

## Week Three: 1Tim 3:1-13

### *“Character and Wisdom”*

*1Ti 3:1-13 (ESV) The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*

*8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 13 For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

Paul starts this section by saying that if someone *aspires* to be an overseer, a leading elder, in the church then he *desires* a good work. *Aspire* means a desired goal or objective. And the second word, *desire*, is often translated *lust*, something I really want and will go to any lengths to get it. One word expresses the goal, the other expresses the motive of the heart. Paul words it like this because he wants to make sure we examine our own hearts and ask, *“What is my motive behind my aspiration? Do I want to serve, or to be served? Do I want power so I can control people and events?”* That is why everything Paul says next is all about character. And Character is wisdom. Or is Wisdom character? Which comes first? And how many of us read through Paul’s list of qualifications think, *“Who can be like this? How could I ever measure up?”* Honest people ask themselves that question. Or maybe we think, *“But I have talent and I can get things done. That should make up for these other things.”* Nothing Paul says is about what we can DO, it is about who we ARE. And right in the middle of the paragraph about our aspirations for elder is a focus on family. What greater measure of wisdom and character is there? What are mom and dad like when no one is watching? That is Paul’s question: *...if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?*

Character is wisdom. Wisdom is character. And where do we get this kind of wisdom? Only from God. God as Creator, God as Father, God as Savior. We will explore that more fully as we look at these passages and see what it means to be an overseer or elder under God’s authority. If we admit to ourselves that we do not measure up, does that eliminate us from the noble goal? No because God is a Savior that transforms the heart and realigns our motives. It takes time, it takes honesty, and it takes a desire to change on the inside. That is where our God does His best work!

Everyone in public life knows that the higher a person rises in an organization the more the world outside looks at you and judges what they see. People judge a man’s

character on what they see in his family life as well as what he does personally. Everything that was once private is now public, and it all matters. But some in the church might say *“The church believes in forgiveness, therefore it doesn’t matter if our leaders don’t live up to all the moral standards. It gives us a chance to show what we mean by forgiveness.”*<sup>1</sup> But that is not the real message of the church, not the whole message anyway. God’s forgiveness is the kind of love that transforms us into His new creatures and does not leave us unchanged. Church elders and deacons have to manage the church and care for people in a way that says we are different. It is telling the world *“You, too, can be different. Our God in Christ will take you in and forgive you and cleanse you no matter where you have been.”* If our leaders are not living that kind of transformed life, then the church will be no different from the culture that surrounds us. We end up following a god of our making, a god who serves us, so we are never inconvenienced and enjoy our comforts. The world likes that.

So as leaders rise, we want them to also rise above and beyond reproach. The outside world cannot find any obvious blemish or stain. They walk in the ways of wisdom that we in the congregation imitate and follow. We entrust ourselves to them and want them to lead us in the path of righteousness. As we ourselves grow under the care of good leaders we learn that even a man above reproach still needs our prayers, so we lift them up and we help them bear the burden of leadership. We all are weak in some area of our life, and we all fail. Christians are called and completely forgiven, so that we are repentant before God and forgiving to others. This is only possible in an atmosphere of respect and mutual trust. This is how we as the Body of Christ reflect Christ’s character in the sight of other Christians, in the sight of the world, and in the sight of our God.

Look at some of the specific requirements Paul lists. Paul begins with marriage. An elder must have one wife, and that’s all. However, if an elder loses his wife through death most churches say that he can marry again. Some even allow for divorce and remarriage, depending on the circumstances of the divorce. Paul knew divorce was a real problem among the Jews, but Paul also faced the problem of polygamy, which was a major problem among Gentile cultures, just as it is for the church in parts of Africa today. Paul appealed to Genesis where the standard has been set: God’s plan from the very beginning was for faithful, lifelong partnerships between one man and one woman. Jesus says that has not changed and He, like Paul, affirmed God’s design for marriage:

*“But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So, they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”* (Mar 10:6-9 ESV)

Does this mean an elder must be married? A single man cannot be an elder? Paul himself argued that as an Apostle he himself was better off unmarried. He also recognized that singleness and celibacy is a special gift of the Holy Spirit. Single men are not ruled out, but different churches have different views on this. What is being ruled out is a man with two or more wives, implying that there were men in the early Christian churches in that situation. I have no doubt Paul would also rule out same sex marriage. The debate rages today about whether gay people should even be accepted as members of a church. Just as in Africa there is debate about new converts who come with several wives. Every culture in history has had its struggles and trials.

Different churches have different views on these things, and we have to approach these trials humbly, with a balance of grace and truth.

Paul goes on with more instructions that seem at first glance like a random list. An elder must be: *...sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money...* In this list there are two things that are unique qualifications for the elder; hospitality and the ability to teach. To do both these things well a man must be clear headed and sober. How can he teach if he cannot think clearly and thoughtfully? Self-control means he does not easily lose his temper, not to mention fighting and violence. We trust those who are gentle with us. Why would Paul have to make a point of not being violent or quarrelsome? Gentleness in men was not a sought-after moral virtue in Ephesus. It must be in the church. Just as there must be respectability, which is respect for self and others. Respect for people is at the heart of hospitality. I think this means more than having dinner guests. It means care for the poor and it means justice for those who cannot defend themselves. I think that is why Paul puts *"not a lover of money"* at the end. If greed leads an elder to steal or cheat, he certainly loses all respectability when the truth comes out. If we think of hospitality as justice in action, it is impossible to be greedy and at the same time show respect for the poor or to seek justice where there is abuse in the world around us.

Love of money or love of power may be the desire that may lead to a man to aspire to be an elder. That is why careful examination is mandatory but a man with pure motives will never shy away from it. That is why Paul warns us about the neophyte, the new convert to the church. There is no track record and pride and greed are traps that are easily hidden. New converts who want to be leaders must pass the test of time and trial. That will usually show the difference between falling into the trap of pride or standing in gratitude and humility for what God wants to do. Pride will lead us into a world of condemnation, like Hymenaeus and Alexander, where we face a wilderness outside of the grace of the church and away from Christ's protection.

Now Paul turns from elders to deacons. Deacon is a Greek word and means servant or minister. In the early church both men and women were deacons in the church. A deacon named Phoebe was one of Paul's most trusted workers. He sent her to Rome with his letter to the Romans, and it is likely she actually read the letter to the churches. *(Rom 16:1)* All Christians are called to serve one another, but the word deacon applies to this special kind of service. I have heard that in the Army the officers are in charge but the Sergeants do the carry the load. Maybe the same could be said about deacons in the church. In Acts 6 we are told that the Apostles asked the members to appoint some people to minister, to be "deacons", and serve the practical needs of the church. One of these was Stephen, who became not only a servant to the poor and the widows, but one of the most powerful witnesses in the church. He became the first martyr. And his murder was witnessed by a young man named Saul, which Paul has never forgotten, and it is the reason he says he is so grateful for God's mercy *(1:13)*. Stephen's example shows us how important this work can be. A faithful deacon finds the respect that gains a hearing from people around us. That is how it happened for Stephen. He knew his Bible and he was able testify before the Sanhedrin. Do we mourn for him or rejoice for him? Maybe both. Look at his final witness before the leaders of Israel:

*"Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and*

*saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Act 7:54-60 ESV)*

We can see what a powerful motivator the Resurrection of Jesus was to the early church. And we have the same power living in us—and over us—and working through us. Paul prayed we would know and grasp *"...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead" (Eph 1:19-20)* Jesus is interceding for us now with that same prayer.

We find the qualifications for elders and deacons are somewhat similar. The two lists are interchangeable except for the qualities of teaching and hospitality, which is the exclusive domain of the elders. Teaching means more than ability to give a lecture, it is the authority that stands guard over the doctrines of our faith. Hospitality is the heart of our mission to the community. Simply put, the elder guards the truth and advocates for the needy. Elders are the public face of the church. The deacons are the inner strength of the church. This all works together to build up and strengthen a body that rests on the foundation of Jesus Christ. We want Jesus to be as attractive to the world as He is to us.

I want to go back to a question I asked earlier, *"How can anyone measure up to these qualifications?"* Character is wisdom and wisdom is character. Where does wisdom come from? It is nurtured in the home and in the church. James says this kind of wisdom is not man's wisdom, it is God's wisdom: *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. (Js 3:17)* That means there is only one place we can get it, and James tells us it comes from God: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. (Js 1:5)* There is a whole book in the Scriptures that tells us this is true. It is the book of Proverbs written by Solomon, the wisest King who had ever lived. That is, until Jesus came on the scene. Let's go to Proverbs and ask God for His wisdom.

In Proverbs 3 we can find six characteristics that define a wise man. But it also tells us how to become a wise man. We could call them Six Tests of Wisdom. Ready? Here is number One: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding... (Prov 3:5)* We can believe in God yet still trust something else for real significance and happiness. That something becomes our real god. Of course, we hide this from ourselves and can only see it when we lose control and our "something" fails us. When things go horribly wrong and we find out can't handle life on our own. We find the cure for this kind of idolatry in the Gospel. Our own works, success and achievements will not justify us. We are only justified when we trust in Jesus Christ, *with all our heart.*

Next, wisdom says to submit to God in every area of life and not rely on your own understanding, especially things that are beyond our capacity to comprehend: *...in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. (Prov 3:6)* The culture

around us tells us to question everything and not rely on anyone except our own understanding. There is a choice to make; to rely completely on myself as my own authority and submit to no one, or to see there is something more powerful than I. Proverbs tells us outright to choose God. He is the Creator who made us, loves us, and will direct our lives in a way that does not depend solely on our own reasoning and intuition. Our wisdom grows as we live our lives shaped by the narrative of the Bible. That story points us to the wisdom found in Christ, *who richly dwells within us.*(Col 3:16)

Test Three is a willingness to accept counsel and advice. Fools are wise in their own eyes. *Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.* (3:7–8) Remember when you were a teenager? Often young people do not listen to their parents but rely on the best advice of their friends. Is it no wonder they remain foolish? It not just teens, though. Many of us only listen to people of our own social class or political persuasion. But the wise man listens to the Word of God, to his trusted friends, to people from other viewpoints and, most importantly, his critics. The wise man has many counselors. Why does this Proverb say, *This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones?* It may be the old saying that says “*The doctor who treats himself has a fool for a doctor and a fool for a patient.*” But when it comes to sin, Jesus said, “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*” (Mk 2:17) The wise man seeks advice, the wise man knows he cannot be his own Savior.

The Fourth test: *Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.*(Prov 3:9–10) The wise man is generous. This fits Paul’s warning about *lovers of money*. Money can blind us to how greedy we really are. The Scriptures say the best way to break the power of money over us is to give lots of it away. In Israel the first fruits of a crop were given to God before harvest time. It was a test. Would you be willing to trust God’s provision not knowing how big the harvest would be? One of the hardest things to learn, especially in our culture, is that money is not our security. Money is God’s provision for us so we can learn the lessons of stewardship. Generosity is wisdom.

Number Five is the ability to learn from adversity. *My son do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.* (3:11–12) Test four said a generous man might enjoy increasing financial blessing. But this test says that may not always be true. Test one said trust in the Lord even when it all goes wrong. The world is filled troubles beyond human understanding. And we can’t seem to fix it. Wisdom teaches us to be ready for suffering. That suffering is God’s method for growth in *more* wisdom. But it can also drive us away if we do not trust adversity as part of our Father’s discipline. The farther we run from God, the more increasingly bitter life can become. Sometimes the only way we can make sense of our suffering is to turn to the Gospel where we see Jesus as God’s own Son suffering infinitely for me and for you. He bore the ultimate discipline, and He is standing with us to bear ours. “*What a friend WE HAVE in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear...*”

Finally, test Six. *Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, “Come back tomorrow and I’ll give it to you” —when you already have it with you.* (3:27–28) Wisdom is justice. Helping our

neighbors is not a matter of charity. It is our neighbor's *due*. It is what we owe. What about people getting only what they deserve or merit for themselves? That is the only thing that makes sense to us in our competition driven society. This is what makes the Kingdom of Jesus a backwards and upside-down world. Jesus says our neighbor has a right to part of the wealth God has given to me as a temporary steward. The parable of The Good Samaritan answers the question "*Who is my neighbor?*" It is anyone we encounter who is in need. Listen to James again: *If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (Js 2:15-16)* This where James famously says "*Faith without works is dead.*" Giving is an act of love, the kind of love we see in the Gospel, where the One who had it all gave His all so we could share the richness of His Glory!<sup>2</sup>

These tests and this wisdom is for every child of God, not just elders and deacons and "special people." But we must certainly pray that our leaders pass these tests and have this wisdom! And the Lord reminds us about the men who rise to this challenge as leaders: "*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*" (Heb 13:17)

*Father, You tell us that the beginning of wisdom is this: "To Get wisdom. Even if it costs all you have, get understanding. Cherish her, and she will exalt you, embrace her, and she will honor you." Lord, we are not born with this kind of wisdom. We come into this world knowing nothing and though we mature and become independent in many ways, we want to stay dependent on you for things we cannot do. We could never do what Jesus did for us. We want to bow down before you and thank you and praise you Father for the gift you have given us, a gift we did not earn or deserve. And we love you for it. Because of the Son you love. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup>Wright, Tom. *New Testament For Everyone*. The Pastoral Epistles. Westminster John Knox Press 2011 p.28

<sup>2</sup>Keller, Timothy; Keller, Kathy. *God's Wisdom for Navigating Life*. Penguin Publishing Group. pp.22-27 The idea and the concepts for the six characteristics of wisdom came from this excellent devotional on Proverbs.