

Title: A Noble Task  
Text: 1 Timothy 3.1  
Theme: Thinking clearly about local church ministry  
Series: 1 Timothy  
Prop Stmtnt: A healthy church will esteem the office of an elder.

Read Text:

If you run for any kind of public office, you can expect someone to do a "hit piece" on you. They will take an unflattering picture, darken it, add lines to it and surround it with partial statements you've made or phrases taken out of context, and then display it in an effort to depict you as evil and as vile as can be. If that isn't enough, they will try to dig up dirt on your family. Your children will be followed; your parents and in-laws will be intimidated and perhaps threatened. All of which causes any semi-rational person to be very leery about getting into politics. Why would you want to do that to your family? But there is a deeper question. Why is there such a culture of personal destruction? Why do we talk the way we do about leaders? The way we view, treat, and talk about leadership says more about us, than it does about them.

We cannot change others. We cannot demand that people in this world treat others with grace and respect. But, we can nurture an entirely different culture in the church. We can be a people of humility, grace, patience, hope and love. In fact, the gospel of Jesus will produce this in our lives. Imagine this. Imagine being part of a church family where the leadership really loves and cares for every member of the church and prays for every member and longs for every member to keep taking steps to be more like Jesus. Imagine that if you spent a day with one of the elders, you would see him at work, home faithfully living as a follower of Christ, loving and leading his family, loving and caring for the church. Imagine sitting in on private conversations that elders have, or reading all of their emails that Wikileaks dumped, and reading over and over about their care for the church.

Not only that, but imagine a church where every member is convinced of that. Imagine conversations about the leaders behind their backs that are uplifting, encouraging, and trusting. Even questions about what one guy said or disagreements about a proposal are discussed in a context of trust, love and security, because every member is convinced of the integrity, commitment, and competency of the leaders. What would it be like to be in a church where the leadership really cares and the people really trust? Where there is no need to question the motives of another? Where every person can honestly say, "I know you care deeply for me." Would something like that be different than what many people in our world experience? Oh my, yes! But, this is what can be. This is what the gospel can produce. Imagine the church being a church. This could be glorious in the lives of people.

1 Timothy 3 is a foundational text for the church. This text formally establishes the office of an elder, also known as an overseer, bishop or pastor. Those terms are used interchangeably in the NT as various descriptions of the same office. Around here, we

generally use the titles of elder or pastor. They mean the same thing. But notice how verse 1 begins. This business about being an elder:

### **1. This is important, (1a)**

If you are in the habit of reading through I Timothy from time to time (which I encourage you to do), you may have noticed that this phrase shows up a couple of other places (1.18; 4.9). Paul uses it again in 2 Timothy 2.11 and in Titus 3.8. "The saying is trustworthy." Pay particular attention to this. This is good for you to understand and believe. This is worth believing in. Here's what I mean.

Let's say that you ask your kid what he or she wants to be when they grow up and they say, "I want to be a Supreme Court Justice." Do you instinctively think, "Oh, seriously, what do you really want to do?" or do you think, "Wow, that would really be amazing?" What if your kid said that he wanted to be a doctor, a plant manager, a small business owner, an accountant, a tradesman, a teacher, an engineer, or a social worker? Most of you would mull that over and try to think what that would be like and what would be the best path to get them to that point. But, what if your son said that he wanted to be a pastor? Would you be tempted to take in a deep breath and sort of freeze for a minute as you tried to figure out whether to encourage that or distract him from that? (Aww, that's sweet, it really is, but seriously, now what do you want to do?) What if your beautiful, talented, gifted, intelligent daughter called you from college and said that she was bringing a guy home she wanted you to meet, because she was thinking that he might be the one. But, oh yea, he's studying to become a pastor? How you respond to that is probably a fairly good indicator of how deeply you believe this text.

The office of an elder, the qualifications of an elder, the way the congregation responds to an elder and the way an elder responds to the congregation, is all very important to know and to esteem. This business about being an elder:

### **2 This is specific (1b)**

Every detail here is important. As followers of Christ, we follow Christ. We are under authority. And when we are given detailed plans as to how Christ wants his church to function, we do not have the liberty to modify them. We are given instructions in this chapter about overseers and deacons and deaconesses because they are important for the church. I find it odd, when churches simply do not take pay attention to the language.

I served on the staff of a church once that had very confusing polity. There were deacons, but no one knew who they were. They only met one time a year, but beyond that really didn't do much deaconing. There were pastors, but they had limited input. The real power was in the trustees. There is no trustee board in the NT for the church, but there was in this church. I am not sure what qualifications one had to have to be a trustee, but I remember one guy became a trustee who was a contract negotiator for the railroad. When the railroad union contract came up, the railroad brought this guy in and he was a hard-nosed, tough-as-nails, negotiator. He would go nose-to-nose with any union boss and

Was just a tough, somewhat raw dude. So, one day the staff pastors were informed that this guy, who was now on the trustee board, was going to write policy manuals for the pastors. It was an utter disaster. Now, I had recently graduated from college and was a young, youth pastor. I just wanted my high school kids to love Jesus. I honestly had not given much thought to church polity. I didn't care if there were deacons, or trustees, or whatever. But, all of a sudden, I cared because I was wondering why a guy whose job was to break down unions dictating policy for pastors. He not only had no idea what I did, he had no idea what the Bible said. This specific information is good. It protects the message of the church and the church itself.

1 Timothy gives specific instructions regarding the gender, character and competency of an elder. This position is reserved only for men and only for men who can teach. We will work through these qualifications in another message, but these qualifications are not suggestions, these are specific qualifications. Here is what this means. If I, or any pastor does not meet these qualifications, then we step down from being a pastor.

### 3. **This is noble.** (1c)

The office of an overseer or elder is noble. It is not noble in the aristocratic sense, but noble in the sense of being upright, good, honorable, and helpful. If your church has good elders, then your church has been given a good gift and you need to see that as a good gift. Now, that is right, yet difficult for me to say that. Let me try to explain.

Some of you have entrusted me with very personal stuff. You have invited me and/or other elders into your private situations. Here is a sampling: I was just diagnosed with cancer, I wanted you to know. We haven't told our kids yet, but we wanted you to know. I just got engaged and wanted you to know. We're going to have a baby and wanted you to know first. We just lost our baby, and you were the first person we're talking to. My dad is dying and wants to see you. My mom wants to know if you will do her funeral. My wife just filed for divorce. We filed for bankruptcy and feel so ashamed. You invite me/us into your hospital room, your recovery room, your pain, and your triumph. And I want to be there, yet at the same time, I think, "are you sure you want me?" Why? Why do you invite me into the secret closets of your life? I think about this when I walk out of hospital rooms and funeral homes. It all has to do with the nature of this office. An elder, overseer, or pastor is part prophet. His job is to speak God's Word to you. His job is to be the voice of God. That is a terrifying job, but it is needful. The Word of God is sharp. It is so sharp, that it cuts all the way into the very core of your being. The pastor who preaches the Word that cuts into the core of your being is one, who, when you listen to him, you invite him, so to speak, into the hidden places. I do not always realize the impact of the Word in your life. As part prophet, I speak about things that affect you deeply. On the other hand, the office of an elder is to be part priest. I not only represent God to you, I bring you before God. You do not go to God through me, but part of my ministry is to pray for you and to bring you before God. The office of an elder is bringing God before people and bringing people before God. That is what happens when I preach the gospel. The gospel is the good news that tells you that although your sin would condemn you, God sent his Son to this earth to live in your place and die in your place in order to satisfy

the righteous wrath of God and pay the penalty for your sin and that by faith alone in Christ alone, you declared righteous in the eyes of God. That is the most incredible, life-changing, eternity-changing, soul-saving, heart-rejoicing truth that you could ever know and believe. It is like the cleanest, coldest water poured out on your parched heart. Naturally, you tend to trust the person who brings this kind of water to you. But I know that it is the gospel that changes you, not me. Yet, the nature of the message is connected with the messenger. \That is why this is an overwhelming office, but it is good. I am overwhelmed by it, yet, so glad that you have elders in your life who will speak God's Word to you and will seek to bring you before God in prayer. This is a noble task.

Aspiring to the office of an overseer is aspiring to do a noble task. Notice that the emphasis of this is on the office. The position of elder is noble. I think that is important to understand. Every elder/pastor needs to understand that. The position is a noble position and needs to be treated with respect. An elder should not confuse the nobility of the position with his own person. I am to treat this office with the respect that it deserves. That is completely different than using this position as an effort to gain respect. In fact, I think that is part of the problem that Paul tells Timothy to address at this church in chapter 1 (1.7). There is a big difference between desiring to teach the Word and desiring to be viewed as a teacher. One who desires to teach the Word is focused on the Word and its impact upon the hearers. One who desires to be a teacher is focused on himself and on how he is being viewed. It is an inherent danger for people to aspire to positions of leadership. Aspiring to the office of a teacher is to be a help to others. Aspiring to the office of an elder is not in order to be respected or admired or validated. No, aspiring to this office is that you might be in a position to do a noble task for the glory of God and the good of others. It is noble, not because the world considers it to be. Often, they don't. It is noble, not because the church at times considers it to be. Sometimes churches don't. It is noble, not because pastors consider it to be. Sometimes they don't believe it either. But it is noble because Christ considers it to be. And in the end, that is all that matters.

#### **4. This is good to esteem. (1)**

This text about elders is an encouragement to men to those who may be interested in serving as an elder, or may be an encouragement to those men who are approached by others in the congregation about serving in such a position. This is a noble task and it is a good thing to aspire to. But, obviously, because this text is right here in this letter for the church, it is good for the church to esteem it. We tend to get more of what we praise and the church is always in need of qualified elders. But, at the same time, this text is a warning. This position is not for everyone. And here are some things that we all need to know. It is good to esteem this office because...

##### **a. It is demanding.**

The work of the elder brings a pulling on the soul that is difficult to describe. Our work is different than other work in this regard. The longer you work as an accountant, mechanic, teacher, window cleaner, scrap dealer, or cashier, the more competent and the more confident you tend to become. However, the longer you serve as an elder, the more

distrusting you become of yourself. An elder handles the Word and as you know when you handle the Word, the Word handles you. The more you study the Word the more you learn about your own insecurities, fragile sensitivities, and the less confident you become in yourself. The first time Paul used the phrase, "This saying is trustworthy" was when he identified himself as the foremost of sinners. One of the fruits of growing in Christ is becoming more confident in who God is. But there is a price to pay. The more confident you become in Christ, the less confident you are in yourself. I can speak in front of crowds. I can tell stories. I can explain theological truths. But I cannot craft and deliver a sermon that will penetrate the heart of any person. I cannot cause repentance. I cannot cause belief. I cannot cause regeneration. I cannot cause any person spiritually dead to come alive. What is a successful sermon? Is it not the humbling of the sinner and the exaltation of God? That is the gospel. We must be undone of our own strength and completely dependent upon his grace and that is so true for the elder. No pastor, no elder can deliver a successful sermon without being himself utterly humbled and undone. Every sermon that is properly preached is done at the undoing of the preacher.

**b. It is hard.**

An elder has to lead. God designed the church to be led by elders. Elders have to lead and leaders have to make choices. It is easy for me to watch a football game and think that on a fourth and one that the team ought to go for it instead of punting or trying a field goal. But it is different being the coach and actually making the call. If I, as a fan, think that the team ought to go for it, no one is going to scrutinize, analyze, and criticize me on sports talk shows for the next 25 years. But, if I am the coach, my life, my career, where my wife calls home, where my kids go to school, how I am going to pay the bills, how I am going to pay for my kids' braces and college is all flashing before my eyes. And making decisions in public is hard. In fact, what is becoming increasingly difficult in our culture is simply finding people who will make decisions and stick with them.

President Kennedy once said that, "to lead is to choose." Those of you under 50 and particularly, those of you under 30 are part of a culture that fights so hard against making commitments. Try planning an event and see how many people will commit to attending it. Put it out on social media and thousands of people will like it, but how many people will say, Yes, I am coming, instead of Maybe, I will show up, if I feel like it in the moment, or unless I get a better offer in the meantime. Our aversion to actually making a decision and sticking with it exposes the fact that we do not have leaders.

There's a gal in our church who manages an office, and was expressing amazement at how difficult it is to find people who will actually get out of bed and get to work on time. She had a young guy tell her that he couldn't believe that she didn't notice that he had been to work every day that week and wasn't even late. Her head was spinning. Isn't that what you are supposed to do? That's not above and beyond. This is why you should not give out participation awards. Making and keeping a commitment was new territory for him. But, not for leaders. However, when you make choices, you will make some people unhappy. That is not fun. No elder relishes that. But, good elders will make hard decisions even when they are not fully understood. There are some things that I/we

cannot fully divulge. There are things that we know that we will not go into detail about. We risk being misunderstood. In fact, there are times when the elders are misunderstood. That is hard to bear. It is hard not to get defensive, to feel self-pity, etc. But neither do you want elders to divulge things that they hold in confidence. So, once again, it is essential that we uphold the qualities of an elder. Because there are times, hopefully rare when you bank on the character of these men, even when you do not agree with the decision that they have made.

c. It is personal, (aspire, desires)

The word translated "aspire" has the idea of reaching ones hand out for. The word translated "desire" means to set your heart on it. Together they describe a godly ambition. It is a good thing when God gives a man an inner desire to be an elder and he takes steps to pursue that. How is he supposed to know what those steps are? Well, that is what the following verses help address. Here are the qualifications that need to be present in your life. But why would any man be willing to serve in a public position, where every decision is open to disagreement and criticism, where he is exposed to being accused of pride or being unthoughtful or out of touch, where every aspect of his life is open to evaluation, and where his fitted-ness for this position hangs in the balance of his kids behaving. Why? Because God gives this desire. One needs more than desire to be qualified, but that desire is necessary. But, what is also necessary is the confirmation of the congregation. The congregation needs to witness the qualification and be the ones who affirm that this desire is legitimate.

d. It is necessary.

It is necessary that we esteem the office of an elder, because ultimately it is God who says that this is a noble task. And we ought to agree with God. And we ought to agree in the sense that we see the wisdom and goodness in delighting in good elders. It is so true that bad leadership has such a toxic effect on everything it touches. But, good leadership is a wonderful grace and we should esteem it, pray for it, treasure it, encourage it, commend it and cultivate it. We should talk to the young men in our church and tell them that one day, they may be an elder. We ought to plant those seeds. The disciples of Christ were probably around the age of our college students. These were the men who launched the church. We do not have to follow our world and constantly tear down those whom God raises up. In fact, the way we treat leaders says more about us, than it does them. As a congregation, we need good shepherds to care for us. We need good elders to pray for us, encourage us and counsel us. We need good elders to be thoughtful and careful. And the elders need a congregation that will pray for them, encourage them, be willing to be counseled, and together, we can demonstrate something that is rather rare in this world.

This morning, I want us to take an opportunity to practice what I have just preached. (Ask Roy and Roseanna, Kevin and Danielle to come forward)

Roy Schnepfer and Kevin Haag have served on the Elder Board for the past 3 years and are rotating off since their 3-year term is done. These brothers have served well and I want to acknowledge that to them and before you.

Roy and Roseanna have 3 married children, and 8 grandchildren. 2 of his children and their spouses are members here. Roy owns his own business and serves on national boards relative to his work. His schedule is demanding, but, he takes this role as an elder seriously, and has always been one of the men, that if he took on a project, he would see it to the end. Roy and Roseanna have been members here since 1989. Roy has a lot of knowledge about our history as a church and this background is often useful to explaining how certain things came to be in our church life. Roy never talks just to be heard, but when he talks, we all listen. He's a hard guy to say "no" to. I could tell you many stories, but there is one that I think captures it well. Years ago, we were talking with Patrick McGoldrick about joining our pastoral staff. We were convinced Patrick needed to come here. Patrick wasn't sure. Roy told me that he and I needed to get on a plane, fly to Chicago, look Patrick in the eye and tell him that he had to come here. Like I said, It's hard to tell this guy "no." So we did. And the Lord used that meeting in ways that continues to bless our church.

Kevin was in high school when I became the pastor. John Hutek, Terry O'Brien and Roy and others were instrumental investments into Kevin and years later, this Kevin's life made a decisive turn for Christ and he has never looked back. You know him as the moderator who leads our Member's Meetings. Some of you know him and the teacher of the Edge class. He and Danielle have 4 girls who know him as dad. And he is a good dad. Kevin takes the office of an elder seriously. He is humble, patient, compassionate and very thoughtful. This past year, Kevin lost his job. We walked with him through this forest and every one of us is proud to call him our brother. He weathered this storm with grace and faith and we were blessed by it.

These two men have served us well. Their wives have given them up that they might be able to invest in this way for us. We can and should tell them thank-you and well done. As you have the opportunity, would you express appreciation for their kindness and ministry for our church?