

"Elders"

I Timothy 3:1-7

¹ 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. (ESV)

Several people have asked this morning, "I thought you were preaching through Colossians." My reply has been pretty standard, "Last week I preached on patience, and I just wanted to see if you got it." In all seriousness, we are taking a little hitch for the next two weeks. The reason is because we're doing officer nominations a little bit differently than maybe they've been done in the past, and I wanted to make sure that everyone understands exactly what is going on when we ask you to nominate officers. Your job as the congregation, among other things, is to nominate the officers who will serve you, both elders and deacons. We also have another position. It's not an officer position, but it is an important one nonetheless, and that is the office of trustee. You'll notice today in your order of worship (I'll talk about it a little later), you have a nomination form.

What we're going to look at today is, "What is the office of elder and what it means for you to nominate someone to the office of elder." How do you do these things? To summarize, the office of elder, thinking about the body of Christ, is a leadership role, sort of the head, if you will. The deacons are the hands and the feet. The trustees, on the other hand, enable the context for both ministries of elders and deacons to take place. If it weren't for the trustees we wouldn't have a place to do these things and have everything maintained. Trustees, I'm sorry I don't have a sermon for you because it's just not a Biblical office that is mandated. However, it's extremely important and many of the characteristics that I talk about, certainly the character characteristic, must be kept in mind when you're thinking about nominating people to the position of trustee.

This morning we're going to talk about elders, looking at three things. First, what the elder does. What's an elder's job? The second thing we're going to look at is who an elder is. Those first two points are for you, the congregation. The third point is for those who are either currently elders or for those who may be nominated to the office of elder, and the third point is simply how to survive being an elder. Or, what does it mean to survive elder nomination or just be an elder?

First, "What is an elder's job?" Maybe a better question, if you ask an elder, would be "What is an elder's job not?" It's a pretty comprehensive job description. You're going to have to forgive me. This morning I'm going to be a little bit more technical than I normally am during my sermons, but that is because of the subject matter and the importance of it. In the EPC we have a Book of Government. It's the way we read the Bible and how we apply things so that it's standard. It says that the elder's job primarily is to look out for the spiritual welfare of the sheep and to represent the mind of Christ in the courts of the church. The courts of the church are the church's session: the meetings of elders, the Presbytery meetings, which are the regional meetings, and the General Assembly, which is the national meeting.

The first thing I want to make clear about elders is this. In a Presbyterian church you sometimes you're hear two different kinds of elders spoken about. One kind of elder is a ruling elder and the other kind is a teaching elder. At least in the EPC they're equal. One of the common myths in church is that somehow the elders are the pastor's boss. That's absolutely not true, at least according to the EPC's Book of Order. The pastor is what is called a teaching elder because he primarily teaches. The ruling elder is a ruling elder because he primarily rules, but they are both equal and they exercise joint authority together. So, the Session is not the boss of the pastor. The Session can't just up and fire the Pastor. However, if the Session comes to you and wants to fire you, it's probably a good time for you to start looking someplace else. Just to give you a distinction, ruling elders and teaching elders have the same power and authority although they exercise them in different places and at different times. With that said, my job is primarily teaching, but it encompasses some other things.

What is the job of the ruling elder - the people that you will nominate? The reason I'm going to tell you these things is because you need to ask yourself, "Do I know anyone who's actually doing these things now? Because if he's doing these things now and he's not an elder, maybe he needs to be nominated. The easiest way for me to explain is to read to you from our Book of Government. In the wise providence of God I happen to have my copy of the EPC's Book of Government. It's one of my favorite things to read when I can't sleep. Let me read to you the job description, if you will, of a ruling elder – how it actually works. Number one, "A ruling elder should study and learn the Word and be equipped to teach that Word, even to supplying a regular ministry of the Word where none is available. The ruling elder should be adept at leading worship and at leading in prayer." That's the first thing, giving you the basic, general job description. The first thing it says is that the ruling elder ought to be able in a pinch to actually preach. If you ask some of our ruling elders or ruling elders from any church that I know, that would make them a little bit nervous. It doesn't say they have to. It says they ought to be able to in a pinch, and that's the reason you have a plurality of elders. One of the things that made me proud is, if you remember when I was on vacation for a month, three Sundays in a row your ruling elders preached. That's their job (not to preach all the time - not to have that a worry of theirs), but if need be, they're able to step up. That's one.

It says number two, "As an under shepherd the person should visit the sick, the bereaved, the lonely, the aged, the shut-in, and all those who have pastoral need. In cases where there is special need the ruling elder shall be careful to inform the pastor." If people understood that paragraph I think fewer pastors would get burned out. Did you hear what it said to do? If I asked, "Just whose job is it to visit the sick, the bereaved, the lonely, the aged, the shut-in, and all who have pastoral need?" What would you say? You'd say, "The pastor. That's why we pay him good money!" It's the job of the elder primarily. I love the line just because it affects me. It says, "In special cases the pastor ought to be informed." You ought to let him know what you're doing, but either way it's the elder's job. I tell you that for a couple of reasons. One is that when people expect the teaching elder to do all of those things it's nearly impossible. Ultimately he will burn out and fail. Fortunately for me that hasn't been the case here because your elders, the ones who are currently on board, do those kinds of things. I've said that over and over again. I wouldn't still be able to be here without an assistant and during the interim if it were not for the fact that the ruling elders are doing the job that they should do. Keep that in mind. They're supposed to shepherd folks.

I remember when the first interim pastor bagged out. I was just an assistant. They asked, "Tommy, can you preach until we get another interim?" I said, "You know, I think it would be better for the church." People asked, "Why?" I said, "I think people expect an ordained pastor to be at their bedside." If you enter the hospital and an ordained pastor doesn't show up, you sort of feel slighted. I'm here to tell you that you ought to be honored if a pastor doesn't show up, but in fact one of your elders shows up because he's doing his job and living out his calling. That doesn't mean I'm not supposed to do those things. But it's one of the jobs of the ruling elder.

The third thing, "It is especially incumbent upon the ruling elder to see to the development of children in the congregation, inquire after active members, to encourage new members in spiritual development, and otherwise show care for whom they serve." What does that mean? The ruling elder is supposed to be disciplining people and making sure that discipline and discipleship are taking place in the church. That can be done by having children's ministries for one thing.

The last one I'm going to point out to you is this: "A ruling elder should be diligent to watch for moral failures and to seek and to warn, to admonish and otherwise reclaim those who stray." That's the hardest job of a ruling elder in my opinion - to admonish and warn and seek those who stray. But that one actually helps me get my head around this big definition of what it means to be an elder. I could read the Book of Order to you all day long and it's helpful, but if you want something to hang what it means to be an elder on, it comes down to this: an elder is a shepherd. That's one of the reasons I opened the Call to Worship with the 23rd Psalm this morning. An elder is actually an under-shepherd to the great shepherd, Jesus.

Did you notice in the 23rd Psalm what the shepherd does? He leads, he cares, he feeds his sheep, and (my favorite part is one of those things that's cool and everyone skips over) it says "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Did you ever ask yourself why the shepherd carries those two things? In all the pictures he only

has one stick, and yet the 23rd Psalm says, "Thy rod and thy staff comfort me." There's a good reason for that. It's because a shepherd's job is to get the sheep from point A to point B. From point A to point B two things are constantly happening. Predators are trying to come in and attack the sheep, for which you need a rod. On the other hand sheep are constantly trying to get off the path that the shepherd is leading them, for which you need a staff. The rod is for swatting predators and the staff is for gently tapping sheep back into the path. But a ruling elder's job is to do both those, among other things. They shepherd, they teach, they admonish, and the hardest thing (and I say this for those of you who might be nominated and I say this when I meet with people) - the hardest thing that a ruling elder ultimately does oftentimes is have to do church discipline. A lot of churches don't. This church historically has done church discipline. The purpose of church discipline is to restore people, not to hurt them. That's why the Psalmist says, "Thy rod and thy staff – the thing that you're knocking me back on the path with – they comfort me." The fact that God has given you elders ought to make you rejoice because God has assigned specific people to make sure you make it from point A to point B.

The question is, "What kind of person is this?" That's what an elder does, but who should an elder be? That's where we get the text today. Notice what Paul says. I'm not going to go through all of these characteristics, but I'm going to hit some highlights. He says,

² *Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable . . . (ESV)*

The first thing I want to point out to you is that there are about 14 or 15 characteristics here that define what an elder is, or the character qualities of an elder. But the first quality and the last quality are functionally the same and they have to do with an elder's reputation. The first and the last thing that Paul says is that an elder or an overseer ought to be above reproach - above reproach with those on the inside of the church and above reproach with those outside of the church. Then he goes on.

First Paul says - it's interesting because we think in our sex-crazed culture that we have to emphasize it, but Rome and Ephesus were just as bad – the first thing that Paul says (it's not surprising) is that an elder ought to be the husband of one wife. Simple as that. Now the big question that comes from that is, "Can an elder be divorced?" You need to think this through because you're the ones who nominate. Can you nominate someone who's divorced to the office of elder? The answer to that is easy. You can nominate whomever you want. That doesn't mean they're going to get through. The question is, "Can someone who has been divorced also become an elder?" The answer is, "It depends." Did you like the clarity in that – the black and white – the way I just cut straight through that? It just depends because on one hand someone may have gotten a divorce before they ever became a Christian and then they became a Christian and remarried and their life is completely different because of what Jesus has done. Someone may get a divorce shortly after they became a Christian. Every situation is different. One camp would say (and I tend toward this side) you've got to take things on a case-by-case basis. On the other hand, some would say it's just flat out a disqualifier, whether it's before you're a Christian or after you're a Christian. If you pushed them on it, they would say something like, "It takes two to tango." Even if a man's wife leaves him and he's exonerated for that, they would say there's still something about him that made her leave him. Whether you agree with that or not, that's one position. But the answer is, "It has to be case by case."

Where else does Paul go after he talks about the qualities. He says, "The husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable." Those should be obvious, I hope. The next one is hospitable. When you're considering your elders, ask yourself, "Is the person you're thinking about nominating hospitable?" In other words do they show hospitality? Do they have people over to their homes or do they not? On one hand the deacons here (which we'll talk about next week) give lots of money and lots of support to people in need. But the deacons are not the only ones. Is the person you might think about nominating as an elder also hospitable in that way? Is he charitable? Would he take someone into his home? That's one of the qualities. As we move on, it says, "he ought to be able to teach and not be a drunkard." You certainly don't teach while drunk.

I'm very defensive about people with whom I serve. I feel like part of my job is to guard the elders. One of the criticisms I often hear about elders is, "Why aren't they teaching more?" The answer, for one, is "They're doing a lot of other stuff, too." But also notice that Paul's criteria here doesn't say they should be teaching all the time.

It says they ought to be able to teach. Are they able to teach when someone comes up and asks them a question, "Why does the Apostle's Creed say 'Hell'?" Can they teach in the moment? Some of our elders actually do teach all the time. We've elders who teach in kindergarten, sixth grade, C-groups. So the question is, "Should they be teaching all the time?" Maybe or maybe not. It's sort of up to them wherever God has called them. When Paul says, "not a drunkard" basically he's saying he shouldn't be addicted to alcohol or any other substance. Think about that when you're considering your nominations.

Then he goes on and says, "not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money." Where he says, "not violent but gentle" the language in the Greek there for "violent" means "someone who strikes with their fist." Or they strike with words as if they were a fist. Is the person like that? Is he pugnacious (I love that word)? He says he shouldn't be that way but instead he should be gentle. "Gentle" there simply means "magnanimous." Is he willing to listen to other people? Is he willing to hear what someone has to say because an elder among other things, represents you. So if you ask an elder a question and he immediately shuts you down and tells you to be quiet and smacks you around, he's probably not the kind of guy that needs to be nominated.

What next? Paul continues on. He says,

³ *not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.*

I want to hit that one very quickly because on one hand it seems obvious. On the other hand I think it's a particular temptation for those who take the office of elder – to be a lover of money. Why do I say that? It's because the person who becomes an elder ultimately is sort of a multi-competent person. They have to be able to manage and they have to be able to lead and anyone who is able to be a good elder, generally speaking, probably has the ability to make a good living. The reason I point that out is that on one hand it's a temptation, but on the other hand anyone who's currently an elder at our church or has been or who will be nominated, functionally speaking he is giving up something to do it. He could use the time to make more money. He could use the time to spend it with his family or do anything that pleases him. But instead he actually chooses to serve you. That's pretty big.

Paul tells us the lab in which you can see if all these things are working out next.

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?*

Let me say one thing. The question that immediately comes up, "Does someone have to be married in order to become an elder?" The answer is, "Absolutely not, because if you had to be married in order to become an elder that would disqualify Paul who wrote the letter, Timothy who was receiving the letter, and Jesus Who is the reason for the whole Bible." So you can't just say out of hand that an elder has to be married. The question is, "If he is married, what should a criteria be?" Paul basically says, (I'm telling you this so you can be looking for it) "Does he manage his own household well? Because if he can't manage his own household, how can he manage the household of God?" If he can't manage a flock of two or three how is he going to help manage a flock of two or three hundred, or in our case five or six hundred? The household is a lab. The other question is, "How do you diagnose that? How do you know?" The answer is, "I'm not sure." However, the best advice Judy and I ever got about parenting might apply here. If you're a parent and you're honest, you have to admit that sometimes you think, "Man I've totally ruined these kids – and they're only two years old. I'm totally lost. I'm doing everything wrong. I'm a horrible parent. I should catechize more, or we need to read the Bible more as a family. I've done everything wrong. God help me." Someone told Judy and me, "The question to ask yourselves is: Are your children a joy to other people?" If your children are a joy to other people – they might be nightmares at home – but if they're a joy to other people, genuinely speaking you're doing something right. "Gosh, whom should I nominate as elder?" There are people in this church whose children are a joy to me. Their parents are obviously doing something right at home. Maybe that person ought to be nominated to the office of elder. By the way, I don't nominate people. You do. So the household is like a lab in which you see these things take place. Then Paul says two more things.

⁶ *He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. (ESV)*

On one hand you'd think that is obvious. They guy can't just become a Christian and then all of a sudden become an elder. Paul says if that happens he could become conceited and fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Now, is Paul saying that the guy can actually become a Christian and then lose his salvation? The answer is, "Absolutely not." I think what he's saying here is that he could fall the same way the devil did. The devil had this high and lofty office and became prideful and then fell down into a state of condemnation - forever. I'm not sure exactly what to say about that other than it's probably the same thing that happened to the devil, but not by being condemned forever. But here's the bigger point I want to make. Just because someone says that they have been a Christian for twenty or thirty years does not necessarily mean they are not a recent convert. Some people become Christians and then they do not study or grow for the rest of their life, sadly enough. So when you're thinking about whom to nominate as an elder you might think, "OK, I know a guy (let's call him Joe Tentpeg) who's been a Christian for thirty years." But ask yourself, "Does he seem like he's been a Christian for thirty years? Has he grown in grace? Is he more and more like Jesus?" Otherwise, functionally speaking he's almost a new convert.

The last think Paul says is surprising to most people in church when you point it out.

⁷ *Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (ESV)*

The last thing he says is that one of the qualifications and one of the things you ought to be looking for in your elder candidates and those who are your elders is not only that they have a good reputation in the church, but that people outside the church, people who do not believe the Gospel, have a high opinion of them as well. Now, that says a couple of things. One is saying that the person actually knows someone outside the church. Part of an elder's job is to reach out to other people. So, do they even know anyone outside of the church? That's a good place to start. Then if they do, how do people outside the church think of them? If the person said he owns a business, ask yourself, "Do the employees think the person is a fair person to work for? Does he have integrity?" Or if the person is an employee, would their boss say he is a good employee or not? Either way, what's important, is that it not only matters what people inside the church think of a person but what people outside the church think. I read one commentator that said, "If a person doesn't even meet the low moral standards of those outside the church, how can you expect him to meet the moral standards of those inside the church?"

So, that's it. Those are the qualifications for the office of elder. Before I go on, I just want to tell you a couple of things about the nomination sheet, and then I've got one more point. You should have one nomination form in your order of worship. You can fill out as many nominations as you want and you'll find those at the Welcome Center. The only thing I want to point out is when you get to the bottom it says, "Based upon these qualifications I recommend (use my hypothetical Joe) for the office of elder. I believe he meets the qualifications and criteria for this office at First EPC because (blank). If you have someone you want to nominate you need to fill that out. You shouldn't just circle someone's name who's already on there, or just write someone's name and throw the thing in. That means absolutely nothing. If you're nominating someone for the office of elder, the nominating committee needs to know why you think they need to be an elder, because they're trusting you to make that call. The other thing is on the bottom of this it says, "Submitted by (blank)" and then it leaves space for a phone number. I point that out for two reasons. One is positive and one is negative. Maybe they're both negative, I'm not sure. If you nominate someone and you have this glowing, flowery description of this person, but you do not sign your nomination form, we cannot accept it because we don't have the ability to follow up with you and verify it. "Are you sure this guy is like Jesus? Are you cool with that?" "Yeah." "Good, we can talk to you." On the flip side, and I have to say this about once a year, if you write something negative about someone and don't sign it, that will not be received either. This week we received three very similar anonymous letters that were sent to the nominating committee that basically were making the case about someone who should not be an elder. Let me tell you a couple of things. One, whoever wrote those letters, wasted postage. Number two, the best way to discourage a pastor and elders is to write an anonymous note with a complaint on it that says, "I've been talking to a lot of other people about this as well." That's wrong. Earlier in the book,

Timothy says to tell people who do that kind of thing to stop it. I tried to think of a nice non-blunt way to say that but I couldn't. I'm sorry. But the point is, if you have something to say we welcome your criticism, whether it's about elders or anything else. But you have to sign it. If you don't sign it we can't follow up with you and help you understand where we're coming from. So that is the nomination process. Are you going to nominate?

The last point, is going to be for those who actually would be nominated and those who are currently elders now - how to survive being an elder. Or, why would you even bother? One of the reasons I hardly ever preach about this is because I hate reading that list. There are about 14 areas and if I had to say how many of the 14 I feel pretty much a failure at, I'd say 14. Maybe 13 out of 14. I can teach but who knows how good that is in the big picture?

So why would you do it? I think the opening line is the key, I think. Paul says, "The saying is trustworthy, if anyone aspires to the office of overseer he desires a noble task." In the Ancient Near East it was really difficult to get men to actually volunteer to do anything. It's like, "Well, welcome to the 21st century as well." What Paul is doing is setting it up as a good thing. He says anyone who aspires to this does a noble thing. So Paul is sort of greasing the skids. But when you look at the language I'm not quite sure that's what he's doing because what Paul says here is whoever desires this or aspires to it, it is a noble task. The language there means something like a task that is both excellent but also difficult. It's not as easy as saying, "It's noble." It's really a two-fold meaning.

In our household, sometimes my wife will tell the kids "Arduous no malice est" when they complain. "Hard is not bad." That's what Paul is saying here. He says whoever aspires to this job needs to realize it's a difficult job, but it is also a good job or a desirable job. The question is, "How do I survive in it if I don't feel like I'm qualified at all?" The answer to that is that you've got to take it in the context I think of as the first trustworthy saying in this book. Paul says, "Here's a trustworthy saying. If anyone aspires to be an overseer . . . "If you go back a few verses, the first trustworthy saying he said sets the context to what it means to be an elder and how to survive. Listen to what he says in verse 15.

1:15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (ESV)

I meet with all the elder candidates and they sometimes say, "Tommy, I just don't feel worthy. I don't feel like I meet the criteria." If you say that to me, you're going to lose because as soon as someone says that, I say, "Well then you're the exact kind of guy I'm looking for." What an elder is is not someone who necessarily has it all together, but an elder is someone who necessarily understands that he doesn't have it all together and the only place to go to get it together is Jesus Himself. You don't want an elder who thinks he knows everything and who thinks he's righteous. You want an elder who knows how desperately sinful he is and how much he struggles, and he can take you to the very same place that he goes when he needs shepherding as well, and that is to Jesus. If you're an elder, that is your job. Do you realize that? I've heard sermons on this passage that made me want to walk out and go home and tell Judy to hide the sharp items in the house because I think I can't do it. But when you consider the job of an elder in the context of the Gospel it makes all the sense in the world. The elders are to be an example of these things. The thing that an elder should be an example of more than anything else is the perfect patience of Jesus. They need to be not just Christians. Every Christian needs to trust Jesus. Every Christian needs the perfect patience of Jesus. But you wouldn't be able to nominate someone as elder unless you saw that somehow playing itself out either in his leadership, his risk-taking because he knows he might fail and yet knowing if he fails Jesus is still going to be there for him, or maybe in humility. It could work itself out in any way. The question is, "Is the person you're considering to nominate for the office of elder driven and defined by this thing called the Gospel - what Jesus has done for him? At that point they're probably ready to be an elder. It is hard, to be honest with you. I I'm closing with this.

What does it mean to be an elder? I thought about it and for some reason I was immediately whisked back to 1984 in the Ranger indoctrination program. I joined the Army right out of high school. I was seventeen years old and I wanted to be a Ranger. I went to basic training and then Airborne school, and then to the Ranger indoctrination program, which is basically six weeks of emotional, physical, and mental abuse to see if you can

make it to be the bottom person on the totem pole in a Ranger battalion. I remember the first day, and the way I think I made it through is that I couldn't believe the things that came out of these guy's mouths. I thought, "I'm starring in the 'Boys in Company C' or something, like some movie" because they were just saying the most off-the-wall things. The first day of the Ranger indoctrination program a tall skinny staff sergeant named Sergeant Ataway (I'll never forget him) stood up in front of about eighty guys and he said, "Gentlemen, I'm here to tell you that those of you will think of this time every day for the rest of your lives. Those of you who don't make it will not be so fortunate." I thought, "OK. That's a pretty bold claim." Yet, twenty years later, every day I think back on my time in a Ranger battalion. And when I think back on my time in the Ranger battalion I think two things. On one hand it was the most miserable experience I'd ever had in my life. If I had to do it over again I don't know if I would. On the other hand it is also the most joyous, most significant, most meaningful experience that I ever had in my life. If I had to do that again I would do anything to get that again, which means I can't have the joy without also having the suffering and the hardship as well. That, at the end of the day, is what it means that this is an excellent job and it is a difficult job. I've never met an elder that has been from a relatively healthy church who at the end of his career – in the twilight of his years - hasn't said, "I'm glad I did it." Not one. Being an elder is extremely difficult on one hand because you have to deal with discipline. You have to deal with complaints. You have to deal with hard things. On the other hand, it's extremely joyful. The elders are the ones who get to interview new members. They get to hear when people have become Christians. The elders get to be there when babies are born. They get to be there when people die, which in itself isn't happy, but the times that they share with the families will never be forgotten. So if you are nominated to be an elder, keep that in mind as well.