

Preparing for a Good Work

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Introduction.

- A. One of the things that our culture believes in is equality at any cost, that all people, regardless of their personal differences, should not only be treated the same, but should behave the same. As a consequence of this effort, there seems to be a growing confusion in our country about what makes a woman a woman or a man a man. I'm not talking about biology here, but about the way we understand ourselves.
- B. Let me give you an example. Has anybody here seen the recent "I am man; hear me roar" commercials from Burger King? You've got all these guys prancing around with Whoppers in their hands singing about how they aren't going to eat quiche anymore, but the whole thing comes across about as masculine as a Pampered Chef party. It's a symptom of the way our culture has lost touch with manhood by losing touch with the Bible.
- C. If we want to recapture our sense of what makes men men, we have to find it in God's word, because the Bible will tell us how. Christianity brings out what is most feminine in women, but it also brings out what is most masculine in men, because that's what it takes to conform to the ideal of Jesus. We always see Jesus depicted as this effeminate hippie in a bathrobe, but I guarantee you, folks, that He was a man's man. He was tough, He was capable, He was a leader, and He never backed down from what was right. His compassion came not from weakness, but from strength. He was a man that the rough folk of Galilee could look up to.
- D. If we want to recreate this Biblical ideal of manhood in ourselves, we need to look at Paul's comments in 1 Timothy 3. This description of what it takes to be an elder is also a description of what it takes to be a man, and if we wish to be elders in the church, we need to view our manhood in this light. Let's look at this passage, then, to learn what sort of men we must be to prepare ourselves for a good work.

I. Not Greedy for Money, Gentle, Not Quarrelsome, Not Covetous.

- A. We've already looked at the first part of this 1 Timothy 3 text, but we see the second portion of this text revealed in 1 Timothy 3:3-7. The first thing this text tells us is that the man who wants to be an elder is **not greedy for money**. To understand what's going on here, we need to understand a little bit about the cultural background of the church in the first century. In today's church, we commonly view the preachers as supported and the elders as volunteers, but that was not the case in the time of the New Testament. Consider, for instance, 1 Timothy 5:17. When this passage says that good elders are to be counted worthy of double honor, it doesn't mean that the church should throw them a party twice a year. Instead, it means that they should be financially supported in proportion to their usefulness in the Lord's work.
- B. Paul is telling would-be elders here, then, that even though there is some gain associated with the office, that should not be their reason for seeking it. Likewise, we should also be wary of seeking the eldership for any other ungodly reason. For instance, I know a brother who goes to a congregation that decided 10 years ago not to appoint him as an elder, and he's been whining and moaning about it ever since, because he thinks that he deserves the recognition. That's wrong, brethren. We are to look for spiritual, not temporal, gain.
- C. If we aspire to the eldership, we must also learn to be **gentle**. Once again, friends, this is a masculine trait here, not a feminine one. The elder is not gentle because he lacks the strength to be harsh; he is gentle because he is strong and secure, because of what he understands about himself and others. Back in my law-school days, I spent one summer working for a county attorney's office in Texas, in their protective-orders division. Essentially, I spent my time helping women who wanted legal protection from their abusive husbands. One of the fascinating things I learned is that it's usually not the big, bluff, confident John Wayne types who resort to abusing their women. Instead, it's the weedy, whiny little guys who get stomped on by the world and need some way somewhere to assert power over someone. Weakness makes them harsh.
- D. By contrast, the elder can be gentle because he knows who he is and what he's worth. Look at what James says in James 3:17. He describes the wisdom from above as peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, and merciful. The elder is all of these things because he can be. He respects himself, so he doesn't have to demand respect from others. He is secure in his relationship with God, so he doesn't sweat the small stuff. He is gentle.
- E. Similarly, the man who wishes to become an elder must **not be quarrelsome**. Indeed, he needs to possess this quality in abundance, because once he does become an overseer, his ability to keep the peace will be sorely tested. In any congregation, there will always be those who disagree with the elders. Sometimes, the dissenters are just troublemakers, contentious men who need to be silenced. At other times, however, they are genuinely trying to serve God and just happen to see things a little differently than the elders.
- F. It's in times like those that the elder must understand how to deal with disagreement. That's not something that comes naturally to any of us. Whenever anyone comes to one of us and says, "I think you're wrong," it's only natural for us to get a little defensive. If we're not careful, that original reaction will dictate our response. We'll take the objection personally and declare war on the objector. It's bad enough when ordinary Christians

do that, but it would be disastrous were an elder to do so. By contrast, the elder must respond in the way that Paul describes in 2 Timothy 2:24-25. Times of controversy make it difficult to show kindness, patience, and gentleness, but that is precisely when those qualities are most necessary. We need to learn not to worry so much about winning the argument or about defending ourselves from attack, but about winning the hearts of those who disagree with us to God's service. We must avoid quarrels for the sake of the work.

- G. Paul also informs us here that the man who is fit to be an elder is **not covetous**. This is similar to the idea that he must not be greedy for money, but it's broader in scope than the desire for material gain from the eldership. This passage tells us to protect ourselves from any kind of evil desire for possessions.
- H. The elder must not be covetous for two main reasons. First, as the Bible tells us repeatedly, the covetous man is an idolater. He has placed material possessions, and by implication his own desires, above his obligation to love and serve God, and God isn't willing to be second in our hearts to anything else. Second, the covetous man is covetous because he's looking to himself and not to the Lord for the fulfillment of his needs and wants. Look at James' description of the covetous in James 4:2. We can spend our whole lives straining and fighting for contentment, but it will never be ours unless we seek it through God. The elder must understand that.

II. Ruling House Well, Keeping Children in Submission, Not a New Convert, of Good Reputation.

- A. Just as the elder must rule himself well in these things, he must also be **one who rules his own house well**. This is the same qualification we saw during our sermon last month on deacons. In the Greek, the word is exactly the same. Essentially, this tells us that the elder must also be a good manager of the things that God has given him. Unless he shows responsibility, wisdom, and steadiness in his stewardship of his material blessings, he should not be given the chance to oversee the things of the Lord's church.
- B. As part of this, the text tells us that the elder must **have his children in submission with all reverence**. Of all of the attributes the elder must possess, none is more disputed about than this one and its parallel requirement in Titus 1:6. There are opinions all over the map on whether these texts require the elder to have children who are Christians, and if so, how many and what percentage, but tonight's not the time to address all of that. In this series of lessons, we're looking at what a man must do to prepare himself for the eldership, and no one looks at this text and says, "Well, I think an elder only has to have two Christian children, so I'm going to encourage my third child to become lost." Let's look instead at what God requires of fathers.
- C. We find the heart of God's instructions on this subject in Ephesians 6:4. Sadly, there are few passages in the Bible that are so disastrously neglected as this one. This country is filled with men who refuse to accept this God-given responsibility and allow their wives instead to provide spiritual leadership for their families, and that is shameful. Now, I have nothing but respect for the women who are in this position and do the best they can, but the men who by their inaction force them into that position are sinning. Husbands, fathers, it's long past time for us to get up on our hind legs and act like men. It's long past time for us to recognize that we are the leaders of our families, and that as part of our leadership, we are the ones responsible for teaching them to obey the will of God. If we are unwilling to do that, if we show that we are undeserving of the honor of heading our families, we show that we are undeserving of the office of elder as well.
- D. Paul next mentions that the elder must **not be a novice**, which is necessary to prevent the elder from becoming prideful. Once we think about it, this too makes logical sense. After all, one of the unique things about Christianity is that it turns traditional notions of hierarchy upside down. The leaders in the church are not the masters of everyone else; instead, they are the servants. This is a hard notion for people to get their heads around. The words and actions of the Lord's apostles in the days preceding the Crucifixion show that even after spending years with Jesus, they still didn't get it. It's only to be expected, then, that a new convert, no matter what his character may be, still won't understand deep down inside what it takes to be an elder.
- E. This is a significant bar to the eldership, and it points out something that the rest of us need to consider too. We need to make sure that we aren't wanting to become elders so we can play church dictator and lord it over the flock. Instead, we must recognize that the central attitude of the elder must be love for others and a desire to serve them and help them on to heaven. Only if we see this should we wish to join the eldership.
- F. Finally, Paul mentions that the would-be elder must **have a good testimony among those outside**. Essentially, the elder must have a good reputation in the community. Even the non-Christians with whom he associates must look up to him and respect him for his moral stature. Once again, there's a perfectly obvious reason why this must be so. People tend to judge organizations and groups of people by their leaders. It's fair to say, for instance, that a big part of the reason why so many Europeans don't like Americans these days is because they don't like George W. Bush. Similarly, an elder whom the outside world does not respect will quickly diminish the reputation of the entire church.
- G. However, the reverse is also true. An elder who is known to be a man of integrity and worth will elevate the church in the eyes of outsiders. Consider Peter's words in 1 Peter 2:12. Remember, friends: elders are supposed to be among the most impressive Christians in the entire congregation. Their example in the outside world should be such that it leads the unbeliever to God. That's the ultimate point of a good reputation.

Conclusion. If you don't have a good reputation before God and men, now's the time to make things right.