

Twelve Characteristics of a Godly Elder

1 & 2 Timothy

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Introduction

Let us look at twelve characteristics of a godly elder. An elder can be the **best** or **worst** thing for a church. A sinful or selfish elder is the church's destruction. However, a godly elder is the church's blessing. Most people would go to 1 Timothy 3:1-7 or Titus 1:10-16 for the qualifications of an elder, but we will look at different characteristics that Paul points out to Timothy throughout the books of 1 and 2 Timothy.

Transition: Let us start by looking at 1 Timothy 1:3-5.

1 Timothy 1:3-5

³ As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, ⁴ nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. ⁵ Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, a good conscience and sincere faith,

The reason Paul was leaving Timothy in Ephesus was to fulfill the role of an elder in teaching sound doctrine and refuting false doctrine. *“The purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, a good conscience and sincere faith”* (v. 5). Timothy was charged to carry out his role as an elder in **love**. Paul uses three characteristics to describe how that love should look: 1) pure heart, 2) good conscience and 3) sincere faith.

1. **A Pure Heart (1 Timothy 1:5)**

The word *“pure”* means in the negative sense free from corrupt desires, sin and guilt and positively it means blameless, innocent, unstained with the guilt of anything.ⁱ The *“heart”* refers to the center and seat of spiritual life; it is the soul or mind, as it is the fountain and seat of the thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes and endeavors.ⁱⁱ This does not mean that an elder must be sinless; otherwise, no one would be qualified. It does refer to the fact that an elder must know in his inner most being that he is in a right standing before God and if he does sin that he would confess it and repent. A *“pure heart”* can be seen in a man that asks forgiveness quickly from another and does not justify his sinfulness.

2. **A Good Conscience (1 Timothy 1:5, 19; 2 Timothy 1:3)**

Paul mentions a good conscience several times to Timothy. Let us look at 2 Timothy 1:3.

2 Timothy 1:3

³ I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience

The word *“good”* refers to a good constitution or nature; a moral quality, in general and *“conscience”* refers to the part of the soul that distinguishes between what is morally good and bad.ⁱⁱⁱ An elder should be a man that does not struggle with determining **basic moral issues**. He should know right from wrong and have a pattern of doing right. There were many pastors in Paul's day as in ours, who have rejected a good conscience as we will see in a moment in 1 Timothy 1:19. Too many pastors have rejected what they once knew as good to please people or themselves. Too many pastors justify their own sin or blame others so that will not look bad

before their congregation. One's conscience must remain good and not influenced by the world around them. A godly elder's conscience remains good. A "good conscience" can be seen in a man that does not struggle, hesitate or weary to do what is right.

3. **A Sincere Faith (1 Timothy 1:5, 19)**

Paul mentions that Timothy should love from a sincere faith. "Sincere" means unfeigned, genuine and without hypocrisy. "Faith" refers to the conviction of the truth of anything, to believe to a complete trust, trustworthiness or the state of complete dependability. Paul goes on to describe this faith in 1 Timothy 1:18-19.

1 Timothy 1:18-19

¹⁸ This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, ¹⁹ having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck,

Timothy must fight the good fight of faith, because those pastors who have **not** done this, their life of faith has suffered shipwreck. There is no Christian life, which does not involve **serious moral striving**. Without this, the life falls victim to both error and perversion of conduct.^{iv} We need serious moral striving.

A godly elder believes in the truth of the Scriptures no matter what the outcome. Many men behind pulpits today, jettison the truth for pragmatics. Pastors are turning to whatever works to **grow their church**. Many of these men are shipwrecking their own faith in the process. The reality is that God never requires a pastor to grow the church. That is the Holy Spirit's job and the man with a sincere faith leaves it to the Holy Spirit. However, God calls each of us to have a sincere faith, a genuine trust of the Lord. The elder is especially to be trusting God at His word and **not the expectation of the outcome**. A godly elder is not concerned with the results but the process. Let me say that again. **A godly elder is not concerned with the results but the process**. A "sincere faith" can be seen in a man that makes right decisions even when they are unpopular and does not worry about the outcome.

Transition: A good conscience would tell you if you have a pure heart and is based on a sincere faith. So, a godly elder will have a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith. Now let us look at an example of Paul in 1 Timothy 1:12-14.

1 Timothy 1:12-14

¹² And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, ¹³ although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴ And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.

Paul is not ashamed of his past sins.

4. **Not Ashamed of Past Sins (1 Timothy 1:13)**

Paul sees his past sins as an opportunity to glory God. Past sins are opportunities to display God's mercy. A godly elder **does not attempt to hide his sin, past or present**, no matter how

big or small the sin was. Paul murdered Christians and he does not mind sharing that to show his own humbleness and amazement that God would use him.

This does not mean that a pastor should be openly discussion his past sins, but he should not be attempting cover them up or hide them from others. If a pastor attempts to cover up a sin, he may disqualify himself, for he may no longer be blameless. A man not willing to admit to sins, especially public one, as Paul's was, may try to hide other things too.

Pride says to hide the sin. Some pastors try to hide their sins because they think that the people will not respect them if they knew. That type of thinking is nothing but pride. A man not ashamed of his past sins is humbled by them and does not hide them.

Transition: To balance this out let us read 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

1 Timothy 2:1-2

¹ Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

5. Leading a Quiet and Peaceable Life (1 Timothy 2:2)

Paul states that all men in authority should live a quiet and peaceable life. Paul is including Timothy and himself in this passage when he uses the word “we”, “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life”. Elders are men in authority; therefore, Paul applies this passage to elders.

The word for “quiet” pertains to a tranquil, peaceful existence or attitude.^v “Peaceable” is very similar but specially refers to the idea of someone who is settled, steadfast or immovable. This describes someone who is comfortable with who they are and not trying to be someone they are not. A pastor is not be a man seeking to be the center of attention. Paul states that all men in authority should live in such a way that their life is marked by an immovable comfort in their contentment with where God has placed them in life.

Transition: So, godly elders will have a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith, not ashamed of admitting to their own sin and leading a quiet and peaceable life. The next characteristic of a godly pastor is found in 1 Timothy 4:6.

1 Timothy 4:6

⁶ If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.

6. A Teacher (1 Timothy 4:6)

A godly elder is a teacher. A pastor is one who is gifted to teach not necessary preach. As a teacher he must desire to educate people not show his own knowledge and study. He must love to teach not just preach. Teaching is more interactive then preaching. It is important to understand that godly teaching requires sound doctrine.

Paul mentions the idea of “sound doctrine” eleven times in these two books. This thought is spoken of maybe more then any other in these books. Paul encourages Timothy to be in “sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 10; 4:6, 16; 5:17; 6:1, 3; 2 Timothy 1:13; 3:10, 16; 4:3).

Question: What is sound doctrine?

The word “*sound*” is not an adjective as we may think from the English, but a verb and a present, active verb that described what we should be doing to the “*doctrine*”. It is something that we should be doing, that is, be being sound. It would accurately be translated “sounding doctrine”, but that does not make much sense in English.

We all have a doctrine, no one does not have a set of teaching that they believe, but we must be about the process of making our doctrine sound. An elder **must** be about the business of sounding his doctrine. That means that elders, like Paul in Acts 17 with the Bereans, should encourage people to check their doctrine with the Scriptures. A godly elder is not offended when corrections in his doctrine are pointed out. We all have areas of our doctrine that need correction.

Too many pastors let their authority as a leader interfere with their doctrine and they tend to preach more than teach. The reason for this may be that the teacher is one who interacts with his students and the preacher is one who disseminates information but not receive it. Some start to forget that they are not the authority, the Word of God is. This is one reason we can **never** stop trusting in the Lord and depending completely on Him, **especially** a pastor.

The pastor must study diligently the Word of God not the books of men. Not saying that the books of men are bad, but they do not even compare to the Word of God. The godly elder studies God’s Word to take it into his heart and make it his own. A teacher can be seen in a man who is refining his doctrine and excited to educate others.

Transition: Tied very closely with a godly pastor being a teacher is that he also must be an example to other. Let us read in 1 Timothy 4:12.

1 Timothy 4:12

¹² Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

7. An Example to Others (1 Timothy 4:12)

Paul tells Timothy to “*be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, [and] in purity*”. That pretty much covers every area of life and then some. The Greek word for “*example*” comes from the root word to strike, beat or wound.

This is a very interesting word. It has the meaning of the mark or impression left behind after a strike or blow from an object, like a hammer. It is used in John 20:25 to refer to the scars left behind in the resurrected body of Christ. It also has the meaning of pattern in conformity to which a thing must be made. The other interesting part of this word is that in the ethical sense it is a pattern of warning.^{vi}

The example is the mark left behind from a blow of a hammer or a copied pattern. An elder is to be the mark of Christ left behind for the church to pattern their lives after. We, as a church, are the mark of Christ left behind in the world. We are to be the mark that is made when Christ impacts the world and especially the elder is to be the mark for the church. A godly elder’s good example gives his words meaning and power. If he says to love your wife like Christ loved the church and you see him live it out in his life, you are more apt to obey it yourself.

This word “*example*” is used as a word of warning. Paul is warning Timothy to mark his actions and life to be watched and seen by others. An elder must be careful to leave a godly impact or pattern in word, conduct, love, spirit, faith and purity. An impact or pattern in these areas cannot be done from a distance, this involves close, imitate relationships between the elders and the

congregation. A godly pastor is not hiding from others and surrounding himself with a select few. He is one of the congregation.

Transition: We have seen that a godly pastor is to have a pure heart, a good conscience, a sincere faith, not ashamed of his past but leading a quiet and peaceable life, is a teacher and example to others. Now we will see that he is also one who endures hardship in 2 Timothy 2:3.

2 Timothy 2:3-4

³You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. ⁴No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of *this* life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.

8. **One Who Endures Hardship (2 Timothy 2:3)**

No godly elder says that ministry is easy, far for it. Ministry is extremely difficult. Paul illustrates godly elders, like Timothy, as a good soldier, having to endure much hardship. The phrase “*endure hardship*” means to suffer evils and distress, to be afflicted, to withstand trouble. When a pastor starts to avoid difficulties and tough decisions, he is like a soldier who engages in warfare and then “*entangles himself with the affairs of this life*”. A soldier does not worry about his retirement plan when someone is coming at him with a sword.

Many pastors avoid dealing with sin in the church because it is hard. We have discussed being sound in our doctrine. We cannot be sound if we avoid the difficult issues that life presents. However, when you find the man who always addresses the issues no matter how difficult they may be, he has the leadership quality that could make him a godly elder. Many times people will avoid an elder who is not afraid of dealing with hardship, because they know that they will not get away with the evil they plan.

An elder must remember He “*who enlisted him as a soldier*”. The pastor’s job is to please God, not men and **definitely not self**. The elder who desires to please God knows that hardships will come and will always be ready for it, like a soldier must always be ready for battle during warfare. The godly elder will survive the hardship because his focus is on Christ, the source of his salvation and trust, and is therefore prepared and ready for battle. One who endures hardship can be seen in a man who is not discouraged by the battle or the return to battle. He is not crying over split milk.

Transition: A godly elder not only endures hardships as a good soldier, but also is one who follows rules, as we see in 2 Timothy 2:5.

2 Timothy 2:5

⁵And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.

9. **One Who Follows Rules (2 Timothy 2:5)**

This is very simply the fact that an elder must follow rules, whether it is the rules of Scripture, the bylaws of the church or the government, the pastor must follow the rules. This is the same way that an athlete must follow the rules to win a competition. If a leader starts to justify the breaking of rules how can he expect to receive a reward, any more than a runner who skips one leg of a race to win. Some time ago during the New York City Marathon, they awarded the first person to cross the finish line the award for first place, only to discover that somewhere in the

middle of the race the man was seen on the subway. The prize was removed from him and in the place of glory was now disgrace. Winning is not winning if the rules are not followed, it is disqualification.

The reason people break rules is because they are focused on the results. We are not called to seek for results. Results are God's work and the process is ours. God choose to call His children to obedience not results. A godly elder is one who seeks to follow the rules but leaves the results to God.

Transition: Not only does a godly pastor endure hardship and follow the rules, but also he is also hardworking as a farmer, 2 Timothy 2:6.

2 Timothy 2:6

⁶The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops.

10. Hardworking (2 Timothy 2:6)

Paul uses the illustration of a farmer to depict hardworking. A farmer must wake before the sunrise and work all day long with no guarantee that his hard work will pay off. The farmer could lose his whole crop to fire, animals or weather. Yet the farmer must persevere or he will definitely have no crop. The word for “*hardworking*” means to grow weary or tired from work and labor.

A truly hardworking man never says that about himself, other said it about him. **A hardworking man always sees the work ahead not behind.** Avoid an pastor who starts to look to make things “easy” for himself and complaints that the work is too hard. The godly elder will wake up, work himself to the point of weariness, for the Lord sake, then go to bed only to wake up the next day and start it all over again.

Transition: This working is for the ministry of the Lord and is focused on the people of God. Closely related to hardworking but with a focus on God is the idea of being diligent. In the first half of 2 Timothy 2:15, the godly elder is commanded to:

2 Timothy 2:15a

¹⁵Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed.

11. Diligent to be Approved Unto God (2 Timothy 2:15)

A diligent person is one who exerts himself to make every effort to do a task. The Greek word here for “*approved*” means genuine as pertaining to something that is tested, it has to do with money. It has to do with acceptable coins of money. Donald Barnhouse explained it this way:

In the ancient world there was no banking system as we know it today, and no paper money. All money was made from metal, heated until liquid, poured into moulds and allowed to cool. When the coins were cooled, it was necessary to smooth off the uneven edges. The coins were comparatively soft and of course many people shaved them closely. In one century, more than eighty laws were passed in Athens, to stop the practice of shaving down the coins then in circulation. But some money changers were men of integrity, who would accept no counterfeit money. They were men of honour who put only genuine full weighted money into circulation. Such men were called “*dokimos*” or “*approved*”.^{vii}

An elder should do all they can to present themselves as approved to God. The approval must be from God and not from men. A pastor who is seeking the approval of men will eventually change from the Scripture as his authority to people. What ever the people want he will try to provide to keep them happy with him. However, the godly elder seeks only to be pleasing to the Lord and if people are pleased, that is a side benefit. The godly man's focus is to trust in the Lord.

Transition: Lastly, the final characteristic has to do with the elders handling of the Word of God. Let us look at the second half of 2 Timothy 2:15.

2 Timothy 2:15b

¹⁵ rightly dividing the word of truth.

12. Rightly Divides the Word of God (2 Timothy 2:15)

The word "*rightly dividing*" is a Greek word that refers to cutting something sharp and straight. It means to proceed on straight paths, hold a straight course.^{viii} This speaks of the pastor's study, interpretation and teaching of the Word of God. A pastor who cuts short his study of the Word or depends more on the writings of other men has dulled his cutting blade and is ripping instead of cutting straight.

The only way for any pastor to be approved unto God, is not to have a big church but to accurately interpret God's Word to disseminate it to the people of God. God is not impressed with big churches or programs. God enjoys the man who will study the Scriptures with an honest, diligent heart. If you find an elder who loves to study the Scriptures, is very concerned that his interpretation is accurate and lived out in his life, you have found an elder who will be guided by the Scriptures and not himself.

Transition: We have finished looking at twelve characteristics of a godly elder.

Conclusion

1. A "*pure heart*" can be seen in a man that asks forgiveness quickly from another and does not justify his sinfulness.
2. A "*good conscience*" can be seen in a man that does not struggle, hesitate or weary to do what is right.
3. A "*sincere faith*" can be seen in a man that makes right decisions even when they are unpopular and does not worry about the outcome.
4. A man not ashamed of his past sins is humbled by them and does not hide them.
5. A godly man is marked by an immovable comfort in their contentment with where God has placed them in life.
6. A teacher can be seen in a man who is refining his doctrine and excited to educate others.
7. A godly pastor is an example and not hiding from others and surrounding himself with a select few.
8. One who endures hardship can be seen in a man who is not discouraged by the battle or the return to battle.
9. A godly elder is one who follows the rules but leaves the results to God.
10. The godly elder will wake up, work himself to the point of weariness, for the Lord sake, then go to bed only to wake up the next day and start it all over again.
11. The godly elder seeks only to be pleasing to the Lord and if people are pleased, that is a side benefit.

12. A godly elder loves to study the Scriptures, is very concerned that his interpretation is accurate and lived out in his life.

When choosing a man to pastor, the congregation needs to carefully select God's man. These twelve characteristics may help a congregation in what to look for, however, are these characteristics only for elders? These twelve characteristics are for each of us, who are Christians. We each need to live this way. However, to live a life defined as we have discussed, there is one most important characteristic: trusting in the Lord. If we do not trust the Lord to change us and mold us into what He wants us to be, we will not live these characteristics. We must ultimately remember that whether an elder is godly or ungodly, our trust is not in men, but our trust is in the Lord.

Thought Questions

1. How can we identify these characteristics in a man, especially one we hardly know?
2. Are these characteristics important for every Christian or just pastors?
3. How are these twelve characteristics different then the ones mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 or Titus 1:10-16?
4. What changes could you make in your life to emulate these characteristics?
5. How do people typically evaluate pastors?
6. Think about some elders you have known. Which ones stand out in your mind as having served with exceptional commitment and excellence? What sets them apart?
7. Do you relish argument and debate, or do you tend to seek peace at any cost? Why? Why would it be important and hard for an elder to not seek peace at any cost?
8. What do each of this characteristics look like in the life of a man?

ⁱStrong, James. *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible : Showing Every Word of the Test of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order*. electronic ed., G2513. Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996.

ⁱⁱIbid, G2588.

ⁱⁱⁱIbid, G4893.

^{iv}*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin. Edited by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich. electronic ed., Vol. 4, Page 891. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976.

^vLouw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*. electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, Page 753. New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989.

^{vi}Strong, *ibid*, G5179.

^{vii}Strong, *ibid.*, G1384.

^{viii}Strong, *ibid.*, G3718.