer must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not easily angered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for dishonest gain, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, self-controlled, just, holy, temperate, holding firmly the trustworthy word that is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to convince those who oppose it." The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of God stands forever.

Well, after reading that list, let's just close our Bibles and go home because NO ONE is qualified to lead THIS place, I can tell you that. As we come to these qualifications for elders and pastors in Christ's church, we want to look carefully and intentionally at what Paul is saying to Titus and to the Cretan church and what he is NOT saying to Titus and to the Cretan church. And I will be honest I-- I avoid texts like this because my prideful flesh wants to rise up and justify myself and my ministry and the enemy likes the come and whisper: "see, see Joel. You know what I tell you every week after you preach. I'm right, I'm right." It gives me great love and appreciation for my brothers in the work of the ministry, the elders here, who I know can struggle with the same temptations and frustrations and prideful moments and all the things that can easily come our way. And it causes me to want to ask for prayer, for myself and for them, as we seek to lead you because we hope we are godly men and yet we are very human. If you don't believe us just ask our wives and our kids. They will tell you just how human we are.

Well, verses 5 and 6- and I want to just touch again on verse 5 to remind us that elders in place are a reminder of God's blessing of the church. Elders are God's gift to the church. I've told you of that trick ordination examination question that we had out in the Midwest presbytery: Do you think you are God's gift to the church? Well, they're stuck. If they say "yes" we slap them for being prideful; if they say "no" we slap them the other way for not believing God's word that Christ has given gifts, God is giving gifts to his church and elders are one of those gifts that he has given. "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you." And in this text, and in others, there are two words that become interchangeable: elder and overseer. And elder speaks to the qualifications of the man, that he is mature in the faith and

has an understanding of the faith, as we see at the end of this section how he can not only teach the faith, but he can also interact with those who would denounce the faith, who would fight against the faith. And so we see the qualifications in the word "elder" and we see the work, or the office, in the word "overseer," that that is what we do. That we oversee, we manage, we observe, and we help. Now, when we have new- new members come in and interview and, praise God, we've seen quite a few of those in my couple of years here, I remind them that we're overseers, we're not stalkers. You know, we're not hiding in the bushes, we're not trying to catch you doing something. That's not our job. Our job is to faithfully shepherd and lead you to confront things that come to light, but to oversee you. Jay Adams summarizes this this way: "he is a mature Christian man who oversees that flock of God in a particular location." Seems plain and simple. Pretty cut and dry.

And also not- not only are elders gifts to God's church, but elders are examples in being given God's grace. Let's not pull a Sabbath school lesson on the office of elder. And what would I mean by that? Well, so often we look back at the Old Testament and we come out saying "you need to be more like Abraham, you need to be more like Daniel, you need to be more like these people" as if they are that in and of themselves. We- we even find "and Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" and we think: well, I want to be like Noah! What do I need to do to receive the grace of God? Well, you've missed the point, you've missed the boat on that, if that's what you think. If you think: well, I can do something to earn and deserve the grace of God in my life. And even so, and I- I know my brothers would say this with me, that there's nothing we do to deserve being an elder or pastor in the church. With my tongue in cheek, say well, whatever it was that you did, I would never do it again if I were you, if that's- if that's the punishment is being put in this place. But we think: "they're such and such a way and have such and such qualifications, they must be that way on their own without the work of Christ." Brothers and sisters, do not separate the qualifications of elder from the gracious working of Christ in their lives. If reading Titus 1 provokes you to self-righteousness, you need a new pair of glasses. If it provokes you to harsh con-demnatory judgment, you need to read it with a new pair of glasses. Don't separate these lists from the gracious working of Christ in their lives.

Well, what- what do we see here? We see three things. First, elders are blameless. There might be another opportunity to just close our Bibles, walk out, because we are not, in that supreme way, blameless. This points to two aspects of the life of an elder and I think one should be emphasized first. This points to the inner life and the outer life, the inner man and outer man of the elder. And I think the one that needs emphasized first is the inner life, the inner man, of the elder, the work of Christ in justification and adoption. Colossians 1 [vs 21-22] says, "And you, who were formerly alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and blameless"-- same word-- "holy and blameless and above reproach in his sight." This is the inner life of the elder, that Christ has been at work in his life. Many churches have suffered the painful consequences of having someone in their midst who seems to fulfill all of the qualifications of elder and yet Christ has not done this work in their inner man. They're, in a sense, blameless on the outside but they're not blameless on the inside. The blood of Jesus is not present there. But we said this points to the inner man AND the outer man of the elder. Not only is it the work of Christ in justifying and adopting in the OUTER man, we see the work of the Spirit in sanctified living. This is the same word that's used in First Timothy 3 in regard to deacons [vs 10] "And let them first be tested; then, being found blameless, let them serve as deacons." There are certain lifestyle and certain works of holiness and righteousness that we're looking for in the leaders of the church. And we see in this man the inner working of Christ and that being worked outward in the outer working of the Spirit as he is learning to walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh. So, elders are blameless, and we take that, not with a grain of salt, but we take that in the understanding that elders are not SINLESS. That they are blameless and constantly in Scripture when it comes to matters of

sanctification and judgment or discipline. It's in the responding and the reacting that we see. Is Christ at work in their life, are they blameless before him and before others?

Secondly, elders are the husband of one wife. Any man who is the husband of one wife. Now, Jay Adams, in his commentary on these passages, says that there are some who would like to make the qualifications of elder so lofty that no one could ever attain to them, that no one could EVER qualify. It's interesting that Paul seems to assume that Titus should be able to find any man in every city who would fulfill these things. The office of elder is, perhaps, more common than we would like to think or, perhaps, than we want to make it in our flesh, as we want it to be SO above and beyond that no one ever qualifies or people only qualify once every 50 years or something like that. But as Jay Adams works through these, not only this initial list, but the- the list below it as- as Paul then breaks this shorter list out he says, surely this is minimal. You know, not drunk, husband of one wife, doesn't get into fist fights. I mean, surely- surely, this is, in a sense, minimal. But elders are the husband of one wife. And there's been MANY different interpretations of this text over the years. Some spiritualize it to mean that you can only ever be the pastor of one church. Some thought it applied to bishops who, when their wives died, weren't allowed to re-marry. Some have even seen it as a requirement that elders and pastors HAD to be married. But I think it's pretty basic and pretty obvious what it means. That elders are not to engage in polygamy. You say, well, thank you, Joel, that's handy, that's- that's nice but, come on, is that really an ongoing issue? Well, it is in South Sudan where we've had some pastors and elders, in a sense, forsake their office to go with the cultural norm of marrying more than one woman. And we have to turn to this text and say "sorry friend, you're disqualified. You can't serve in that way."

Calvin, in his comments on this, points to the polygamy that was going on within the life of Judaism at this time, that multiple wives were being taken, and he says something very interesting, I think- has some very interesting modern applications for us as we wrestle through what our generation faces. He says that polygamy could be endured by non-leaders in the church, but if someone had already committed polygamy he was disqualified. That's my summary of what Calvin says on this text. And that's very interesting because, you know, we would think well if someone comes to Christ then they've got to, you know, I don't know, draw straws or what, which wives have to go, which can stay. You- you cook well, you can stay. You know, I don't know how you would make that determination. If it were up to me it probably would revolve around food somehow. But he's basically saying that there was an allowance within the church for those who HAD lived a polygamous lifestyle before Christ, as they came into the church, understanding they had set up a whole home economy on this and now, what would you do with these wives who are accustomed to being taken care of and serving within that home. And yet there is a separation out of the elders of the church, that they could not participate or could not have participated in such a life. And so there are modern applications here. What of those in South Sudan and other nations where you're seen as a real schmuck if you're- if you have a certain amount of means and you only take on one wife when there are few husbands to be had and many women, I mean, you're really selfish if you don't participate in that. What of the fundamentalist Mormons? What if a family like that comes to Christ, the true biblical Christ, what do we say in that moment?

Now what's not being said is that- that Joel, Vince, Brad, David, David, Tony, Mike, they can't be polygamous, but Neil go- go ahead. I dare you, I dare you. She is small but mighty, okay. No, that's not what- that's not what's being said, that the elders can't participate in this but, Hey, all y'all, go for it. No, that's not what's being said. But what is being spoken to is times of transition in the life of the church in various cultures and societies where this is in the culture, now what happens when that family shows up in the church and Christ has done a work in the- in the life of the husband and the wife and the wife and the wife. What do we do with that? What is being said is that this would be a residual situation from

pre-conversion, or I think of those men in South Sudan who might repent of that work but have now taken on another wife. At any rate, we should understand that it is not as God intended to be and so it should be mourned, not celebrated, and as we live in a world where things like polygamy start to seem less and less offensive in light of other things going on, and people want to be poly amorous and poly gendered and all sorts of things going on, we have to be mourning this and we have to be thinking of how to apply Scripture in the life of our generation and in the time in which we live. So we need to think of extrapolations and applications of this in the life of the church. Think of so called gay marriage and adoption. What do we do with those families when they show up in our church? And this speaks to the intricacies of the Gospel applying to the lives of men and women and boys and girls who Christ draws to himself. It can also point to our self-righteousness. If we're sitting here today thinking, well, yeah, but we all know Jesus really isn't going to save people like that. Really? How bad was your sin before the Lord? Well, it wasn't really that bad. Really? Really? We should pray that we have to deal with this in the church. We should pray that an agenda on the elders docket is what to do with the two men who just showed up with a couple little kids and they're saying, "we love Jesus now and we know we're not right, what do- what do we need to do?" Elders are the husband of one wife.

Thirdly, elders have Christian families. Any man who is "having faithful children who are not accused of being wild or unruly." Now, every pastor's wife gets nervous when she sits in worship, by herself, a pulpit widow, handling a family the size that everyone expects a pastor's family to have. I had a conversation with a lady in our neighborhood who asked me if I was Catholic because we had 5 children. Some of you laugh, those of you who have nearly twice as many as that. I said, "No, I'm Presbyterian." "What? I- I grew up Presbyterian, we don't have 5 children." I said, "Did you know the average Presbyterian minister's home in the nineteenth century and I think the average was 18 children." "That was over 100 years ago," she says. Let me have a little parenthetical time here. I want us to be careful not to interpret this passage too harshly in light of what we- what we expect children's behavior to be in worship. In other words, we need to be careful how we define "wild and unruly" as pertains to our kids. And that's for all of us, not just the officers of the church. It breaks my heart when I have parents apologized to me for how their kids acted in church. My grandfather was a Baptist minister- I've shared this with you before- and people used to say, "it doesn't bother you when kids are acting up and not listening in the worship service?" He says, "No, it bothers me when their parents aren't listening in the worship service." Let us not ascribe righteousness too highly to sitting still. Howard Hendricks in his books on Christian education reminds us that the kid crawling the walls-- well, let me, let me-- the kid sitting quietly in Sabbath school is probably not going to change the world as much as the one crawling the walls. Let us be careful to love and disciple all of our kids in the church, not just the ones who sit quietly and- and quote unquote do as they're told. Free sermon over.

Faithful children... this speaks to a certain age, not necessarily adults with their own households, but it does, most likely, not apply to toddlers, either. And so that, first of all, sets aside.. we're dealing with kids who can mentally and emotionally engage the Gospel and what they're being told. How DO we define these words? Well, when we look at a word like "wild," we almost imagine feral children just running around the church building, eating whatever they find out in the woods, and all of this. And while it might seem that way after worship some Lord's days- we do have some kids with quite a bit of energy and they're- it's a beautiful thing. This speaks of what other translations use: debauchery, the word that's applied to drunkenness in Ephesians 5. And so we see that not only is there a certain age but there's a certain extremity to what Paul is talking about here. Now, here's where Greek helps out a little bit. As you look at this text you might be tempted to think that having faithful children, or not accuse of being wild or unruly, that they're not accused of those two things. But there is actually a separation here between "wild" and "unruly." Wild applies to what they're being accused of. Unruly applies to the children. And so what we see here are the two aspects of biblical discipline which we find in our

church's book of discipline. Part one of our book of discipline has more informal discipline. Matthew 18: you see someone sinning, you go and talk to them, they say "you're right I should stop that," you've won your brother, problem solved. You go talk to them, they don't listen, you take a witness to see how they interact and respond with that, and it moves forward from there. If all that fails then we have the more formal disciplines of the church where accusations are brought, where there are rebukes or admonitions given, or there might be excommunication, okay? And so there are two aspects to discipline, both of which are, I believe, an application of what is being interacted with here in the children of elders. And it might more clearly be put this way: faithful children who are neither unruly (insubordinate or disobedient) OR accused of being wild (debauched, drunkenness, these types of things).

So what we're dealing with here are older, aware children of the elders who are responding neither to informal OR formal discipline in the church. That's a little different than the little kid of an elder has a tantrum in the middle of worship and his mom has to drag him out and we throw him up on charges because they have an unruly and wild kid. And so, as we see a certain age and a certain extremity of what Paul is talking about here, it brings it back around to the fact that elders have Christian families. The elders put in place in their home the means by which their children are, hopefully, driven toward, but also drawn toward, loving the Lord, loving his Word, loving his church, loving his worship. And the elder prays for that and labors for that and hopes for that in the life of his children. Now, some of you know what it is to see your kids grow older and realize they don't love Jesus. They don't love Jesus. You know what it's like to pray, through tears, that they would come home. Not just to your house, probably not to your house because they'll just eat your food and you kick him off the couch and all this. But that they would come home to the faith. That they would come home to the house of God. This doesn't mean the elders will have perfect families. This means that we will have elders in the church who are seeking to disciple and train their families. Elders that may know how to sit and cry WITH you and weep WITH you over the heart of a child that perhaps seemed to love Jesus when they were young but, as they got older, they wandered off into the world and have no regard for Christ and his ways and his church. It means that we have elders who love the Lord. It means that we have elders who know the pain of discipline and they're not afraid to do it because they love the people that they have been called to lead. Elders are blameless, elders are the husband of one wife, elders have Christian families. And let us remind ourselves that it is this way because Jesus is at work in their lives. Because they have the work of Christ in their inner man, the work of the Spirit in their outer man. That they are not just justified, they are being sanctified. They're standing in the face of the cultural norms and obeying Christ rather than the world and they're seeking to lead their families to the Lord. Brothers and sisters, see the grace of God at work in his church as you see godly, yet very human elders seeking to love and serving as we have been called to by our Lord.

Stand with me as we pray.