1 Timothy

Lesson 3

**Introduction**

So far, Paul has given the falling instructions to Timothy:

* Confront people teaching false doctrine/hold on to apostolic gospel (1 Tim. 1:3-20)
* Pray for all types of people, including kings and authorities (1 Tim. 2:2-7)
* Observe order in church services
  + Men should pray in holiness without anger or contention (1 Tim. 2:8)
  + Women should focus on pleasing God with good deeds rather than seeking improper human attention through extravagant or immodest dress (1 Tim. 2:9-10)
  + Women should learn in church services while recognizing male authority in the church (1 Tim. 2:11-15)

**1 Timothy 3:1-13 Elders and Deacons**

1. **Elders**

Paul continues to discuss order in the church by addressing leadership. Paul commends the saying that, if anyone aspires to the role of “overseer” or “bishop” (episkopos), he seeks a noble task. It is not known how this saying started, but Paul seems to be quoting it to encourage men to aspire to be qualified for this office and willing to serve if called upon. Paul will later use the term “presbuteros,” (1 Tim. 5:17) which literally means “elder,” and appears synonymous with the first term, so some translations use “elder” for both terms. Paul uses it to refer to the men who served on the leadership councils who oversaw local churches, and oversight is inherent in the term “episkopos.” Shepherding is another term applied to this role. Acts 20:28.

The list of elder qualifications is:

* Above reproach (be anepilaympton)—a term describing one’s general character, and meaning that there is not an area of one’s character in which one is objectively failing, i.e., someone could bring a valid charge that the elder’s character is lacking;
* A man of one woman (mias gunaikos andra); In first-century Greco-Roman society, multiple marriages were generally not permitted or at least disapproved, but a double-standard existed; wives were expected to be completely faithful to their husbands, while husbands were not subject to disapproval for sleeping with prostitutes, single female slave, or even unmarried free women; this phrase likely set a higher bar than Greco-Roman society expected and required married elders to be faithful to their wives; most commentators do not think it is meant to prohibit single men or widowers from serving as elders, since Paul taught that it was fine not to get married and he was single (1 Cor. 7:1, 8-9.)
* Sober (nyphalion)—this term emphasizes self-control and good judgment
* Self-controlled/prudent (sophron)—this term emphasizes self-control and prudent or thoughtful
* Respectable (kosmios)—this term also means well-behaved or virtuous
* Hospitable (philaxnos)—being open and caring
* Able to teach/disciple (didatikos)—the parallel in Titus 1:9 is being able to encourage others with sound doctrine and refute false ideas; there is no reason to think that Paul is picturing classroom, lecture style teaching; this could happen one-on-one;
* Not addicted to wine (not paroinon)—as we discussed earlier, wine was part of Roman culture, but Paul wants believers to be controlled by the Holy Spirit, not any addictive substance;
* Not combative, but gentle (not playktays, but epiaykay)—gentleness is one of the fruits of the spirit, including for men
* Peaceful (hamaxas)—continues theme of not being contentious
* Not greedy or loving money (aphilarguron)—Paul will talk later in the letter about the importance of not focusing one’s desires on material wealth; Jesus of course said that if people allow money to be their master, they cannot serve God;
* Manages his household well; his children are in submission to and respectful of his authority—In Roman society, one of the father’s duties was to make sure children in his household observed societal norms; Paul adds the rationale that a man who is not able to manage a household will not be able to manage a church;
* Not a new convert (not neophutas)—the term literally meant newly planted; the rationale is that giving this responsibility to a new convert may lead to the conceited pride that lead to Satan’s downfall; Paul thus seems to accept the idea that Satan was an extremely high-ranking angel who rebelled against God due to pride;
* Good testimony from those outside (marturian kalayn exein apo tone exothen)—This means a good reputation with nonbelievers; this item suggests that Paul believed nonChristians would view elders in particular as representatives of Christianity; Paul undoubtedly knew there would be times when outsiders would persecute or slander Christians even when they did not deserve it, but he wanted elders to be people respected for their integrity and consistency even by outsiders; it is not clear whether Paul is concerned that if the elder was someone outsiders were eager to attack, those attacks could be used by the devil to provoke an inappropriate reaction from the elder or that an elder subject to attack would bring dishonor to the entire church or both;

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| 1 Timothy 3:1-7 elders | Titus 1:6-9 elders |
| Above reproach | Blameless |
| A man of one woman | A man of one woman |
| Sober | Not arrogant |
| Self-controlled/prudent | Lives righteously, self-controlled |
| Respectable | Loves what is good, is holy |
| Hospitable | Hospitable |
| Able to teach/disciple | Can instruct in sound doctrine and refute false ideas |
| Not addicted to wine | Not addicted to wine |
| Not combative, but gentle |  |
| Peaceful | Not quick-tempered |
| Not greedy or loving money | Not greedy for money |
| Manages household well | Children are faithful and are not accused of dissipation or rebellion |
| Not a new convert | Holds firm to the apostolic message |
| Good testimony from outsiders |  |

Paul says nothing about characteristics that often matter in secular affairs. Nothing is said about the elders’ physical appearance, wealth, social status, raw intelligence, or success in the business world. The focus is on the fruit of the spirit and other traits demonstrating spiritual maturity. Commentators agree that no one perfectly lives out these qualifications and elders should strive to keep growing, as Paul acknowledged in Phil. 3:12-15. The book “Church Elders” does a great job applying these principles to modern churches. Other passages indicate Paul expected each church to have multiple elders. (Acts 20:17-18; Titus 1:5.) Leadership by a group rather than an individual is different than many secular organizations.

1. **Deacons**

Paul next addresses “deacons.” The word literally means servant. In other contexts, the word is applied to Paul and Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5) and to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6), and emphasizes that all church leaders, including elders and apostles, should view themselves as servant/deacons with a “little d.” (See Matt. 20:28.) In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, however, Paul describes a particular office or role called “deacon.” The use of this name for the office indicates that its focus is service, not oversight.

But, like the elders, deacons have high spiritual qualifications:

* Worthy of respect (semnous)—sometimes translated “serious,” it means someone who is not a lightweight;
* Not double-tongued (dilogous)—this term means insincere, or a person who says one thing to one person and something different to someone else to gain an advantage;
* Not addicted to much wine;
* Not greedy for money;
* Hold the mystery of faith with a clear conscience—deacons must embrace the apostolic gospel with a clear or clean conscience, meaning genuine and sustained effort to adhere to Christ’s ethical commands;
* Tested and proven blameless before serving as deacons—This seems to correspond to elders not being a new convert; Paul does not explain how churches should test elders; it could be evaluating their general behavior over time or by giving them smaller responsibilities that they handled well;
* Women/wives likewise must be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, temperate/self-controlled, faithful in all things—The insertion of this verse about females has generated much debate. Some think Paul is describing qualifications for female deacons. Others think Paul is saying the wives of deacons must have these qualifications. To some extent, the arguments blend together. No qualifications for females were given during the passage on elders. Consequently, even if Paul primarily meant wives, the implication is that Paul thought wives could be involved in the work of deacons, which in turn implies that women could be deacons.
* A man of one woman—Like elders, male deacons were expected to be faithful
* Manage children and households well

Paul concludes by saying that those who serve well as deacons gain “a good standing” and “great confidence” “in the faith in Christ Jesus.” The implication is that serving well advances the process of spiritual maturity and provides spiritual assurance. It may also imply that serving well causes other believers to respect and trust the deacon. There is some evidence that small churches may have just had elders, and that deacons were added as a church grew. (See Acts 6:2-7; Titus 1:5.) It appears that deacons reported to elders. (See Acts 6:2-6.) The qualifications for deacons emphasize integrity and self-control and leave out some of the qualifications related to teaching or reputation. This seems consistent with deacons having important administrative responsibilities, such as handling money or benevolence matters, but not having the doctrinal responsibility or being the “face” of the church to the same extent as elders.

At First Evangelical Free Church Sioux Falls, we have a 7-person elder board that includes the senior pastor and 6 volunteers. The volunteers serve 4-year terms. Replacements are chosen by a nominating committee including multiple church members with input from current elders and staff. People who agree to serve as elders are presented for approval by the membership at a church business meeting. Our church strives to nominate people who fit the biblical qualifications, while recognizing that every candidate is imperfect.

We don’t talk as much about deacons, but I would consider people who serve in positions involving significant time commitment and requiring high integrity such as the trustee board or church treasurer to be the equivalent of deacons, even if we don’t use that term. I personally believe that the principles of 1 Timothy leave room for female deacons.

**1 Timothy 3:14-16 Paul’s purpose statement for the epistle**

Paul says that he hopes to meet Timothy soon, suggesting Paul wanted to visit Ephesus. (1 Tim. 3:14.) But Paul knew there was a good chance that would not happen, although he does not say why, so Paul wrote the epistle. The epistle’s purpose was to tell Timothy “how people must behave in God’s household, which is the living God’s assembly/community, the pillar and bulwark of truth.” This statement emphasizes that (1) the church is God’s community, created, sustained, and ruled by the triune God (which implies God has the right to make the “house rules” that govern this community), and (2) that God’s household is supposed to be a bulwark of truth, i.e., by following God’s rules, even when they are unpopular, God’s community is a source or beacon of truth for outsiders.

As often happens with Paul, this reference to God inspires him to a statement of praise, which appears to be a creed or hymn that he expects Timothy to recognize. Paul introduces this with a word combining the ideas of certainty and consensus, i.e., “as we all know and confess,” “great” is the “mystery of our religion.” In this context, “great” means that the mystery, i.e., the reality revealed by the gospel, is awesome, important, and profound. Paul then quotes a creed/hymn summarizing that reality:

He was manifested in flesh

He was vindicated in Spirit

He was seen by angels

He was preached among all peoples

He was believed on/accepted in the world

He was taken up in glory

The most popular view is that the creed/hymn is three couplets, each containing a contrast between flesh/earth and spirit/heaven. The first line refers to Jesus’ incarnation and “manifested” implies Jesus pre-existed and the incarnation simply “manifested” or revealed his existence to humanity. The second line probably refers to how the resurrection provided divine vindication of Jesus’s claims about his identity. (See Rom. 1:4.) “Seen by angels” likely refers to Jesus’s resurrection appearances. “Preached among all nations” refers to the ongoing Great Commission among humanity. The fifth line is hard to translate, but refers to all types of humans accepting and believing the gospel. The sixth line refers to Jesus’ ascension to heaven, which reflects divine acceptance of Jesus’ work. So there is a rough logical progression, with the couplets describing (1) Jesus’s mission, (2) the witness to that mission, and then (3) the acceptance of that mission/identity.

**1 Timothy 4:1-16 Advice for a church leader/pastor**

Chapter 4 transitions to personal advice to Timothy as a church leader or pastor. Paul begins with another problem involving false doctrine. Paul contends that the Spirit has clearly predicted some people who seem to be believers will abandon their professed faith. It is not clear whether Paul is citing scripture or a NT era prophecy. One possible scriptural source is Matthew 24:10-14, where Jesus predicted both people abandoning the faith and the problem of false prophets. The phrase “in later times” included Paul’s time. New Testament writers, who would have grown up an OT view of prophecy, viewed everything following the Messiah’s appearance as part of the “last days” or “later days.” During the NT era, Jesus and other writers introduced the idea of subdivisions within this time period. (Ex., Matt. 24:3-25:46; 2 Thess. 2:1-12.) Paul addresses an example of this problem occurring during his time.

But first Paul addresses the source of false doctrine. Paul contends that the false doctrines he is concerned about are ideas generated by “wicked spirits” and “demons.” But those ideas are spread by means of human teachers that Paul labels “false speakers” and “hypocrites.” This combination implies the speakers do not believe, or at least do not actually live by, the false ideas they teach. Paul says they have “seared” or “cauterized” their “own consciences” like branded skin. The false teachers’ sustained disobedience has made them unable to feel guilt or sense what is right, and the word “own” implies they have participated in the hardening of their hearts.

The content of the false teaching that Paul has in mind is surprising. They forbid people to marry and to eat certain foods. Paul says God created all foods to be received with thanksgiving by believers who know the truth. So, whatever foods they were forbidding, Paul viewed as acceptable. Paul argues that all things God created are good (Gen. 1:31), and should not be rejected, if it is received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by God’s word and prayer of thanksgiving. If we ignored Paul’s other epistles, this passage could be construed as permitting gluttony, illegal drugs, or all types of sexual conduct. In other epistles, Paul clarifies that the inherent goodness of creations such as food or the human body should not be used to justify sinful and destructive practices like gluttony or prostitution. (1 Cor. 6:12-17; Col. 2:19-23.) In 1 Timothy, the limiting principle seems to be “receiving it with thanksgiving.” Perhaps Paul means that one cannot give thanks to God for something while using it in a way or for a purpose disapproved by God. So we can give thanks for pizza; but we cannot genuinely give thanks for eating too much pizza. But the fact that humans can consume too much pizza does not justify imposing a rule that no one should eat pizza. The problem is not pizza, but the fleshly desire to eat too much pizza, and that desire can only be conquered through the long, difficult process of replacing fleshly desires with the fruit of the Holy Spirit. (Col. 3:1-15.)

Paul says that, if Timothy teaches these instructions to the brothers, he will be a good “deacon” or “servant” of Christ Jesus, “nourished” on the “words of the faith” and “good teaching,” which “you have followed.” The imagery is that a good minister grows strong in the faith by holding onto the good doctrine, and thus is in position to identify false teaching and provide accurate teaching, thereby fulfilling the role of a good minister. But that process requires effort. Timothy must reject false ideas, here described as myths and godless superstitions. And he must “train” himself in godliness. The word for training came from athletics. The comparison to athletic training conveys the hard effort required.

Paul adds that physical training has “some value” but godliness has more value because it has benefits in this lifetime and the life to come. Paul describes this principle as a faithful or trustworthy saying (The NIV makes it sounds like verses 4:9-10 are the saying, but most commentators agree that 4:8 is the saying.). The source of the saying is unknown, although one can find analogous thoughts in the gospels, where Jesus emphasizes benefits in the age or life to come. (Luke 18:29-30.) The great value of godliness now and in the future is why Paul “toils” or “labors” and “struggles mightily.” These terms include the root word for “agony” and convey extreme effort. The good news, however, is that Paul is not asking Timothy to put extreme effort toward an uncertain venture, but rather to set his hope on the “living God” who is the savior of all types of people, either “especially believers” or “that is, believers.” If Paul meant “especially believers” one common rationalization is to see this as a reference to the distinction between unlimited and limited atonement, i.e., Jesus is savior of all types of people by providing a ransom payment sufficient for all, but that atonement is only applied to those who believe. If Paul meant, “that is, believers,” the phrase is saying that believers come from all types of people groups. This suggests that church leaders should work so hard at godliness because (1) because investing in the living God has a certain and great return, and (2) because the task, bring the good news about Jesus to all types of people, is so huge.

Paul urges Timothy to “command” and “teach” “these things,” likely meaning the content of the epistle, but since the epistle includes references to the gospel and summaries of the gospel, Paul does not mean Timothy should ignore what he has learned from Paul in the past. Paul exhorts Timothy not to let anyone look down on him due to his youth. Scholars think in first century Rome, men were considered young as late as their mid-40s and age was entitled to deference. The method for making sure his youth did not become an obstacle was to be an exemplary believer in speech and conduct, and in love, faith, and purity. Paul again mentions his hope to arrive in Ephesus, and implies that may change Timothy’s role. Until then, Paul exhorts Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation (i.e., urge people to behave consistently with scripture), and to teaching (which would include explaining the meaning or application of scripture). Paul urges Timothy not to neglect the spiritual gift that he received when a group of elders laid hands on him and prophecies were spoken. When that occurred is not specified, but it sounds like an ordination or commissioning ceremony that may have occurred when Timothy decided to accompany Paul’s team many years earlier. Paul exhorts Timothy to “practice” these things in the sense of diligently working at them (the way a doctor practices medicine), and to be “devoted to” or “absorbed by” them. The goal is so that Timothy’s spiritual growth will be plain to see. Note that this indicates even a church leader like Timothy, who was always described positively, can continue growing. Last, Paul urges Timothy to “pay attention” to himself and his teaching and to “persevere.” The reason is that, by doing so, he will “save” himself and his hearers. This line is shocking to evangelicals. We do not like to use language suggesting that implying that a human can save himself, much less anyone else. But Jesus and other NT writers are not afraid to use similar language. (Luke 9:24; James 5:20; Jude 23.) They do not mean that Timothy can provide the means of justification before God. The NT makes it abundantly clear that the righteousness Jesus provides through faith is the only thing that provide that type of justification. But they have no trouble using language indicating that human effort—such as Timothy paying attention to how he lives and what he teaches—can be a vital part of the process of having and maintaining genuine faith.

**Applications**

The church is the manifestation of God’s household on earth, and so believers should strive to follow God’s rules for His community.

God’s household rules for local churches include leadership structure, ideally headed by a group of elders. Their qualifications are spiritual, and their task is to be spiritual shepherds for the local church, including protecting the community’s adherence to the apostolic gospel. Some churches also have the office of deacons, who report to the elders and perform important administrative duties.

The role of a pastor/church leader includes:

* Confronting teaching that departs from apostolic doctrine;
* The leader’s own training for godliness, including increasingly holy speech and conduct, and the virtues of self-sacrificial love, faith, and purity;
* Devotion to the ministries of public reading of scripture, exhortation, and teaching;
* Development of the leader’s spiritual gift;
* Diligent effort and careful attention to the leader’s own life and creed with the goal of persevering in the faith and helping the church members persevere in faith.
* To be continued. . .

Legalism—i.e., entirely forbidding a morally neutral thing or activity (ex., eating steak or getting married), is an evil thing. It breeds pride and false humility without actually reducing sin. (Col. 2:20-23.) It distracts people from Jesus’s priorities, which makes the church less effective.