

July 28, 2024

PASTORS AND THEIR QUALIFICATIONS

1 Timothy 3:1-7

(6 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)

It think it's pretty accurate to say that pastoral ministry has fallen on hard times. For one, we've had a lack of men entering pastoral ministry. A couple of years ago Ray Van Neste pointed out at our network conference that for the last number of decades, men have not been pursuing the pastorate, and as a consequence we have a number of churches which do not have pastors and cannot find replacements for the pastors they once had. We also have had a number of prominent pastors over recent years who have fallen prey to moral failures, whether sexual sin, becoming harsh and authoritarian, or even one prominent pastor who allegedly attempted to hire a hit man.¹ Sadly, when I searched the internet in order to provide a link for that last note, I had to filter through a few results to get to the one I was thinking about. Finally, if there was a time in our culture when being a pastor was a respected position, that simply is no longer the case. When you're a pastor and someone asks you what you do, well, I can admit that I attempt to bear myself for their response when I say, "I'm a pastor."

And yet, when we look at the Scripture, the office of pastor is a crucial one. On Paul's missionary journeys, he made clear to appoint pastors in each church he'd planted (Acts 14:23). When Paul wrote to Titus, he opened that letter telling him that he'd left Titus in Crete so that he might "appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). Moreover, the Bible's expectation is that each local church has not only one pastor, but multiple pastors, which the Bible refers to interchangeably—as we've already seen—with the titles "elder" and "overseer" as well. Therefore, when Paul writes this letter to Timothy and gives him instructions for guarding the gospel and defending it against those who would come against it with false teaching, it makes sense that he would remind Timothy of the kind of men who should serve alongside of him as pastors in this task. And that's precisely what he does in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

As we look at this text, then, some might already be tempted to tune out. How does a text about the qualifications for pastors apply to you? Well, let me note a few groups this text will be especially helpful for this morning. First, for those men who may well desire pastoral ministry, this text speaks to you, not only about your desire but the qualifications that need to characterize you. Second, this text obviously speaks to the five of us who are your pastors. I know it's been true for me as I've studied this text, but my guess is that all five of us will find ourselves challenged and convicted this morning as we work through this text together. But also, for the entire church, we all bear the responsibility for making sure that the pastors we appoint meet these qualifications and are faithfully carrying out the tasks that pastors should be about. Therefore, we all need to pay careful attention to this text. So, with that said, let me start by

¹ <https://patch.com/illinois/chicago/mancow-muller-pastor-james-macdonald-wanted-hire-hitman>.

noting a truth concerning those who desire to serve in pastoral ministry, namely, that those who desire to pastors desire a good thing.

Desiring to be a pastor is desiring a good thing

I want to start my sermon on this note because this is where Paul begins this text. He writes, “This saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (v. 1). Men, let me say this clearly, if you desire to be a pastor, the Bible says that you desire a good thing. Now, that doesn’t mean that everyone who desires to be a pastor will actually end up serving in this office. You need to be evaluated by your own pastors and the church to see if you might qualify and are gifted to serve in this office. But I do want to make this unmistakably clear: if you desire to pursue pastoral ministry, you are desiring a noble task.

Let me also add that I’m using the word “desire” or “aspire” not only to mimic the language of the text but to push against some other language that we’ve attached to this issue of men pursuing pastoral ministry. In more modern church history, we’ve often noted that men are *called* to pastoral ministry. But the Bible doesn’t seem to speak that way. I’m not sure that we can find a place where the Bible speaks of calling a man to a vocation. Typically, calling is used to indicate someone being called to salvation. Now, of course, Paul can say that he was called to be an apostle, but that’s because his calling to this role was wrapped up in his calling to come to Christ. So, I don’t really think the Bible speaks in terms of God calling individuals to pastoral ministry.

Moreover, when someone says he feels called to pastoral ministry, he probably means that he feels an inner desire and inner compulsion toward this role. I felt that way myself and believe that was the work of the Spirit. Therefore, I can understand why people say that they are “called” by God to be a pastor. But if we want to be biblical, I think it’s better to speak of a man aspiring or desiring to be a pastor. And not only is that more biblical language, but it’s also a humbler approach. Let me explain why.

When someone says, “I’m called to pastor,” that statement casts aside everyone else’s judgment of whether that person is qualified or gifted for the task. It suggests that you have a divine decree about what you are to do, and everyone else should simply yield to that. After all, how do you look at a man whom you do not believe has the qualifications or gifting to pastor and tell him that he shouldn’t pursue pastoral ministry when he’s telling you that God has *called* him to do this. It serves as a trump card against anyone who thinks otherwise.

However, if someone says that he aspires to pastoral ministry or desires to be a pastor, then he’s simply acknowledging that he longs to fulfill this task, has an inner compulsion to pursue this, maybe even strongly. And yet, he understands that his desires may not line up with what the church deems is best for him to do. To say that he desires to be a pastor says that though this is his desire, he understands that others should evaluate him to see if this desire is matched with his own qualifications and abilities. And should the church not conclude that a man who desires to pastor should do so, it doesn’t suggest that the church is working against God’s decree.

Rather, they're faithfully evaluating this man and helping guide him in the direction where he might best serve others. Therefore, it seems best to me to retire the idea of being "called" to pastoral ministry but rather speak in line with the Bible in saying that one desires to be a pastor. But the key point that I want to say to the men in this room is, men, if you desire to do this, you desire a noble task.

Now, what makes pastoral ministry a noble task revolves around my second point, namely, that a pastor is to be of exemplary character.

A pastor must be of exemplary character

One interesting aspect of our text after verse one is what Paul does *not* do. He doesn't launch into a job description.² I do think this text helps us see what a pastor is to do, and I'll note that in point three. But what Paul focuses on, rather, are the qualifications one must meet in order to serve as a pastor of a local congregation. Why do that? It's because the qualifications and the job description are largely one. Paul is saying to us that one key role the pastor plays is allowing his life to serve as a model for others of Christian living. He must exemplify the character of a Christ-follower for the congregation to see and follow. Let me show this to you by first walking through some specific qualifications Paul mentions, and then we'll consider the bigger picture a bit.

First, I'll tackle some of the more easily understood and straightforward qualifications. Paul tells us that the pastor must be "sober-minded" and "self-controlled" (v. 2). That is, he must be able to think clearly, to be sensible, and to be self-disciplined, not controlled by his fleshly desires. He must be "respectable" (v. 2), meaning that he must merit respect, living in an admirable way. He must be "hospitable" (v. 2), being willing to care for other believers, especially those who face need as they invest in the gospel. It would have been common in the first century world, for example, for a believer to come traveling through for the sake of the gospel and need someone to help provide a place to stay, etc. We see that even in the earthly ministry of Jesus, for example.

Additionally, he must "not [be] a drunkard" (v. 3), drinking alcohol to excess and intoxication. He not be "violent but gentle" (v. 3). This does not mean that he's unwilling to physically defend another or the like, but he isn't characterized by violence but by gentleness. Nor is he "quarrelsome" (v. 3). As we saw back in chapter 2, he must not be gripped with anger, always looking to argue and be proven right. And he's no "lover of money" (v. 3). He must not be greedy, stingy, or controlled by gain. Rather, he should be generous and given to sharing. Finally, he must not be a "recent convert" (v. 6). The warning here is obviously not that it's shameful to be a recent convert. After all, that was true of all of us at some point. Rather, the warning is that

² Jonathan Leeman has noted this: *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 250.

if you take a recent convert and put him in the role of a pastor, it may cause him to become prideful and lead to his destruction.

Now, there are some more complicated qualifications as well. Paul starts the qualifications by noting that the overseer must be “above reproach” (v. 2). We might read that thinking that Paul is suggesting something like perfection, but I think he simply means that for one who would be a pastor, there must be no obvious character fault that someone could point to in order to discredit him.³ Then, Paul says that he must be “the husband of one wife” or “a man of one woman” (since the word for man/husband woman/wife are the same) (v. 2). This qualification means that he must be sexually faithful to his wife, obviously not adulterous but nor given to pornography or the like.

Some have taken this to mean, contrary to what I’ve noted, that Paul is intending to rule out a man who has been divorced and remarried. Thus, they read these words as if Paul is saying that a pastor must be a man who has only been married to one woman in his life. However, there are a few problems with this. First, if you read the phrase as referring to a man who has been married to only one woman, that also rules out the widower who has remarried, something that Paul explicitly says is a fine and good thing (1 Cor 7:9). Second, it would rule out someone who’s been divorced on biblical grounds. That is, it would rule out the man who’s divorced because his wife was sexually unfaithful or because his unbelieving spouse abandoned him. Some would say, “Yes, Paul is raising the bar very high for pastors,” but actually—and we’ll see this more in a second—these qualifications are what Paul would expect for all believers (except not being a recent convert and being able to teach). Finally, the same phrase is used in reverse to refer to widows in 1 Timothy 5:9. A widow who is enrolled in the program of financial aid must be “the wife of one husband.” But later Paul will argue that younger widows should marry (1 Tim 5:14). It would be hard to imagine that if these younger widows were widowed again (after a second husband died), that Paul wants them excluded from the church’s financial aid program. Rather, he’s saying that they must have been faithful to their husbands to be enrolled. That’s the very thing Paul is saying of elders. They must be faithful to their wives.

Finally, Paul says that “he must be well thought of by outsiders” (v. 7), which can seem odd when the culture is so hostile to the gospel. How can we expect unbelievers to think well of a man who would hold to Christ’s teaching in this culture? But the idea is that the man walks in consistent holiness. That is, even outsiders cannot accuse him of hypocrisy but must recognize that he walks in a consistent pattern of holiness.

Now, let me say two things before moving on. First, I know I’ve skipped two qualifications. I’ll address them in point three. Second, I want us to step back from these qualifications for a second and see something, namely, that these aren’t necessarily extraordinary. In fact, D. A. Carson has often noted that the qualifications are remarkable for being unremarkable. I mean, think about it. These aren’t extraordinary standards that you’d think would only be true of some

³ Bobby Jamieson, *The Path to Being a Pastor* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 47.

men in the church. Did Paul think that most men in the church were unfaithful to their wives, drunkards, greedy, violent, etc.? Of course not. He's describing qualifications that should characterize all men in the church.

And yet this means that Paul is saying something quite weighty. What he's saying is that the man who would serve as a pastor must walk in exemplary Christian character. That is, he must be characterized in such a way as to be a picture of how all Christians are supposed to live. He must be a model for others. As Jonathan Leeman has noted, when the church gives a man the office of elder, they are saying, "Church, here is a man you should follow. Listen to what he teaches. Watch how he lives. When it comes to following Jesus, be like him."⁴

To my fellow pastors, this must be true of us. And to the members of Cornerstone, this is what you should be saying about any man whom you appoint to be one of your pastors. It's weighty. I feel it. I'm convicted by it. And I long for it to be ever more true of my brothers and me as we serve in this office. May God grant us the grace to that end.

Now, we've seen that if one desires to the office of pastor, he desires a noble task. We've seen the qualifications for a pastor, which can be summed up in saying that he must be of exemplary character, a model for others to follow. And, finally, I want to note what the pastor does as we see that a pastor is required to teach the Bible and lead and oversee the church.

A pastor is required to teach the Bible and lead and oversee the church

As we looked at the qualifications for a man to be a pastor, I left two out. And the reason I did so is because I think that these two qualifications show us what a pastor is required to do. First, one of Paul's qualifications is that man who would serve as a pastor must be "able to teach" (v. 2). I've noted that most of the qualifications should be true of every single man in the church. Again, it's not as if elders should be exceptional in that they're not drunkards, for example. This should be true of everyone. But there are two exceptions. The first is that he's not a recent convert, but we obviously hope that's not true of every man in the church. We want unbelievers to hear our witness and come to Christ so that there are always new believers in our congregation. But the other is this one we've just mentioned, namely, that the pastor must be able to teach. This is a qualification that wouldn't be assumed to be true of every man in the church. And this exceptional qualification is noted, I think, because this is a crucial task for any man who would be a pastor.

A pastor must be able to teach God's Word so that truth is proclaimed and falsehood refuted. Now, this doesn't mean that every elder must be equally gifted in teaching. Jonathan Leeman puts it well, stating, "An elder's ability to teach doesn't mean he can step into the pulpit and enthrall a thousand people with his wisdom and wit. It means that, if you're struggling to understand the Bible or how to handle a tough life situation, you can stop by his house and ask

⁴ Jonathan Leeman, *Authority*, 249.

him for help, and you'll receive sound biblical wisdom."⁵ This indeed is demanded of all the pastors. Moreover, as the church gathers, at least one of the pastors must stand and preach God's Word, and we must trust him to do this faithfully. Paul will make this explicit when we get to his second letter to Timothy. The pastor must be equipped to teach God's Word to God's people. That's one of his tasks.

The other qualification I didn't mention was that the pastor must "manage his own household well, with all dignity, keeping his children submissive" (v. 4). This means that the elder must bring up his children with proper discipline. They must not be wild and uncontrolled but disciplined and kept under control. Of course, this doesn't mean the man should be a harsh authoritarian. After all, fathers are commanded not to provoke our children to anger (Eph 6:4). But we must raise them up in proper discipline so that our children aren't insubordinate.

Now, of course, this doesn't mean that a pastor must be married and have children. After all, Jesus would be disqualified on that point, and Paul would have no business exhorting others to remain unmarried as he does in 1 Corinthians 7 so that the person might be whole-heartedly devoted to the Lord. However, if a man is married with children—as would be true of most men in that culture and in ours—then he must manage his household well.

But what's most helpful here for this point is Paul's note in verse 5. After noting that the pastor must manage his own household well, he adds, "For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (v. 5). By adding this line, Paul is showing us that a pastor is responsible for caring for the church. That is, he is to oversee, care for, and lead the people of God. Paul will later use the word "rule," writing in 1 Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." And so we can say that pastors are to teach and rule. They are to preach the Word and lead the church, caring for her and providing oversight to her members.

Practically speaking, the pastors bear the responsibility for setting out what is taught in the church, what the church will focus on as we gather, etc. We're responsible for ensuring that we can faithfully live out the commands of Scripture and for making sure that the Bible is preached and taught. We bear responsibility for making sure false teaching is stopped and that unrepentant sin is not allowed to go unchecked. Again, we must teach the Word and lead and oversee the church. And we can add that (according to Hebrews 13:17) we will give an account to the Lord Jesus Christ for how we've overseen those whom the Lord has placed under our care.

Therefore, pastors are a good gift to the church to teach us God's Word, care for the church, overseeing the souls of those under our care. And anyone who desires to pursue pastoral ministry desires a noble task. But it's not a position that should be entered into lightly. You'll be responsible not only to teach the Bible faithfully and oversee the members, but to give an

⁵ Jonathan Leeman, *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 247.

account to Jesus for how you've done this. Moreover, your life must be a model for others to follow.

So, if you desire this, it is a good thing. Feel free to talk with any of the pastors and share your desires. And, to the congregation as a whole, pray for us. This is weighty, and I can assure you, we all feel the weight of it. But we trust that the one who gave us his Son will give us the grace to walk in this office well. Let's thank our Lord now for that grace as we come to the table. Amen.