

God-Given Qualifications for Ministers of the Gospel

I. What they are

II. Why God gives them

(1 Timothy 3:1-7) Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. {2} Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, {3} not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. {4} He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. {5} (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) {6} He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. {7} He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Tell me, if I were to ask you for a description of the perfect pastor, what would you say? What qualities would you look for in the ideal minister of the Gospel? Recently a survey was conducted asking people for the traits of the perfect pastor. All the results were compiled and it turns out these are some of the traits of a perfect pastor:

- He preaches sermons that are exactly 11 minutes long.
- He condemns sin but never hurts anyone's feelings.
- He works from 8 a.m. till midnight while also serving as the church janitor.
- He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all of his time with the senior citizens.
- He makes 15 evangelism calls a day, never misses a meeting and is always available to talk to you when you stop by his office.
- He's 29 years old and has 40 years of experience.
- He remembers everyone's name including your aunt who visited church a year ago.
- And, oh yes, he's handsome.

Tell me, is this your idea of a perfect pastor? Have any of you met that man yet? Yeah, me neither. But it does force us to think about what we would expect a pastor to do and be. And of course that has some real application for our life as a Christian congregation, because 4 weeks from today we will install a new pastor here in Mount Olive. What will he be like? Will he live up to our expectations? Maybe most importantly, will our expectations match up with what God expects of a new called worker? What does God say are the qualities of a good pastor? Does God lay out any qualifications required for those who are called into the public ministry? Actually he does. And those qualifications are recorded for us right here in 1st Timothy Chapter 3. And so, as we look forward to the installation of a new pastor, and actually four new teachers also next month, it's fitting that we take a little closer look at what might be called,

The God-Given Qualifications for Ministers of the Gospel

we'll see both what those qualifications are and why they are important.

Our text for the day is a portion of Saint Paul's first letter to his son in the faith, Timothy. Just like the scripture lesson from 2nd Timothy last week, here Paul is offering words of advice from an older pastor to a younger pastor—and to his congregation and ours.

Paul begins with the words, *Here is a trustworthy saying: if anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.* The Greek word translated as overseer (or in some translations, bishop), refers to someone who is in a position of authority or leadership. Sometimes a parallel word “elder” is used. Scripture speaks of elders as the ones who “*direct the affairs of the church*” and “*those whose work is preaching and teaching.*” (1 Timothy 5:17). While these terms could be applied to a number of different positions in the church, they are probably best embodied in the position of parish pastor.

So what is Paul’s point? If anyone sets his heart on being a pastor, he desires a noble task. In other words, for a young person, for example, to aspire to be a full-time public minister of the Gospel—that’s a good thing. There are few careers more fulfilling than full time ministry. And yet, as Paul goes on to point out, just because someone has his heart set on being a pastor, doesn’t mean that person is necessarily qualified to be a pastor. There are a number of other criteria which must be met for a person to become or remain a pastor. Paul lists them here. Let’s take a closer look at each one of them.

Paul writes, *An overseer must be above reproach.* That doesn’t mean that a pastor must be sinless. If that were the case, there wouldn’t be any pastors. We’re all sinners. Rather, that term, “to be blameless” or “to be above reproach” means that a person is not guilty of a grave moral offense. He is not guilty of doing something that so damages his reputation that he is no longer fit for the ministry.

Paul goes on, *a pastor must be the husband of but one wife.* That doesn’t mean that a pastor can’t be a single man. St. Paul was unmarried his whole life. Rather, what Paul means here might be expressed in a more literal translation, namely, a pastor must be “a one-woman man.” That means that if he’s married, he must be devoted to his wife. He can’t be a womanizer. And can’t be guilty of having an affair. Of course, if he was guilty of adultery and he then repented of that sin, he would be forgiven by God. He could still be a Christian, but he would no longer be qualified to be a pastor.

The next three words all kind of fit together. Paul says that a pastor must be *temperate, self controlled, respectable.* Temperate means more than that a pastor can’t be a drunk. It means he must be even keeled, He must have a certain soberness to him—which ties directly to the fact that he must be self-controlled. In other words, he can’t be ruled by his emotions. The Greek word here brings with it the idea of using your head, being sensible. We might say that a pastor needs to be level headed. And Paul says that he needs to be respectable, or orderly. In other words, a pastor shouldn’t be a slob. Shouldn’t be boorish in his behavior. When I was at the seminary, they told us, “You need to be a gentleman.” Both when you are with people you know, and when you’re with people you don’t know—which leads to the next qualification.

Paul says that a minister of the Gospel should be *hospitable.* The Greek word here literally means “a friend to strangers.” That means that a pastor should make guests feel welcome, whether they’re visiting his home or his church.

Now you realize, that all of those characteristics are expectations that God has for more than just pastors. These are qualities that God would have every Christian display. It’s not that God says that as long as you’re not a pastor, you have the freedom to be an arrogant, mean, out of control jerk. No, to a certain extent, the qualifications that Paul lists here apply to all of God’s people.

There is, however, at least one qualification that God applies a little more strictly to pastors and teachers. It’s the next one in the list. Paul says that a pastor must be *able to teach.*

If you think about it, God does not require that of all Christians. You don't have to be a good communicator to be able to be a believer in Jesus. I mean, your words could be gobbledygook and you could still trust in Jesus as your savior.

But in order for a person to carry out the office of the public ministry, in order for a person to be able to do what God calls a pastor or teacher to do, a minister of the Gospel must be able to teach. As a pastor, I don't have to know how to perform heart surgery or be able to change brakes on my car, but I do have to be able to teach, that is, I have to be able to communicate the truth of Holy Scripture in a way that people can understand. It's why seminary students take courses in Christian education. It's also why there have been times when some seminary students were declared to be unfit for the ministry, because they just didn't couldn't teach. They weren't qualified to effectively communicate the gospel. They could be Christians; but they couldn't be pastors or teachers.

But now, back to some of the other character traits required of pastors. Paul says that a minister of the Gospel must be *not given to much wine*. In other words, he can't be someone who abuses alcohol. He's *not violent, but gentle*—both with words and actions. A pastor is not to be a bully, not quick-tempered, or as Paul puts it, *not quarrelsome*. And of course, a pastor is to be *not a lover of money*. Scripture's warnings about the danger of loving money, or the impossibility of serving God and money, apply to pastors just as much as everyone else.

Now, from those kinds of character traits that God demands of pastors, Paul moves on to two other circumstances-in-life issues. He says that a pastor *must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect*. And then Paul adds the rationale for that qualification. He says, *if anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can you take care of God's Church?* Obviously, there is a correlation between properly caring for each of the pastor's families—the one at home and the one here at church. Each requires a certain amount of firm discipline and also unconditional love.

The second circumstance in life issue that Paul addresses? Paul says that a pastor *must not be a recent convert*. In other words, he shouldn't be new to the Christian faith. In our synod, our worker training system kind of takes care of that qualification automatically. By the time a man makes it through four years at MLC and four years at the Seminary—well, there's no way he's still a recent convert.

St. Paul closes out this list of qualifications by kind of coming back full circle to the idea of pastors being above reproach, or as he puts it in verse 7, a pastor *must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap*.

Wow, you think about that entire list. It's clear that God has some pretty high expectations for his called workers. There's a strict set of qualifications for his public ministers of the gospel. The question is, why? Why does God hold his pastors and teachers to such high standards? Why is God concerned with not only what your pastors teach, but how we live? Is he trying to establish a two-tiered system of Christianity? You've got these fairly holy regular people, and these super holy pastors and teachers? No, the reason that God holds ministers of the Gospel to higher standards boils down to one thing. And that is, God's unchanging commitment to safeguard his Word. God doesn't want anything to hinder people from hearing and believing the message that faithful pastors and teachers proclaim. And so, to keep the messengers from getting in the way of the message, to keep them from becoming stumbling blocks to those who are watching and listening to us, God sets high standards for his called workers. That's what Saint Paul means when he says in 2nd Corinthians chapter 6, *we put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited*.

You realize, that's what St. Paul was concerned about. He wanted to make sure that he did or said nothing that would somehow detract from the message that God had graciously given him to share. My friends, you realize, the same thing is still true for your called workers today. As ministers of the gospel we recognize that our call to publicly proclaim God's truth to you and for you is a precious, undeserved privilege. I know I speak for all of the pastors when I say that we hold with trembling hands the calls you have extended to each one of us. We know how easily we could allow that call to slip through our fingers, by allowing ourselves to fall into some kind of great or shameful sin. And yet, purely by his grace, God has kept your pastors faithful, faithful to himself, faithful to his Word.

And while he's certainly done that for our benefit—he's kept us qualified to be ministers of the gospel, and we are grateful for that—the fact is, he's also kept us faithful for your benefit, because he loves you and wants nothing to hinder you from hearing and believing the good news of God's love for in Christ, the good news which your pastors have the privilege of sharing with you, week after week after week. For you see, when it comes right down to it, because God knows the Word Works, there's nothing he wants more than for his people to have pastors and teachers who share that Word faithfully! God grant that always be the case, here at Mount Olive and around the world, in Jesus' name. Amen.