



Series: Stand Alone

Date: June 26, 2022

Speaker: Pastor Spence Shelton, *Lead Pastor*

Text: Titus 1.5-9; 1 Timothy 3.3-7

Title: Elders

Intro

Today is a really big day for Mercy Church. In fact, it's such a big day that we are even pausing our sermon series in Philippians to focus on what God's word has to say about today. Today we are commissioning a group of men to serve as elders of Mercy Church.

Now this word "elder" might be a weird word for you if you are newer to the bible because we don't really use it in everyday English much. Unless lately with elderberries. Which has some kind of dark art magic that makes you feel all better the minute you touch one. But in the bible, elders are the leaders of the church. The word is synonymous with "pastor."

We have spent the past year training and preparing these men to serve. And then about a month ago we introduced these men to our members. And we asked you to pray over them and ask the Lord to confirm their appointment or to signal us to wait. This is why membership really matters here at Mercy. A member's job is to hold the elders accountable by confirming or cautioning the direction the elders believe God is taking the church. Well, this past week our

members voted and today we are commissioning the men you voted to affirm as elders.

Today I want to show you what God's word has to say about elders. We will focus our attention on Titus 1.5-9. I'll reference a couple of other spots in the new testament that talk about this role. We are going to cover 3 things as we walk through this scripture.

1. The nature of an elder's authority in the church
2. The character to look for in an elder
3. The role the elder plays in the life of the church

But before any of that...let's talk about why this matters in your life. Elders matter because the church matters. And the church matters because God has decided to make His church his instrument in the world that desperately needs HIM. I mean, it seems every week we see evidence of how broken the world is. How desperate it is for redemption. And God has placed His church like a city set on a hill to shine the light of Christ into the world. To carry the hope of Christ into the dark places of the world. To speak and demonstrate the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- The church announces the hope of Jesus to sinners
- The church cares for widows and orphans
- The church gives sanctuary to the refugee
- The church cares for the sick
- The church is a family, a body, and a community of friends for all who call Christ their savior



The Church is God's plan A to tell the world about himself. God loves the church a whole lot. In fact, He calls the church His bride. And elders are His appointed means of ensuring the bride is honoring and worthy for the groom named Jesus.

When the church is healthy, its people flourish and the gospel moves forward. And the elders keep the church healthy. When the church gets unhealthy it can do GREAT damage to the reputation of the gospel in that community. ELDERS are the ones appointed by the church under the guidance of the holy spirit to ensure the church stays healthy and stays on mission.

So the best thing for a community...and for your life...is a healthy church. And the best way to ensure a church is healthy is to have qualified elders protecting and guiding the church. So let's look at the nature of an elder's authority, the character of an elder, and finally what their role in the church is. THEN, we'll commission some men to this task.

OK - So let's start with the nature of an elder's authority in the church. Start in verse 5.

[5] The reason I left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint elders in every town.

The only thing I want to say about verse 5 is that the word elder is plural. And consistent in the New Testament is always a reference to church leadership as plural. Elders. Because of that, we have a group of elders who oversee Mercy Church. I'm not the only elder. There is a group of us. And listen that isn't the most efficient method by organizational leadership standards. Group decision-making slows things down. But God doesn't build his church for efficiency, He builds his church to reflect His beauty and glory. And because God designed it, we can be confident this way IS best. This isn't Spence the pastor and everybody else do what I say. No. I'm **AN** elder here. And as one of the elders, I am subject to the mutual accountability that exists on the elder team. The men we commission today will serve as fellow elders with me. These guys do a great job letting me use my gifts of teaching & leadership & vision casting. So yes, I serve our church as the lead or senior pastor. But authority-wise we share the load.

And the beautiful thing here is that the only way this can work is if this group of elders has massive amounts of humility and trust. God loves unity in the body because it amplifies the gospel and the only way this group can function effectively is if they humbly persevere together. Otherwise, nothing would ever get done. And the beauty is that this reflects the very nature of God himself. The three persons of the Godhead regularly give honor & glory to one another and exist in perfect unity.



So we different men, all with opinions, insist upon unity together because God insists upon it. So the first thing: **an elder's authority is shared, not singular.**

Now having said that let me speak what we all know - **We live in an age that is deeply skeptical of power structures.** And surely for good reason. The "Me Too" movement of the past few years and the recent sexual abuse scandals both outside the church and inside the church have left many skeptical of church leadership. And I get it. I grew up in two churches. In one, the church destroyed the pastor & in the other, the pastor destroyed the church. So I really wanted nothing to do with church anyways. And so, of course, God would lead me to become a pastor! HA!

I need you to hear right now that the call to being an elder is not first a call to power. It's not. It's a call to servant, sacrifice, death, and slavery.¹ Matthew 20.25-28

[25] Jesus called them over and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. [26] It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your

¹ This response to power structures comes from Matt Chandler's sermon "What are elders" preached on 1 Timothy 3.12 on June 30, 2013 at The Village Church.

servant, [27] and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; [28] just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20.25-28

This calling is the opposite of a power grab. Jesus is saying leaders are given authority in the church *Because* these are the men who show sacrificial love. They show a willingness and eagerness to serve everyone else. That's who makes a good elder. The type of man who is willing to sacrifice for these people. Who looks at the people of the church and says "I'm willing and ready to die to myself, just like Jesus, for these people because I love these people!"

Elders GO FIRST in living the gospel. The Gospel says God loved you and me so much He died for us. And that love is the model by which we love others and Elders GO FIRST.

See the aspiration to be an elder, which 1 Timothy 3.1 says is a noble aspiration, is not an aspiration unto power, but an aspiration unto a form of death. We don't let a man be an elder unless he is willing to DIE to himself for you. That's the nature of an elder's authority - it's a selfless serving authority.

And Hebrews 13.17 says not only are they servants in this life. But elders are accountable to God.



[17] Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account...

One day I and the other elders have to stand before God and give an account to God which means for the members of Mercy Church your elders are accountable before God for your soul.

How's that for a recruiting speech? The perks of eldership are dying to self & accountability before God for souls. Come join us! All of this means we don't walk into this role lightly and being an elder is ANYTHING BUT a power grab.

Now with that said, let's look at Titus 1.5-9 for our next two sections. The character of an elder and the role they play. And it's in that last section about what they do.

Ok now to verse 6. We are getting into the character of an elder. The list that Paul is about to give Titus...and he gives a very similar one to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3... it's a list of qualifications that are almost all character. It's not who is the smartest or most put together or successful. It's a character thing. The reason it's all character is because your elders are to lead you to Jesus. So they need to look like Jesus.

[6] An elder must be blameless: the husband of one wife, with faithful children who are not accused of wildness or rebellion.

Blameless² - easy starting point right? Perfect? If perfect: Right out of the gate, all your elders have failed.

Not perfect. So what does this mean? They carry themselves in such a way that accusations aren't brought against them. And any false ones that are brought are quickly revealed as false because of how transparent & upstanding he's lived... He's going to say blameless in the home and then blameless in the church. This is the overarching word used to describe the character of an elder that he then goes into explaining it. Blameless, another translation is "above reproach." Why – because he is holding up the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is a massive deal. He's leading you to Jesus so he needs to look like Jesus. You should smell the aroma of Christ on him. Now he will not BE Jesus. He's a fellow sinner. But if you follow him, you will find Jesus.

Faithful - husband of one wife. Another way of saying that is that he's a one-woman man. And because we are at this spot let me go ahead and say cards on the table here we do believe the role of elder is to be held by qualified men. Now, this is not a sermon about women in ministry because it's not what the text is about. BUT, it is related because we are talking about a leadership role in the church.

² (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6–7)



So if you'll give me 5 minutes I want to explain that since how we treat and value women is a big issue in our day.

What I'm going to say is this is about God's design for an office of the church, and not about giftings or abilities. The spiritual gifts of teaching and leadership are certainly as available to women as they are to men. Those are gifts.

In fact, for a church to be healthy we must cultivate the leadership and teaching gifts of all who have them, both men and women. And we must invite and encourage women to lead in every way God has made available. That's our aim as a church. We have 28 staff right now. 14 women and 14 men. Mandy Foster serves on our executive leadership team on our staff. 3 of our 8 ministry directors are female. Women and Men both teach Equip classes here. There are 46 women either leading women's groups or co-leading mixed-gender community groups.

Both men and women have equal access to spiritual giftings, have vital roles to play in the church, and we should create clear paths for development in the church for both! And we are trying to build those pathways as we grow as a church. Abiding by God's design here does not preclude a commitment to the development, empowerment, and advancement of women in ministry or the unleashing of their gifting in the church! Now we are still a work in progress. For sure. I'm just trying to show you a little under the hood

of some of our practices of how we value women using their God-given spiritual gifts.

The office of elder is not about that. It's about God's design. And we are unapologetic about this.

Some key texts - In 1 Timothy Paul reinforces this idea that an elder is the husband of one wife.

2 An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife... 1 Timothy 3.2

Now we don't say elders should be men because of this verse & Titus 1 alone. Because "the husband of one wife" is a strange way to say an elder needs to be *male*. On top of that neither Paul nor Jesus were married. So it would be an inconsistent thing to say only married men can serve when Paul wasn't married. No, these are arguments against polygamy - against having multiple wives. Because Christ only had one bride - the Church. So they are to be faithful men and a one-woman kind of man.

In 1 Timothy 2 Paul says, when talking about the church

12 I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; 1 Timothy 2:12

God has reserved the authority in the church for qualified men. Not just any man. As a species, men do not have authority over women. Qualified men appointed by the church to the office of elder are entrusted with authority over the church. So we do our humble best to try and practice this because we believe it is best for God's church when we follow God's word. We do believe qualified men and



women are able to serve in the role of deacon. That's a separate sermon but the same underlying reasoning - we are trying to obey scripture.

So my 5 minutes are up - yes we believe elders should be men. But they are the kind of qualified men women flourish under. And if women aren't flourishing under their leadership they are the wrong men. This has nothing to do with God's gifting, it has to do with His design.

Leader of a well-ordered home – See what's happening is the bible is saying the home is a proving ground for ministry. In short - are you leading your family well? Do you have a well-ordered life?

That's why we bring the wife in on the elder process. How is this guy in his home? A dad can't control the conversion of his kids but he can lead them in a dignified, gracious way.

So you should be watching my kids. Not whether or not they sin. Don't need you making that list. Too many pastors' kids grow up with bad memories because their church thought they should sin 30% less than other kids or something. That's not this. You should be watching how they respond to me. They should be responsive to the loving leadership of their father. And that's on me, not them.

In other words, that whole "Ohhh you know pastors kids..." Shouldn't be a thing.

Paul calls for elders to be faithful leaders and shepherds of their own households if they are to be considered to be leaders and shepherds for the household of God.³

Ok, next in verse 7 we get this word "blameless" applied to overseeing the church. And there are things he must not be and things he must be. First, we get what he must not be...

[7] As an overseer of God's household, he must be blameless: not arrogant, not hot-tempered, not an excessive drinker, not a bully, not greedy for money.

All of these are signs of sin running unchecked in this man's heart. Really all of them reveal this man is not controlled by God's spirit but by his own desires. They reveal that he is submitted to his fleshly desires instead of the Holy Spirit.

He must not be arrogant – An arrogant leader thinks HE is worthy to be praised. But the gospel says we are wretched sinners and God saved us out of mercy. An elder can't be arrogant because he must lead his people in the awareness of the humility sin brings. He must lead us to worship JESUS' name, not his. Let me say something right here that isn't in the list but is true: since an elder isn't Jesus, the

³ (1 Tim. 3:5)



one thing he must do that Christ did not do is be repentant where he sins. An elder is not so consumed by pride that he refuses to confess his sin.

He must not be hot-tempered – The gospel is a message of the patient loving kindness of the Lord. The Lord is patient...not hot-tempered. In His patience He waited on you to turn from your sin. Elders model that gospel patience by loving strong-willed people. He's not eager to fight. Guys who love conflict are bad elders. Good elders don't like conflict but they aren't afraid of it either. They are shepherds. You gotta guard against wolves and when wolves attack elders go first & often get injured in the process. But better him than the sheep.

He must not be an excessive drinker – He's not controlled by drink, he doesn't escape to drink. He's controlled by the Spirit and escapes into the Spirit. In doing so, he models the gospel to be a better escape, a better place to run to, than any substance the earth can offer.

He must not be a bully – The Lord has power. But the gospel says He laid aside power and came not to be served but to serve. An elder must model servant love. If he manipulates people & situations he's getting them to do his will, not the Lord's will. This is a wolf, not a shepherd.

He must not be greedy for money – The gospel is a message of the radical generosity of God. God gave His son for us! Elders must go first in demonstrating that generosity through their own generosity.

Then Paul turns around and says here is what they must look like. Because here is what the love of God looks like in action. And God has called the elders to go first in displaying, in being tangible expressions of the gospel. And here they are:

[8] but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, righteous, holy, self-controlled,

He must be hospitable – Jesus describes God's love as a father welcoming His lost son home again. It's loving people. Hospitality is a genuine concern for your soul. Not whether or not your decorations are seasonal. Elders go first here. And a church where elders are hospitable will be known as a welcoming church.

He must love what is good – The gospel creates a people who are a light in a dark world. The elder loves obeying God because he has experienced the goodness & joy of obedience. And in doing so he makes the gospel attractive to those around him.

He must be sensible – There is not a massive gap between how he sees himself and how the world sees him. Heard one guy say "He isn't one of the audition episodes of American Idol. Where he thinks



he can sing and the rest of the world is like NO!” Knowing his limits and using reason shows the gospel to be reasonable.

He must be righteous – The Gospel is the news that righteousness will win out over evil one day. Yes, there is injustice and oppression in this world but that’s not the way it should be. And one day God will right all wrongs. And in the meantime Elders serve as models of the righteousness in their own lives and fight for justice for everyone.

He must be holy – The gospel is the announcement of a holy God reconciling sinners to himself. Making sinners holy again. And elders are to model that holiness for the church. You should look at your elders and say I want that kind of holiness. I want that.

He must be self-controlled – This is the positive expression of the “can’t be an excessive drinker.” He’s got to show what it looks like to submit human desires to God’s desires and then show how that life is better. This doesn’t mean he’s stoic. It means he holds his tongue & his Twitter rants. Like Jesus, he submits his desires to God’s desires. And because of that, you can trust him which will point you to trusting in Christ.

Ok, that’s who an elder is. Look at this passage again and what you see is that Paul’s overwhelming concern is not ability but Character.

Verse 9 tells us the ONE ability he has to have but what he goes through first is character. This is why becoming an elder is not a fast process here at Mercy. We accept nominations from you for men you consider worthy. We talk with him, interview him and his wife, talk to those who know his character, & assess his theology. Then we present him before the whole church and give the church some time to pray & speak up. We assess - has he gone first in modeling Christ in the home and in the church? The big thing here is...is this guy the kind of man where the more you see him the more you see Christ THROUGH him.

Now let me tell you what this elder does. **What an elder does**

[9] holding to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it.

An elder teaches the gospel faithfully. That’s his big job. To grip the faithful message...and to encourage people with it.

To govern the church in a way that ensures the church is remaining faithful to the calling of God. To make sure each member is growing as a follower of Jesus and to make sure the church as a whole is making wise faith-filled decisions that lead us towards fulfilling the mission God has us here for. This is a GIANT responsibility. You



GOTTA pray for your elders. Pray for humility and wisdom. Pray for protection against the enemy. Pray for unity among one another.

In fact church, the bible gives you responsibility in this to honor & care for your leaders.

17 The elders who are good leaders are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. 1 Timothy 5.17

Now awkward moment: Did I just tell you to double honor me? Brothers and sisters, I HAVE to tell you what God says even in the awkward moments ok. We are talking about elders and the reality is many churches chew up pastors in a 3-5 year cycle and those guys leave burnt out & bitter. And that's to the church's own detriment when that happens.

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. Hebrews 13.17

God is saying if their job is more duty than delight, that's to your detriment.

See the gospel is a life-giving message and elders are to come to the brothers and sisters of the church and remind them once again

today that GOD LOVES YOU. And God wants you. To remind you that whatever brought you in here today, whatever weight you are carrying...you can set it down at Christ's feet. Whatever sin you are hiding, you can find forgiveness in him. Whatever suffering you are going through, he can carry you through it.

My job is to point you to Christ. And I have to be faithful to the message.

- It says you are created by God...to know God like a child knows his/her father. He loves you, and He wants to know you.
- You have sinned. I CANNOT leave that out and just tell you that you should live your best life now. I can't. The gospel message is profoundly clear that your sin has separated you from God. You are lost and you need saving. I know that is offensive, but at least you can respect that if we believe eternity is at stake we love you enough to tell you and not hide this from you.
- And because you can't save yourself, God sent Jesus to die for your sin. You deserved to die for it. Yet God wouldn't let you. You were guilty, and Jesus stepped in and paid for your sin so that you could be forgiven. And after He died He rose again meaning sin & death no longer have a claim on your life. It means you can be saved from your sin and live for eternity with God.
- But you have to receive it. You aren't born into it. You must receive it.



That's the elders' job. Keep that message in front of you and help the people of the church apply the gospel into their lives.

Closing