

The Priority, Qualifications, and Focus of Elders (Part 1)

Titus: The Church Established / Titus 1:5–11

Introduction:

Twice in the gospels, we read of Jesus having compassion towards people because “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” One is in Mark 6. When he and the disciples came to a crowd of people waiting for them, Mark records that, Jesus saw them like sheep without a shepherd, so He began to teach them. Jesus had compassion for them because they needed a shepherd to lead and teach them. In John 10, Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, describing himself as one who cares for His sheep, leads His sheep, protects His sheep, and lays down His life for His sheep. The scriptures speak of God as the shepherd of His people, and Jesus fulfilled that shepherding role, as God in the flesh, in a personal way while He walked on the earth. He shed His blood on the cross to purchase a people in need of a shepherd. And He continues to shepherd His people but uses an interesting means to do so. We pick up on this, as we see what happens at the end of Matthew 9 & 10. In Matthew 9:36, we see Jesus have compassion on the crowds again, because they were ..., like sheep without a shepherd. However, this time, instead of teaching and feeding them, He turned to his disciples and said, in verses 37-38, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38 therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Here, though Jesus is the great shepherd, he knows His people would need personal shepherding after He was raised, so He turns to His disciples, points to the need, and urges them to pray for more laborers. Right after this, he called the twelve apostles, commissioned them out with authority, and told them, in Matthew 10:6, to go to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” pointing to their shepherding role among God’s people. This role becomes even more clear in John 21:15-17, where Jesus speaks with the apostle Peter before He is taken up into heaven. Perhaps you know this story. 3 times, Jesus asks if Peter loves Him. The first time, Peter says yes, and Jesus says, “feed my lambs.” The second time, Peter says yes, and Jesus says, “Tend, or shepherd, my sheep.” The third time Peter says yes, and Jesus says again, “Feed my sheep.” These stories help communicate two truths central to our understanding of today’s passage. First, that Jesus Christ cares for His people as their good shepherd. And second, that Jesus cared about His people continuing to have shepherds care for them like He did. Jesus commissioned apostles to shepherd His sheep, and Titus 1:5-11, shows how the apostles ensured Christ’s sheep would continue to receive that same shepherding. We see this through Paul’s first charge to Titus being a reminder of,

THE PRIORITY OF PROPER LEADERSHIP IN CHRIST’S CHURCH

Pay attention to the way Paul begins verse 5, 5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, Titus was left in Crete for a very specific purpose, to “put what remained into order.” Paul and Titus had apparently traveled to Crete together, either to check on the spread of the gospel there or take the gospel there themselves. At some point, Paul needed to leave, but recognized there was still work to be done in establishing healthy churches. So, he left Titus there to focus on that. “Putting what remained into order” carries with it the idea of correction and setting things right. We will discover that there were significant problems on Crete, and Titus’ charges involved setting things right. Where Titus should begin becomes very important, then. Look at the rest of verse 5, 5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— The place Titus is to start, is completing Paul’s directions to appoint elders in every town. Notice a few things here. We see that Titus was the one directed to appoint elders. He was called to choose and put elders in place. We also see that there needed to be elders in every town. The construction of this phrase, points to Titus not appointing multiple elders in every town.

Further, the flow helps us to see the priority, as this was what Paul directed Titus to do before leaving, and the first thing he charges him to do in this letter. One question becomes, why is this a priority? Before answering this, let's make a quick observation from verses 5-7. Notice in verse 5, he says appoint elders, in verse 6, "if anyone is above reproach," and then verse 7, "for an overseer... must be above reproach." We see the terms for elder and overseer are interchangeable as one office. And this is consistent throughout the New Testament. Back to our question, why is appointing elders a priority? Consider, first, what Paul says about them in Titus 1:7 7 For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. They are called God's steward. The word for steward refers to those put in charge of managing an estate. These were slaves or freemen, responsible to the master of the house for how they cared for his property, possessions, other servants, and even children. Elders, or overseers, are those put in charge of managing the household of God. Elders appear in the bible as early as Acts 11:30, receiving the collection taken for the church in Judea. Acts 14:21-23, shows that Paul appointed elders in every church in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, before committing them to the Lord. By the time we get to Acts 15, they were serving alongside the apostles, in Jerusalem, determining whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised. In Acts 20, before Paul left to go to Jerusalem, he called the elders of the church in Ephesus together in verse 17, and reminded them of their calling in Acts 20:28, to, 28 Pay careful attention ... to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. Elders, or overseers, were a priority for Paul, because they were God's stewards charged with caring for the church, purchased by Jesus' blood. Yet, Paul wasn't the only one who saw this priority. When writing to the churches of the dispersion, Peter speaks directly to the elders in 1 Peter 5:1-4 saying, 1 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder ... 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Think about what Peter is saying, the elders of the church, are fellow elders with the apostle Peter, meaning their calling is connected to his, as shepherds of the sheep. Elders, or overseers, then, are those called and commissioned, as God's stewards, carrying the same call of the apostle Peter to shepherd the church of God, following in the footsteps of the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who purchased them with His own blood. Do you feel the weight of this appointment? This is not an appointment for us to take lightly. It is also not a position of status or prestige. And it is not a position of leadership, like the world considers leadership. Jesus makes this clear in Mark 10:42-45, when he says to the apostles, 42 ... "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 43 But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The call of elders is nothing short of a call to be an under-shepherd of the great shepherd, to lead like Jesus led, care like He cared, and sacrifice like He sacrificed. And Hebrews 13:17 brings this weight even deeper, showing how leaders, or elders, will give an account for those they watch over. Those who aspire to this office, made overseers by the Holy Spirit, should step forward with humble trembling, because the task they are called to is a daunting task. We needed to camp here because it should shape how we approach the qualifications and focus of this office that Paul will remind Titus of, causing us to humbly submit to the word of God as we consider what elders should be and do at GracePoint Church, as those shepherding like our good shepherd. After reminding Titus of the priority of proper leadership, Paul moves to the qualification and focus of elders, in verses 6-9. Let's start with the qualifications of elders, where we see that,

ELDERS MUST BE QUALIFIED MEN WHO DISPLAY GOD'S GRACE

I recognize there may be different feelings, experiences, and understandings on this subject, as there are different views Christians take on this topic.

Here at GracePoint Church, we are persuaded the scriptures prescribe this office to qualified men only. As we read the qualifications for elders, or overseers, found here in Titus 1:6-9 and in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, we see them pointing to male eldership. This is consistent with the rest of the Bible's teaching, that reveals how God, in His goodness, has chosen to call men to be the leaders within the home and church. This, by design, is to portray to the world the relationship of Christ and the church, as well as the beauty of order and roles within the Trinity. As God, in three persons, has order and roles within Himself, with the Son submitting to the Father, and the Spirit proceeding from the Son and the Father, He calls His church and Christian homes to reflect that same order and beauty, when functioning properly. If you have a different understanding, we are happy to have you worshipping with us, and I would be happy to speak with you more about it if you have any questions. Let me say 2 more things before digging into these verses. Church, the bible is emphatically clear that men and women are equally created in the image of God, co-equal in value, dignity, and gifting. This distinction is one of calling, not value, status, or ability. A calling we've seen carries tremendous weight and responsibility, and a calling ultimately to a deep service of others. Also, I am fully aware this understanding has sadly been abused and used at times throughout church history to stifle women from using their gifts, to the detriment of the church. The authority of godly leadership does not look like anything else in the world and we should strive to always show that. Know that we long to see women thrive at GracePoint Church and desire to provide ways that align with the scriptures for women to build up the church through the use of their spiritual gifts. With that said, let's dig into what makes a man qualified to be an elder, because it is not just any men who can be elders, it is qualified men. Look at verse 6, where Paul starts with an overarching qualification. 6 if anyone is above reproach The idea behind the word for above reproach is that a charge can't stick. If the elder were accused of failing in one of these qualifications, it would be clearly apparent to all that the accusations are not true. This doesn't point to perfection, but the defining tone of their lives being free from the sins listed as having mastery over their hearts, and visibly walking in each of the virtues listed. Each negative qualification should be viewed as whether something has a grip on someone's life, not an offense that they have turned from. Each positive qualification is something elders both exhibit now and are growing in. Some may shine brighter than others, but they all must be present in some form. The foundation Paul laid and continues to present in this letter, of God as a Grace Giving Savior, reminds us that all these qualifications are only met through the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, elders must be qualified men who display God's grace. I see 3 ways elders must display God's grace in these verses. We will cover 2 of them today, and the 3rd next week,

1) ELDERS MUST DISPLAY GOD'S GRACE TO LOVE AND LEAD WELL

Verse 6 is a difficult verse to understand. Look there with me, 6 if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife Paul begins by saying the elder must be the husband of one wife. The literal translation would be a "one woman man." The phrase here is notoriously hard to determine its precise meaning. Many commentators suggest the best way to understand it is in terms of marital faithfulness, hence the ESV translation. The idea is that his eyes, his heart, and his actions are clearly revealing a dedicated love for only one woman. The elders love and dedication to one woman shows the ability to love and be dedicated, like the good shepherd, to the church, as Christ's bride. The second phrase is harder to understand. Look again at the end of verse 6, where it says, 6 if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. The main question is with the word translated "believers," in the ESV. Does that mean that an elder's children must have faith in Christ? It is possible that is what Paul means, but I am not persuaded that is the meaning. One reason is that it is not mentioned in the list of qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3. Another is how the word used here, is translated in various ways throughout the Bible, as either believe or faithful.

When you consider what follows, and how charges of debauchery or insubordination are strong terms of rebellion against authority, I agree with scholars that suggest Paul is speaking of children who are faithful to their fathers leadership, and the way Christians live. This qualification, then, appears to mirror 1 Timothy 3:4 of the elder being able to manage his own household. The lives of an elder's children reflect on his ability to lead his home well, revealing his ability to lead the church well. These qualifications lead to some questions. Does an elder have to be married, or have children? What about divorce? The requirement of marriage and children is easier to handle, as we consider that neither Paul, Timothy, or Titus were married. Paul also gives a strong call towards a life of singleness for the sake of the kingdom in 1 Cor. 7. So, it would appear that this qualification is for those who are married, and have children, not denying that single men, or men without children could be qualified. When it comes to divorce and remarriage, my conclusion is there is nothing to say definitively that a divorced man is automatically disqualified. But suggest thoughtful, prayer-filled deliberation is required. Was the divorce biblical, or prior to salvation? Is the elder perceived as consistently having eyes for one woman only? And maybe even whether enough time has passed to prove repentance if it was sin? The main point is how these qualifications show that an elder must display God's grace to love and lead well. The second way elders must display God's grace is that,

2) ELDERS MUST DISPLAY GOD'S POWER TO FIGHT SIN & PURSUE GODLINESS

Start by noticing the repetition at the beginning of verse 7. Again, Paul says the elder, or overseer, must be above reproach, pointing to both the necessity of the qualifications, and the nature of these qualifications. Let's look at verses 7-8 together, then walk through each one, 7 For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, 8 but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. Paul starts with 5 negative traits to put off, showing God's power to fight sin, followed by 6 positive traits to put on, revealing God's power to pursue godliness. You can see how they contrast with each other at the beginning of verse 8 with the word "but." The traits to put off start with not being arrogant. The elder isn't overly proud and self-pleasing. He doesn't only care about his opinions and rights, and lack a concern for the opinions, interests, or feelings of others. Next, he can't be quick tempered. He isn't known for having a short fuse, or being easily angered. We might say he isn't a hot head. He also isn't a drunkard. We all know the difference between someone who has a drink and a drunkard. The elder isn't characterized by his drinking habits and his use of alcohol is appropriately tempered. Further, Elders must not be violent. The word literally means physically hitting others, but it also points to not being verbally aggressive or bullying. I once asked a Christian brother in Abu Dhabi, of eastern European descent, about the biggest way Christ changed his life. He shared how, in his culture, the way you handle any conflict is by physically fighting with people. Mind you, this guy is not someone you would not want to fight. He said the gospel of Christ showed him that violence should never control his life. The last thing elders must not be is greedy for gain. The elder can't be someone who looks to boost himself, his status, or his pocket. Cretans, in particular were known for a love of wealth and gain. After listing the negative traits to put off, Paul gives, in some ways, lists their counter parts in verse 8. The first positive trait is that the elder must be hospitable. This literally means a lover of strangers. The elder is inclined towards welcoming and caring for others, especially strangers, both within the Christian community, and outside the church. The next trait involves the inclination of the heart as well, as the elder must be a lover of good. This is not a love of good in theory, but a zealous desire to see good flourishing in his life and the church. The next 4 seem to almost form a bracket. Self-controlled pertains to the mind and thoughts, disciplined to the tongue, habits, and actions. Both point to a careful control over ones passions and sinful nature. Upright involves being just in his relations with others, signifying that the elder is equitable and fair towards all. He doesn't show preference to anyone. Holy relates to his devotion to God. Elders are men who seeks to please the Lord and walk worthy of the gospel. Do you see the lofty requirements for elders to display the grace of God?

Conclusion:

As we wrap up these first two qualifications, the question that may run through your mind is, how do I apply this passage if I am not an elder? The first way is to set biblical expectations of who elders are in this church. Remember, Paul left Titus in Crete to “put what remained into order.” When one considers the priority of appointing elders, how elders serve the church, and the qualifications laid out for them, it becomes very apparent that for GracePoint Church to thrive, we need to have a true and strong plurality of elders leading this church. Church, I am one of the elders called to shepherd this church, together with other qualified elders. God’s design for GracePoint Church to flourish, is for a team of qualified men to be humbly keep watch over your souls together, leaning in to varied gifts God has granted to each of us, as we lead this church. We should never be to look for the men who barely meet these qualifications, but men who exude these qualifications. We’re not looking for businessmen, or men with certain expertise to lead this church, we are looking for men who walk closely with our glorious savior. As you respond to this passage, set biblical expectations of the shepherding work of all the elders here, carefully considering who are called. The second way to apply this passage, flows from the first. Pray for and encourage your elders to press into their calling. Here are the current elders of GracePoint: Andy Clayton, Andy Jensen, Bill Kehoe, Ben Smith, Jeff Council, Jonathan McGladdery, Josh Johnson, Nate Hamilton, Paul Wilson, Randy Schmidt, Steve Opp. Oh church, we need your prayers and encouragements because we need the grace of God as we follow the in the footsteps of our great shepherd Jesus Christ. And God has ordained that His grace would, at times, be dispensed through the prayers of His people. Finally, and most importantly, though Paul is writing these verses about what elders must be, they are for you as well. Throughout the Bible, and even in this letter, we see these vices and virtues are ones that all who follow Jesus are called to put off and put on. Christ died on the cross to secure the forgiveness of your sin and give you the power of His Spirit to truly live for His glory. So, no one studying this letter can look at these verses and say “Whew, I am glad I am not called to be an elder.” Elders must exhibit these because, as the apostle Peter said, they serve as examples to the flock. As we look at these verses, ask yourself which traits you need the grace of God to help me you put off and put on. If you aren’t trusting in Christ, but you see these things as valuable to pursue, know that the true power to live this way comes only through Christ. Trust Him today, receiving forgiveness, and the power you need. Church, don’t bypass these verses because you aren’t called to be an elder. Seek to apply them to your life, by praying for, and leaning into God’s grace. As the worship team begins to come up, let me end with one question for all of us to ponder. How much could GracePoint Church shine for the gospel if we are a church led by qualified elders, displaying the grace of God, leading members who are displaying the grace of God in these ways?

Would you stand as I pray this over us?