

1 TIM 3:1-7—THE MARKS OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER

INTRO: Any organization is only as good, strong, and successful as its leadership. Look at the government—or not. The principle that good leadership is necessary for any organization to succeed applies everywhere: a football team, a business, a family, the church. After all, the church is a corporate body, not merely a collection of individuals. So it requires some structure to operate well and fulfill its mission. Paul discusses this in **1 Timothy 3**.

However, what is interesting is that, while the church is an organization, it is not an organization in the same sense as a football team or a business. What do I mean? What I mean is, in the Bible, the church is described as having an intimate connection with Jesus Christ. The church is described as **“his body.”** When Saul (who later became Paul) was persecuting the church, Jesus appeared to him and said, **“Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?”** He didn’t just say, **“Why are you persecuting my people?”** The church is so intimately connected with Christ that what happens to us affects him personally.

The church is also described as God’s bride, wife, children, people, temple, building, kingdom, and family. All of these descriptions suggest that there is something far deeper and organic about the church than a simple business or other organization. When I say “organic” I mean that there is a unity—a oneness, a connectedness—in the church that is not necessarily present in a business or football team. For example, every part of a building is connected and is necessary: if you don’t have a wall or a roof or a foundation or a support beam, you will not have a complete building or a very good one.

Likewise in a family: every member is connected; if the parents are angry with a child, they can’t fire the child or send him down to the minors. And if there is estrangement between family members, we all know how heartbreaking and disastrous that can be. That is especially true regarding husband and wife. If they aren’t a unity, then there is no marriage. Divorce can be one of the most devastating things a person can experience, which is why, in Malachi, it says, **“God hates divorce.”**

All of these things are pointing us to the fact that—because of the intimate union between Christ and his church—the type of people who lead his church is of profound importance. We will see that what God values, to a large extent, is unlike the kind of leadership requirements and characteristics valued by businesses and football teams. Additionally, what God values, and the requirements to be a leader in the church, apply to every one of us, whether or not we currently are in formal positions of church leadership. So this passage is for all Christians. If you are not a Christian, this passage also is for you, because it shows us what Christ wants his people to be like.

I am going to be concentrating on 1 Tim 3:1-7, which are the requirements to be an elder or overseer in the church, not on vv. 8-13, which deal with the requirements to be a deacon. The reason is that the requirements for the two levels of leadership are basically the same. They often use the same words and phrases, as I will mention as we go along. There is essentially only one difference between the requirements to be an elder and the requirements to be a deacon, which we will deal with when we come to it. So **1 Tim 3:1-7 [READ]**

PROP: A Christian must have the character of Christ.

O/S: We will see why a Christian must have the character of Christ as we consider three things: (1) background aspects of this passage; (2) the 15 requirements Paul lists for a person in leadership; and (3) some observations concerning the passage as a whole.

I. Background aspects of this passage.

In the Bible, the early church had two levels of leadership: the top level, known as elders or overseers; and a second level, known as deacons. **Verse 1** begins by saying, **“If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.”** The Greek word for “overseer” is *episkopos* which is sometimes translated “bishop.” It is equivalent to and, in the books of **Acts** and **Titus**, is used interchangeably with *presbuteros* (“elder”). What is being referred to is the top level of leadership in a local church, whether called pastors, bishops, overseers, or elders. These are the people who generally set policy and engage in the ministry of the word (preaching, teaching, counseling, discipling, etc.). One commentator says, **“It is noteworthy that here Paul defines being an overseer in terms of function not of status or office. He is not encouraging people to seek status but responsibility.”** IOW, we are not to be in it for the money, or the power, or the acclaim. Jesus put it like this in **Matt 20:25-28 [READ]**.

Verse 2 begins, “An overseer, then, must.” Paul then lists 15 requirements to be in the top level of church leadership. We need to see two things here. First, Paul is not saying that to be in leadership a person must meet one, or five, or even a majority of the requirements. He is saying that, to be a leader in the church, a person

is to meet all of the requirements. Second, what is remarkable about the requirements is that (with the possible exceptions of the ability to teach and not being a new convert) they are all requirements that *every Christian* should have. I say “**possible exception**” because everyone of us teaches in various ways—by what we say, how we say it, and how we live—and every new convert will grow up in Christ and so will no longer be a new convert.

The fact that these requirements apply to all Christians also is seen in that there are no special requirements concerning one’s level of education, material wealth, or other such “external” matters. Instead, all the requirements relate to one’s *character*. Because of this, every Christian is a potential leader in the church. Therefore, as I said at the outset, every Christian should have the character that Paul describes in these verses.

Interestingly, in 1:9-10 Paul listed 15 examples of *unrighteous* people for whom the law was made. Here Paul is saying that our character as leaders is to be the *complete opposite* of the type of people who must be subject to the law, because we *are no longer subject* to the old law. Instead, we are to have the character of Christ, because we are subject to the “**law of Christ.**” Our behavior flows out of our character. Just as our character is to be the complete opposite of the unrighteous, so should our behavior be the complete opposite of the types of acts listed in 1:9-10.

People who are in positions of leadership in the church are the most visible representatives of Christ to the congregation and to nonbelievers in the community. However, *every* Christian is a leader because every Christian is a representative of Christ to our neighbors, friends, co-workers, and everyone with whom we come in contact. Therefore, again, it is imperative that we *all* have the character of Christ and truly model him by how we live. Therefore, what Paul is saying here should speak to all of us.

II. The 15 requirements to be a leader in the church.

Paul’s list of requirements for church leadership begins with the fact that a leader is to be “**above reproach.**” The same requirement applies to deacons in v. 10. The word for “above reproach” essentially means that one cannot legitimately be accused of wrongdoing. This implies that the person is clean inside and out.

The idea is similar to John’s metaphor of “walking in the light” in 1 John 1:5-7. John says that we should “**walk in the light as God himself is in the light.**” Think of light and what it does: it causes things to grow; it warms us when we are cold; it enables us to see where we are going and where we should go. That’s what leaders should be like. Indeed, that’s what all Christians should be like. But there is one other important aspect of light. Light is transparent: there is nothing hidden inside of the light; all is clear. In the same way, one who is “above reproach” does not have hidden sin. His or her inner virtue and character are transparent and clear to all. He or she is the same on the inside as what we portray on the outside. That is the way we are to be.

The husband of one wife: This requirement does not mean that a man *has* to be married in order to be an overseer. Neither Jesus nor Paul was married, and both of them obviously were qualified to be leaders in the church. However, if a man is married, he should only have one wife, not be polygamous. This is an issue for the church in many parts of Africa.

In our culture, polygamy is not an issue, but “serial monogamy” is. IOW, you marry someone, get divorced, and marry someone else. Maybe divorce and remarry yet again. Jesus spoke about that in **Matt 19:9**, where he said, “**I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.**”

God’s ideal for marriage is monogamy, not “serial monogamy.” We are to model God’s ideal. There are, of course, legitimate reasons for divorce. But divorce is always traumatic. We need to understand something: just as celibacy is a calling, so is marriage a calling. Marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. Christ has only one bride—the church—not the church and the world. He is faithful to his bride. We who are married are to be like that.

However, the issue is deeper than just being monogamous. The literal Greek phrase translated as “**the husband of one wife**” actually is a “**one woman man.**” The same phrase is used regarding deacons in v. 12. You can be married to only one wife and yet not be a “**one woman man.**” That happens all the time, when someone has a girlfriend on the side or some other illicit relationship.

To be a “one woman man” implies more than not just sleeping around. It implies that a married man should be faithful to his wife “inside and out.” In other words, not only should he not cheat on her by sleeping with other women, but he should not commit “adultery in his heart” by looking with lust on and fantasizing about other women, or going to strip clubs, or using pornography. It’s a matter of character.

Temperate, prudent: These terms are similar and convey the idea of being sober-minded. IOW, having a sound mind; sound judgment; self-control. The same thing is said of women deacons in v. 11. Leaders must give wise

counsel to church members. Those church members need to know that the leaders are thoughtful and that their judgment is not clouded by any improper influences. Again, this applies to all Christians. **1 Cor 2:16** says that all believers have the **“mind of Christ.”** That means we need to use it temperately and prudently.

Respectable: People will tend to show leaders respect because of the positions of authority and responsibility that the leaders hold. However, the issue is: **“Am I worthy of the people’s respect?”** Try asking yourself, **“If the people saw what I am like in private, would they still respect me?”** You see, our character—what we are really like—is revealed by what we do when we think no one is watching. If you don’t like the answer to that question, then get serious and make the changes you need to make. Get counsel and help if necessary. But do something, because this goes to the very heart of your qualifications to be a leader. It goes to the very heart of your profession of faith and your relationship with Christ.

Hospitable: To be “hospitable” essentially means that you love or care for people or strangers. This is important, because a leader needs to know his people well. Knowing their problems, hopes, fears, etc. helps you be a better Christian leader. Knowing their strengths, weaknesses, gifts, and abilities, helps you raise up new leaders, in order to use all parts of the body in ministry. That builds up and strengthens the entire church.

Again, this applies to all of us. How well do we know our neighbors and our co-workers? We need to relate to people well. As we get to know people better and spend more time with them, we will better be able to speak with them about Christ and model Christ and his care to them.

However, hospitality can come with some cost. Being hospitable to all kinds of people (people from different races, backgrounds, people with HIV/AIDS) may alienate some people in the church. If that happens, do you have the guts to do the right thing anyway? That was one of the chief criticisms leveled against Jesus: he was the **“friend of tax collectors and sinners.”** That did not stop Jesus from showing love and compassion to all sorts of people. It should not stop us from showing hospitality to all sorts of people. It’s a matter of our character.

Able to teach: This is the one real difference between the requirements to be an overseer and a deacon. Deacons may have the ability to teach. Stephen and Philip, who were part of the first group of deacons in **Acts 6**, had the ability to teach. But teaching is not a requirement for the position of deacon, since the primary responsibility of deacons was to take care of the physical needs of the people.

There are many ways in which one can teach: from the pulpit on Sundays or during the week; leading a Sunday school or adult education class; leading a home Bible study or cell group. All church leaders should be exercising their ability to teach in some way. One reason for this is that, if something happens to the primary preaching or teaching elder, the others need to be able to take over that role so that the church will be able to continue without missing a step.

Not addicted to wine: The same thing is said about deacons in **v. 8**. The issue here is *not* drinking alcohol versus not drinking alcohol. Paul lived in a wine-drinking culture. Jesus’ first miracle was turning water into wine. Everyone—men, women, and children—drank in that culture. The term here indicates one who is “given to” or “addicted to” wine.

The principle here is addiction, not the wine. Many people in the church only focus on wine-drinking, not the underlying principle. Thus, many church leaders may not drink wine, but they are still addicted. What are they addicted to? They are addicted to things like power, manipulation and control of people, fame, etc. Those things are far more damaging to people than is drinking wine.

I was in a church for many years where the pastor not only manipulated and controlled his wife, but basically had the attitude “My way or the highway.” He essentially was addicted to himself—to his power and control. He hurt many people. But no one held him to account. Leaders of the church should not let anything, whether a material substance like wine or a non-material thing like power, control them. The church needs to have an accountability structure, just as all Christians need to be in relationships in which we are accountable.

(Not) pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable: “Pugnacious” means “violent” or “a striker,” one who “lashes out” at others. A person can be violent in more ways than just with one’s fists. You can be violent with the tongue, or even the look you give others. “Gentle” is the opposite. Many people wrongly think that “gentle” is another word for “weak.” Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Matt 11:29 says that Jesus was **“gentle and humble in heart”**; but he was not a weak man. Our natural inclination is to lash back when we are attacked. Jesus did not do that. Gentleness takes true strength of character. He demonstrated the strength of gentleness when he was viciously accused but did not lash back at his accusers. Even Pontius Pilate noticed that and commented on it. People notice our character. That is why our

character is at the very heart of what it is to be a Christian and a leader of the church.

“Peaceable” indicates someone who is “not contentious” or “not quarrelsome.” Leaders should be consensus-builders, rather than always insisting on getting their own way. **“My way or the highway”** is not a Christian attitude. Leaders should be seeking the mind of Christ and the leading of the Spirit. That will always result in unity and peace,

I get saved many years ago as a result of a teaching weekend led by two guys from St. Paul’s Episcopal Church of Darien, CT. Back in the day, St. Paul’s, which was then headed by its rector, Terry Fullam, was a well-known teaching center. Let me quote Fullam concerning the unity that results when we are seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit [**READ pp. 113, 114, 115**]. To really be leaders who are peaceable, by seeking and following the leading of the Holy Spirit—and the unity and peace he brings—can profoundly affect what the church does and how it is run. That’s why these requirements for leadership are so important.

But again, it is evident that this should characterize all Christians, not just those in formal positions of leadership. We need to ask ourselves, **“Are people seeing Jesus in me?”**

Free from the love of money: This is the one requirement that talks about money. But what does he say about it? Being free from the love of money is clearly a matter of one’s character. This is so important that Paul warns about the dangers of the love of money at length in **chapter 6**. In fact, in **Matthew 6** and elsewhere Jesus suggests that the lure of material wealth is perhaps the greatest danger to one’s spiritual state.

The issue is not how much or how little money we have. The issue is an internal matter: In whom or in what am I placing my trust? What is most important to me? What do I think about, desire, hope for, and dream about? What motivates me? By what do I measure my success?

One way we can tell what the real answer to these questions is, is to keep records. See just how much you are spending on X, Y, and Z, and see how much and what percentage you are giving to the church, to missions, to the poor and needy, to ministries of all kinds. We may try to fool ourselves. The numbers don’t lie.

One who manages his own household well: The same thing is said of deacons in **v. 12**. Paul is drawing the connection between one’s own household or family and the household or family of God. In **3:15** he explicitly calls the church the household or family of God. Our own families are the testing grounds that demonstrate our qualification and competence to manage God’s family. The issue of the obedience of children is not simply whether they are outwardly obedient and respectful. The issue is *why* our children act the way they do. Are they obedient because of love and respect for the parents or out of fear? The issue is whether we manage “well” or not. That requires wisdom and character.

Not a new convert: The reason Paul gives in **v. 6** for not making a new convert an overseer is a matter of character; a person might **“become conceited”** if raised to a high position too soon. We need to get to know the people we are considering putting in positions of leadership. Give him or her a little authority and see if he or she is faithful in it. As Jesus said, **“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.”** If they are faithful, then they can handle greater authority.

What constitutes a “new convert” will differ depending on the circumstances. Paul does not say how long someone has to have been a believer before he can become an overseer. In Paul’s day, when all the believers were new believers, the elders whom Paul and Timothy appointed probably would have been believers for only a few weeks or months. Nevertheless, those who assumed positions of leadership would have been mature, faithful believers of good, godly character.

That is the real issue here: spiritual maturity. Every congregation has some people who may have been Christians for 5 or 10 or 15 years, but they are still spiritual babies. On the other hand, some people have been Christians for only a year or two, but they already exhibit great spiritual maturity. Those are the people the church needs in positions of leadership.

A good reputation with those outside the church: The church does not just exist for itself. It exists to be **“the salt of the earth”** and **“the light of the world.”** The church is to be **“in the world”** even though it is not **“of the world.”** IOW, Christians individually, and the church corporately, need to be engaged with our community and the world. But we are not to have the same character, values, and priorities as the world. We are to have the character, values, and priorities of Christ. We should be influencing others for good.

Consequently, the reputation we have with nonbelievers in the world is of vital importance. What they see in us will either draw them toward Christ or push them away from Christ. So Paul ends the same way he began, by talking about leaders of the church not falling into “reproach.”

When any biblical writer begins and ends a list the same way—here with the same word, “reproach”—it is important. It is basically saying, **“This summarizes the whole thing.”** IOW, if you are above reproach, inside and out, if no one can legitimately accuse you of wrongdoing, then you will meet all of the requirements—because you have the character of Christ.

III. Some observations of this passage as a whole.

There are four things that jump out at me regarding Paul’s list of requirements to be a leader.

First, all of the 15 requirements for leadership implicate our character, directly or indirectly. What Paul sees as most important for the leaders of the church is that they be people of Christ-like *character*. A person’s education and other things are important. But the Bible reminds us, **“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7).** It is easy to *say* we look to people’s character, the “real them,” but do we really? To be able to assess people’s real character, we need to know them well. That means we need to spend time with them, see them in their unguarded moments, see how they react to negative and stressful situations.

But if we are talking about considering putting someone on the church board or elevating them to some other position of leadership, there is a danger in getting to know the person well. The danger is this: If we know someone deeply and well, that means we are probably his or her friend, and probably a close friend. The danger is that, because we are their close friend, we are likely to overlook or excuse what may be a deep character flaw in raising that person to some leadership position in the church. Or, if we decide to blackball the person, so to say, we risk losing their friendship. This is an issue we need to see clearly and handle judiciously, knowing that the integrity of Christ’s church is at stake, as well as a personal friendship.

Second, all of these 15 requirements apply to all Christians, whether or not they are in positions of formal church leadership. Every Christian represents Christ. Every Christian is a leader in some respect to some people. Given the nature of the requirements for formal church leadership, every Christian should be qualified to be in formal church leadership. In fact, **1 Peter 2** and **Revelation 1** tell us that *all Christians* are priests in the eyes of God. Therefore, all Christians need to work to become more like the man or woman after God’s own heart with Christ’s own character.

Christ calls all of us to “be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” That is, we all need to have and exhibit Christ’s character and live it out. The reason is that how we live reveals our real character, and *that* reveals who Christ really is to us and what he really means to us.

Third, no one is perfect, and no one can meet all of the 15 requirements perfectly. We all have strengths and weaknesses. **Prov 27:17** says that **“iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”** This tells me that leaders in a church—and all Christians in general—should get together and talk about these things; those who are strong in some areas should help and build up those who are weaker. After all, we are all serving the same master, and we want the church to be as good as possible.

Finally, if the churches seriously applied these requirements when choosing their leaders, instead of looking to worldly standards, such as one’s education, job, status, money, etc., the churches would probably look different and act differently from how they look and act today. They would also be far more effective than they are today in bringing people to Christ and in transforming believers into Christ-likeness, because they would be more like Christ himself.

My guess is that, in every church, there are a number of what I call “little people.” What I mean is people who do not have a lot of money, position, education, or status. They are the kind of people who tend to get overlooked when one is considering making new leaders. Despite their lack of these external indicators of success, they may be mature Christians of deep, Christlike character, who meet all of Paul’s 15 requirements. Those are the very people God has given us to be in church leadership.

If we take these things seriously and act accordingly, God will take us seriously. I think God will start speaking to us and leading us in ways he has not previously done. The reason is that now we will all be people who have his character. As such, we will be attuned to his voice, see his hand, and know his will, because we will know him well.

CONCL: In these verses Paul is showing us God’s own heart—what is most important to him, and what he wants his people to be like. Since Christ is the perfect representation of God, he wants us, likewise, to have the character of Christ. Imagine what things would be like if all Christians looked and acted like the person described in these verses. If that were to happen, I think we would begin to see deep revival in the church. Nonbelievers would want to become part of the church, because who wouldn’t want to be part of a people who manifest the character of Christ and all the virtues of Christ?