

Elders and Deacons

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Date: 20 November 2011

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[0 : 00] 1 Timothy 3, page 1194.

And I want to first of all look at the very beginning, the very first verse of that chapter. The saying is trustworthy, if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

And then if we read the very end of that passage we read earlier in verse 13, for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

I perhaps should apologize to anyone who's visiting with us, who has come here from other parts of the country. Or whatever, that this morning we're going to be discussing an in-house issue.

Now that's of course not to say that you can't gain anything out of it, but it's perhaps going to be just a little bit unusual. We wouldn't normally talk about rule or leadership within the church, but it is important for us at this moment in time.

[1 : 17] And I think we should always remember also that this is as much the word of God as anything else. And who knows what God could say to you, even from this seeming, seeming irrelevant part that's relevant to ourselves, but perhaps is not relevant to you.

But even so, God's word is relevant at all times. And it's got that peculiar power to reach into our hearts and to make us see what we've never seen before about ourselves and about who God is and what God is.

And of course, the church exists to demonstrate that. That's what the church is all about. It's the most unique organization in the world. The sad thing is that for many people, the church has become something of a dry institution, something of a formal, traditional place that is more concerned about procedures rather than about people.

And if that is the case, that needs to be sorted out. That needs to be put right. Because the church in the New Testament was about people. It was about people who were brought together for one reason and one reason alone.

And that is they had come to faith in Jesus Christ. They had come to discover that he truly had risen from the dead. And that his death on the cross was the way in which our sin can be forgiven and will be forgiven if we put our trust in him.

[3 : 03] And that is the gospel. And the church has been tasked, commanded by Jesus himself no less, to go into the world and to simply share that message.

Not force people. We are not to take the world by violence. We are to reason and to persuade people. Not by way of being salesmen or salespeople.

It is a question of sharing what God has done for us in the prayer and the hope that people will listen and that they too themselves will come to discover God in the person of Jesus Christ.

It's all about Jesus. It's all about his death on the cross. It's all about his resurrection from the dead on the third day. And God has a very high view of the church.

And whatever goes wrong from time to time and all over the world where the church has existed for 2,000 years, sometimes error creeps in.

[4 : 07] Sometimes the wrong things creep in. And that's why we need to come back to the Bible. And we need to be governed by the Bible because the Bible is the only safe place that we have. And that's why today, as we are thinking together about leadership in our own congregation, we must be guided by the Bible.

We have not invented elders and deacons. Deacons and elders are in the Bible. We believe in elders and deacons because the Bible tells us about them.

It doesn't tell us about any other way of leading the church. There's only two types of leadership in the church, and that is an elder and a deacon. End of story.

And these two functions are, well, there is some overlap, but they are rather different from one another. And it's very important that we be clear as to what one function and the other is.

If I could start with a deacon. A deacon is someone who is concerned about the material affairs of the church, the finances of the church, the buildings in which we worship.

[5 : 17] We have to make sure that the buildings are comfortable, that they're adequate for the size of congregation that we have. We have to make sure that they're well heated. We have to make sure that the money that you put in as an act of worship every Sunday morning is well managed.

And it doesn't go astray. And it's not wasted. We have to make sure of that. We are accountable to you because you come in on a Sunday morning, and as an act of worship, the very first thing you do is to place your contribution in the plate.

You're not giving it to us. You're not giving it to me. You're giving it to the Lord. And that's the very first act of worship. Well, I'm sure it's not the first. I'm sure that you've prayed beforehand. But as you come into the church, don't ever underestimate your placing the envelope or your contribution into the plate.

It is an act between you and the Lord. And as soon as it goes into the plate, we have to manage it. The deacons are charged with managing that money.

And so much of it, of course, has to be placed, has to be spent on local issues, local needs of the congregation. But as a congregation like this, we have the privilege of being able to send a large part of that money to the wider work of the church, to the work of the gospel in various parts of the country, and to the work of training our ministers, and to the work of administration and bringing the gospel to other parts of the world.

[6 : 50] What a privilege it is to belong to a congregation like this which can afford to do so. But we must never become complacent, and we must never become careless in anything that we do.

And a deacon is someone who meets together every month in their congregation, and we have to hear the way in which every penny is spent.

I can guarantee you today that every penny of what goes into that plate is accounted for. And one of the chores of the deacon's court, I don't know if you've ever wondered what happens at a deacon's court.

Believe me, it's not very exciting. A large part of the deacon's court is cheering an account of every single invoice and bill and penny that has been spent.

And that is so important because we have to be an open book. We have to be transparent.

Everyone has to know where that money is going. And that way there is absolutely no suspicion whatsoever.

[7 : 57] And I don't need to tell you that in a world of corruption and in a world of expense scandal, in a world where in many parts of the globe people are hiving off money, that's always the temptation.

That means that our deacons have to be accountable for everything which that is spent. We have to keep our buildings in good condition. We have to provide for all the needs, the material needs of the congregation.

And that, in a nutshell, is what deacons do. There are occasions, of course, when there are particular financial needs which are known about from people in the area.

And that is, we have a benevolent fund. By the way, the collection on Thursday, Thursday's Thanksgiving service, goes to the benevolent fund.

And that fund has been set up particularly to distribute gifts to people when they fall into hard times. And it's completely anonymous.

[8 : 58] It's completely confidential. It's handled by two or three of the deacons, two or three of the elders, in fact. And these gifts are given out completely anonymously. We don't, nobody knows, only two or three of us know where those gifts go.

But it's a very important fund because there are times when people fall into hard times. And it becomes known to the deacon's court and we want to help in some small way. That is what the court is all about.

And that is what a deacon is all about. It is not a particularly exciting function to have. It is a service. You know what the word deacon means?

It means slave. It means a servant. And so if anybody thinks that this is a promotion, you're wrong.

If anything, it's a promotion down the way, in a sense. Except when you remember, of course, that we are all servants. We all serve one another.

[10:02] And of course, to that extent, the work of the deaconate goes on anyway within the congregation. You don't have to be a deacon.

You don't have to wear the badge to be a deacon, to be a servant, to be of service to one another. I know many people in this congregation who are deacons and very few people know about it.

Those visits that go on from week to week, those acts of kindness and support and care that go on anonymously behind closed doors when you visit someone who's bereaved or visit someone who's in need or someone who's sick or someone who's lonely.

That is the real work of the deaconate. You may not wear the badge. You may not go to the deacon's court. But in many senses, you may be a far more faithful deacon than someone who has the office.

There are women deacons in this congregation. They're not ordained as such. They don't have the title. But believe me, there are many women deacons, servants, faithful people who take care of the needs of one another in this congregation.

[11:33] And please don't quote me on that, that there are women deacons in the congregation. Please remember my explanation as much as anything else. Deacons are servants.

That's what it means. In the same way as Jesus went round his disciples and washed the feet of his disciples.

And he said, as I have done to you, so you must do to one another. You have to serve one another. You have to take care of one another. And you have to love one another.

The basis of the work of the church is the love of God in Christ Jesus. And that love is not simply expressed in word, but in deed and in truth.

Love is action. It is a life of love. Actions speak louder than words. We can say all we like about what the church should be. But it's up to all of us, all of us, to put into practice the life of the church in our service of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:44] And it's as we do so that the church ceases to be that cold, traditional institution that has no meaning and relevance in society. It's as we act towards one another and as we reach out to our local community that the church becomes something.

It transforms and it becomes a living, active, faithful body that has relevance to the world around us. So that is what a deacon is.

An elder is rather different. An elder's function is rather different. He's not higher than the deacon. An elder is, he performs a separate function.

An elder is someone who has the spiritual oversight over the people in the congregation. Now that does not mean that he is a tyrant, that he makes up his own rules.

It doesn't mean that he goes judging people and telling them how to live and how not to live. That's very often people's perception of an elder. That's not the way it's to be.

[13:56] An elder is someone who, in a spirit of humility, never forgetting that it is by grace that he is saved, he prayerfully and carefully takes care of the flock of God that God has placed under our care.

What is the work of an elder? Well, there's actually very little in the New Testament data or evidence as to what exactly an elder.

There's just two words. The first word for elder is the word for elder. It's presbyteros in Greek. And it simply means someone who is older, someone who is mature, not necessarily in age.

You can be a relatively young person and still have that Christian maturity and knowledge and wisdom and zeal to be able to take care of God's people.

The other word is the word for bishop, the word we get the word bishop from. And it's actually, it's nothing to do with a man in a white robe. It is to do with being a shepherd.

[15:15] That's what it means. It means to be a shepherd. And in many ways, if you want to understand what the work of an elder is, you just look at a shepherd. A good shepherd.

Not someone who falls asleep on the job. Not someone who lives in a hut drinking tea all the time. But someone who is there amongst the sheep, watching over them, taking care of them, making sure that they don't go into dangerous places.

You see, we've, of course, largely in our culture, lost the art of the shepherd. In Lewis, they just leave their sheep all over the place. Or some people do.

That's not what a shepherd is about at all. But you go to some countries in the world where there are real shepherds, and the shepherd is there with the sheep. He's not remote. He's not somewhere else.

He is there with the sheep 24-7. And he knows them all. Knows every one of them. He can distinguish. I can't distinguish one sheep from another, but the shepherd can.

[16:13] And they hear his voice, and they trust him. In many ways, the work of an elder has to reflect the person of Jesus Christ who told us that he was the good shepherd.

The good shepherd that even laid down his life for the sheep. That's the kind of love that Jesus displayed on the cross.

And the work of an elder needs to arise out of an appreciation of the love of Jesus Christ towards people.

And when that love is there, the love for the Lord and then the love for God's people, the action speaks louder than the word.

And that person is an overseer. That's what the word means. It's a shepherd. It's an over. That's another word. That's another translation of the word.

[17:13] Overseer. Someone who watches. Not critically. Not with some kind of inflated sense of his own ego. In fact, if that's the case, that person should never be an elder in the first place. The first requirement for any leader in the church is that that person has a proper view of himself.

He has to know his own place when it comes to salvation, which is that I am saved by grace. And the same, of course, applies to me.

I am simply an elder, one of the other elders in this congregation. I don't have any more power. I don't have any more say. I don't rule. This is not a one-man rule.

I simply take my place with the rest of the elders. And we make collective decisions. Often we make collective decisions without having to take a vote. But sometimes we have to take a vote when there is a slight difference of opinion.

So be it. That's fine. We have to do that. But the first requirement for anyone who is either an elder or a deacon is this humility.

[18:24] So if that's not there, then there is something far wrong. I want you to notice in this chapter how similar the qualifications are between an elder and a deacon.

It says this, therefore, an overseer must be above reproach. An overseer is an elder. Husband of one wife. Sober-minded. Self-controlled. Respectable. Hospitable. Able to teach. Not a drunkard. Not violent. But gentle. And so on. And then deacons, likewise, must be dignified. Not double-tongued. Not addicted to much wine. Not greedy for dishonest gain. Paul is virtually saying exactly the same thing of a deacon as he is about an elder.

And that's very important. Because the first thing that you as a congregation need to look for in someone who you're considering to be either an elder or a deacon is a spiritual quality.

In Acts chapter 6, the passage that we read first, when there was a dispute between the Hebraic widows and the Grecian widows, the Hellenistic widows, and when the people were looking for deacons, the first thing they looked for was men who were filled with the Spirit.

[19:43] In other words, they weren't looking primarily for men who were good with money. And you, today, are not looking primarily for men who are good tradesmen or good plumbers or good financiers or all these.

All these things are important, no doubt. And that's a bonus. But the first thing that you look for as a congregation is men who are serious about the gospel.

Men who are committed to the Lord. Committed to the church. Who love the church. And who love the gospel. Whose hearts are in the right place. Now when you go through, of course, 1 Timothy chapter 3, my first reaction is, I can't be an elder.

I don't live up to the qualities that are laid down here in 1 Timothy chapter 3. Because it's only a matter of time, as you read through them, that you have to admit, I just don't live up to these qualities in the way that God expects.

But the fact is that nobody does. So we're not looking for perfection. But we are looking for men who are serious about the work of the church.

[20:57] Committed to that work. Men who are loving about that work. People who love to be with other people. And who care for their needs.

And who are capable of wisdom. And judgment. Not kind of tyrannical judgment. But proper judgment. In humility and in grace. Let me just summarize the teaching of this chapter very quickly. Anyone who you are looking at to choose either as an elder or a deacon. Should exhibit something in regard to himself first of all.

He should be self-controlled. He should be mature. And by that way I don't necessarily mean mature in years. He should have a correct attitude. To alcohol.

To money. To his temper. To his tongue. To his demeanor. He needs to have a correct attitude to himself.

[22 : 07] As far as you and I can judge. And that's all the Lord expects of us. As far as we can see. And then secondly.

He needs to have a correct attitude in regard to his family. He must be the husband of one wife.

And I take that to mean. That he has a biblical perspective on marriage.

You see in those days. There was all kinds of stuff going on. The world outside from which a person was converted. Meant that you had a wife and a mistress.

That was the done thing. That was par for the course in the Roman world. You were not expected to remain faithful to your wife. And the wife simply had to accept that. That if her husband went out at night.

He was likely to be going to see his mistress. But of course when a person was converted. All that had to change. But just to make sure. For some people.

[23 : 07] It was more of a struggle than others. To adapt themselves to the lifestyle. Of the Christian faith. And so Paul had to lay it on the line. He said. You cannot be an elder.

Unless you have a proper. Biblical perspective. On marriage. And the home. He's not suggesting that your children have to be perfect.

Whose children are perfect? When I read here. That he has to be. He has to. Manage his own household well. Which one of us is able to manage our own household.

As we are. As we are requested to do. The Lord is not looking for perfection. Otherwise there would be no elders and no deacons. In the church. But as far as we can judge.

As far as that person. His life. His outward life. Is concerned. It conforms. To humility. And to wisdom.

[24 : 06] And to a love. For the gospel. He has to have a proper relationship. And a proper. Attitude. Thirdly. To relationships.

He must be hospitable. He must be gentle. He must be a people person. Do you love people today? Do you love your brothers and sisters in Jesus?

Do you love the unconverted? Do you long for them to be brought to a knowledge of Jesus Christ?

Do you long to be involved in the work of the church?

Well of course you are involved in any case. Whether you are an elder or not. Or a deacon or not.

But do you long for people to be converted? Do you love the gospel? And do you want people more than anything else.

To come to faith in Jesus Christ? Are you hospitable? That doesn't necessarily mean opening your home. I mean some people do. And of course that's a very very commendable thing.

[25 : 05] And one which we should think about. More of us should think about. But what about just talking to people? What comes across? When we talk to people. Is there a love in our demeanour?

Is there a... Remember the Lord Jesus. Who was no threat to anybody. The common people heard him gladly. Are you happy to talk to common people?

Ordinary people. People with problems. People who perhaps have made mistakes in this life. The one thing they need in this life is the gospel.

What do they see in you? Do they see a person who is aloof? And who won't talk to them because they've made a mess of life? Do they see a person who's unwelcoming into the door of the church? Do they see a person with... With written all over you. I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to have anything to do with you. Because actions speak louder than words. Our body language. Our whole demeanour.

[26 : 04] Can speak of who we are. Well that's not elder material. Don't be an elder if that's your attitude. Jesus spoke to anybody. He was surrounded by the publicans and the sinners.

The prostitutes of his day. He gladly spent time with them. Because he said it's not the healthy who need a doctor. It's the sick. In fact they even moaned about Jesus. They said he's a friend of

publicans and sinners.

We have to be like that friend. And if you're not like that. Then I wonder if you should think twice about taking office in the church.

We want people to hear the gospel. And our elders and our deacons must have that desire above everything else. To see people changed.

It's the same with outsiders. People who are looking in on the church. Do they have anything that they can point to you about?

[27 : 08] Is there hypocrisy in your life? Are you one thing here in this church and another thing out in the business world? Or in the street? Or in your neighbourhood? Is your behaviour towards unbelieving people inconsistent?

When you go into your office are you far more concerned about making money? And people know that and they think that guy he goes to church.

He claims one thing in the church and when he's at home or when he's in the business world. All he wants to do is to make a fast buck. People see through that. They see the hypocrisy of it.

And then lastly, he has to have the right attitude to the faith. He has to be strong in his hold of the truth.

Remember one of the qualities that is required of those who are overseers is the ability to teach.

[28 : 13] The ability to teach. That's in verse 2. Now that doesn't necessarily mean someone who gets up in a pulpit and who preaches. But what it does do, it means that someone who is in office or in leadership has to know what they believe.

And they have to be able to engage in conversation because the time will come very quickly when someone will ask you about the Bible. And if you don't know half the Bible, if you don't have at least a reasonable working knowledge of the Bible and the faith, then how are you going to engage in conversation with them?

How are you going to be able to answer their questions? I know that there are many questions of the Bible that have no answers. We discover that every week on a Tuesday night in the Caber Faith. Questions that are answered.

You have to say, I'm sorry, I don't have the answer to that. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about when somebody does ask you a basic question about the Christian faith, are you able to answer that question?

Are you able to, not necessarily argue, but able to show that person? Are you able to encourage that person? Maybe a fellow believer who needs to be encouraged, who's fallen on hard times and who's maybe doubting his faith.

[29 : 30] Questions about part of the Bible. Wrestling in some respect or another. Going through, are you able to help that person? That's the kind of person who is required by this chapter and by the Lord at this time.

I feel this morning as if I've only touched on this subject. I feel as if I've only scratched the surface. I don't want to put people off.

Every time I speak about this, the result is some people come to me and say, I don't feel as if I should be an elder anymore. That's not what I'm trying to do this morning.

I'm trying to encourage and I'm trying to direct the congregation to choose men who are suitable for office. Not everyone is suitable.

That doesn't mean, that does not mean that we don't have a place in the church. The church is all of us today. We believe in a body ministry.

[30 : 43] If the church itself doesn't function, all of us, everyone playing our part, being involved in the work of the gospel. And I suspect that there are people, ordinary people in this congregation, as I said before.

And on the day of judgment, when the Lord reckons what they have done for him, they will have been far more faithful, far more diligent, and far more loving, and caring, and obedient, than many a person who has held office, who has had the title.

The church is all of us. That means that please don't let us point to the leadership to have the answers to every problem that there is in the church.

Many is a problem that there is. Many is a thing that needs to be done. The answer lies with you. Not with the eldership or the diaconate. It lies with you.

If you see something that needs to be done, tell me, but then go and do it. Don't expect someone else to do it. The ministry of this congregation involves all of us.

[32 : 00] Every single one of us who believes and trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ. And it starts with where we are now. It starts with developing the relationships that you have already, and it starts with making new relationships.

The church is all about family. Keep that in mind. It's about family. And if this congregation is not a family, what are we all going to do about it?

How are we going to improve that sense of family? Is there anyone here today that you have something against? You have to sort that out.

The Bible tells you that you have to sort that out. You have to lovingly go to that person or at least be prepared to write and to resolve whatever that is.

In a community like this, it's inevitable that there are tensions. And I'm not talking about any one person in particular. I'm not even thinking about anybody right now.

[33 : 09] But it's inevitable in a community like this where people know each other, they've grown up with each other, neighbours and friends and they've gone to school together, that things will become tense and there'll be arguments and fallouts.

But when it comes to between two Christians, the whole world is looking at you and they're asking, what are you going to do to resolve this problem?

Because if you can't resolve the problem, what a witness that is. It's a terrible witness. It's a shameful witness. That's where it begins.

It begins with ourselves and how we reflect the Lord Jesus Christ in the way we live. we must always be prepared for anyone.

And me too. I have to be able to say to you, if you know anything about me that you think does not reflect the gospel, then tell me.

[34 : 11] And I'll put it right. Are we all the same? I hope so. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we give thanks once again today that you have given us your word. We know that the standard of your word is so unattainable.

And yet by your grace, we are where we are and we have to go through this and we're glad to be able to prayerfully undertake this process. We pray that as we do so, we pray to be guided by your spirit into the choice of the right people for office in this congregation.

And we pray, Lord, that as we do so, that this congregation will grow and develop. We pray that as the word is preached that it will strike home to each one of us. Forgive our sin, now we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen.