



The Calling of the Elder By Pastor Kyle Wells

Paul writes that *“If anyone aspires to the office of overseer (elder), he desires a noble task”* (1 Tim 3:1). The funny thing is, Paul says very little about tasks when he goes on to describe the office. In fact, there is very little in the Bible that describes the *task* of an elder in any real detail. This is because the Bible is far more concerned with the question of “who elders are” than with the question of “what elders do”. Consequently, there is far more in the Bible about an elder’s character than there is about his duties. Paul begins “The overseer must *be*,” not “An elder must *do*...” It is as if Paul is saying: The primary “task” of an elder is to be a godly person; it is a ministry of *being* before it is ever a ministry of *doing*. We can see this clearly if we look at the two places where lists of character qualifications are laid out (1 Tim 3:2–7; Tit 1:5–9). My goal is not to give you a comprehensive analysis of these lists. I encourage you to study them on their own. I do, however, hope that you do find what I say helpful.

A close look at the Bible shows that at its root, an elder is to “live by the Spirit”, that his life is to be marked by the Spirit’s fruit (see Gal 5:22–25), and this will manifest itself in his church, family, and reputation.

Love: Elders are to love their families and God’s Church (1 Tim 3:4–5).

- Does the man show a genuine love for God’s Church and his family? Does that love flow out of a realization of how much he has been loved?
- If he has a family, does his wife feel loved? Do his children feel loved by God? Does he love them enough to engender their willing submission and respect? Does he exercise intimate authority, the type of authority that is won through relationship with willing followers?
- Does he plan and provide for his family? Does he take care of them? Does he make them feel safe and secure?

Joy: Joyful people are contented on account of the gospel, and hence free from greed for money or position (1 Tim 3:3; 1 Pet 5:2–3; Heb 13:17).

- Is the man’s demeanor characterized by a deep and abiding joy because of what God has done for him in Jesus Christ? Is he so satisfied with Jesus that he is not running after other things for happiness and fulfillment?

Peace: Elders are not violent or quarrelsome but promote the peace and purity of God’s church (1 Tim 3:3).

- Is the man argumentative? Does he like to start quarrels? Does he seek the harm of others in speech or in action? Is he able to admit fault?
- Does he promote peace? Does he seek reconciliation?

Patience: Elders are not quick-tempered and must exercise prudence when making judgments (Tit 1:7).

- Does this person act rashly? Does he often let his emotions get the best of him? Is his decision making characterized by taking in and weighing all the evidence? Can he see all sides of a situation or an argument? Is he able to forebear with minor disagreements when he doesn’t get his way? Does he feel like he has to correct every error at once when teaching or counseling?

Kindness: Elders are to be hospitable. That is, they are to show public acts of kindness and be someone whom people consider a “welcoming presence”.

- Is this person kind in his dealings with others? Are his words gracious?
- Does he encourage others openly and often?
- Can you open up to this person easily? Do you feel like he is open to you? Is he someone with whom you can easily share your life?
- Does this person seek people out for relationship? Is he highly relational when he ministers to people?

Goodness: Elders are to love what is good (Tit 1:8).

- Does this person delight in what is true and good and beautiful?
- Does this person fight for what is good and true and beautiful?
- Does he love justice and plead the cause of the innocent?

Faithfulness: Elders are to be commitment-oriented men, who are faithful to their wives, their children, and to their creed (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:9). In order for a person to shepherd God's covenant community, that person must be a covenant keeper himself.

- Does this person keep his word? Does he fulfill obligations? Can he be counted on? Is he dependable?
- Is he a faithful husband and father? Does he share his life with his family? Does he faithfully pursue his wife and kids?
- Will he prioritize love for his family over his duties as an elder, even withdrawing from the post if love for his family requires it?

Gentleness: Elders are to be caring, temperate, humble, and gentle in their dealings with others, not violent or quick-tempered (1 Tim 3:3, 6; Tit 1:6; Acts 20:28; 2 Tim 2:24–25).

- Is this person able to empathize with people?
- Is he tender in his dealing with others?
- Is he sensitive to the needs of those around him?

Self-control: Elders need to be self-controlled and self-disciplined, nurturing not only the souls of others, but their own souls as well (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8; Acts 20:28).

- Is this person self-disciplined?
- Does he take care of his body?
- Does he do things with moderation?
- Is he a hard worker?

Importantly, the lists regarding an elder's qualifications place an emphasis on the *public* manifestations of the Spirit's fruit in his life. It is his *public* behavior which manifests God's private work. This is important to consider since one of the explicit qualifications is that an elder be a person who is thought well of by unbelievers (1 Tim 3:7). In fact, some of the qualifications Paul lists are also found in virtue lists in the unbelieving culture. Paul believes that the public conduct of Christian leaders must be acceptable to unbelievers who, by God's common grace, make some accurate moral judgments. Elders should be known as those who promote the public good; their reputation among outsiders should be esteemed.

I hope this has been helpful for you. There is certainly more that could be said about the character to which an elder is called. I would encourage you to study 1 Tim 3:2–7 and Tit 1:5–9 on your own as we are considering potential elders in our midst.