

A Lover of Good, Upright, & Holy

This morning we want to continue our series of studies on the qualifications of an elder, or the qualities that should be looked for in an elder of the Lord's church.

At the risk of being repetitious, once again, I want to remind us of something that we've tried to stress throughout this series, and that is that while these qualities are listed as characteristics that must be expected of an elder, most of these qualities are also characteristics that should be expected of *all* Christians. In other words, these behaviors and attitudes, for the most part, should be the standard for us all. An elder should be an example to others in how to live these qualities out in our everyday lives, but he is not the only one who must live up to these values. That is certainly the case with the qualifications we plan to study this morning: the requirements that an elder must be a lover of good, upright, and holy. No one should say, "Well, I don't have to love what is good...I don't have to be upright...I don't have to be holy because I'm not an elder." That would be silly and would be contradictory to other Scriptures. These are things that we should all be striving for, and growing in, as we live the Christian life.

So, let's begin our study by reading the passage in which we find these qualities.

Titus 1:5-9 – This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, **a lover of good**, self-controlled, **upright, holy**, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:5-9, ESV)

You'll notice that I did not read the passage from 1 Timothy 3 that we have become accustomed to referencing in our studies. That's because, as it turns out, the three qualities under consideration today are listed only in Paul's instructions to Titus. They are not specifically named in his letter to Timothy. As we've pointed out before, Paul did not list these qualities in the same order in his two letters, nor are the qualifications identical. As well, different translations and versions make it somewhat difficult to line up the qualities between the two lists. It could certainly be argued that the qualities of "lover of good, upright, and holy" are closely related to other qualities that Paul did mention to Timothy, such as "above reproach, respectable, or well-thought-of by outsiders." But this morning we'll focus our attention on Titus 1 as we take a closer look at these 3 qualifications.

Lover of Good

First, Paul says that an elder must be "a lover of good." The Greek word used here, *philagathos* [fil-ag'-ath-os], is found only in Titus 1:8 and nowhere else in the New Testament. It's a compound word made up of the words *philos* (which means fond of, or a friend of) and *agathos* (which simply means good, or that which is good). But that word *agathos* is pretty generic. It can be applied to

“good things,” “good people,” or “good deeds.” And, perhaps that’s why there’s a bit of uncertainty as to what exactly Paul was referring to when he said an elder must be “*philagothos*.” Strong’s adds the note that this refers to “a promoter of virtue.” **Thayer’s Lexicon** has “loving goodness,” and **Vine’s Bible Dictionary** has “loving that which is good,” which doesn’t narrow it down much. Vine’s does note, however, that the opposite of this quality is found in 2 Tim. 3:3, where Paul is speaking of the godlessness in the last days. He says (**2 Tim. 3:1-5**):

2 Timothy 3:1-5 – But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, **not loving good**, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

So, we can see the kind of company that those who are *not* lovers of good keep!

Most translations have kept the same “generic” take on the Greek word **philagothos** that we’ve already noted. Here are a few slight variations:

- "a lover of what is good" (NKJV),
- "loving what is good" (NASB)
- "a lover of goodness" (NRSV)
- “one who loves what is good” (NIV)

Even the Amplified Version refrains from going out on a limb and inserting any more details about this quality, although the Amplified “Classic” Edition does add: “a lover of goodness [of good people and good things].” Oddly, only the KJV is a bit more specific, as it translates this quality as “a lover of good men.”

Now, I suppose someone might throw up their hands at this point and say, “‘Lover of good’ is just too broad and not specific enough. How are we supposed to judge a prospective elder on this qualification if we don’t even know what it means?” But I think, perhaps, that was Paul’s intention. If you were to ask Paul, “Paul, what did you mean by ‘lover of good’? Did you mean good men or good things or good deeds?” his answer might be, “Yes!” Not that he was trying to confuse things, but to make the point that this word “good” does indeed cover a lot of territory.

A Lover of Good Men

For example, an elder must be, as the KJV puts it, a lover of good men. It’s hard to imagine an elder of the church not loving and wanting to be around good people. After all, the best “good people” I can think of are members of the church—his Christian family—God’s people. And if an elder doesn’t love his brothers and sisters, well, he’s not going to be an effective leader. The 18th century theologian and Bible scholar, John Gill, wrote,

[a lover] of good men; for such an elder or bishop has chiefly to do and converse with; and if he is not a lover of them, their company will be disagreeable to him, and he will be of no advantage to them; and if he does not love the souls of men, he will not naturally care for their state, or be concerned for their good.

Notice a couple of points by Mr. Gill. First, he says that good men (and again, I'm focusing specifically on members of the church here, both men and women), should be the ones with which an elder "has to do"—that is, the one he spends most of his time with and "converses" or talks with. How strange it would be if a man is said to be an overseer—an "under-shepherd" as elders are sometimes called—yet he's never around them! What kind of shepherd is never around the sheep? If a man's friends and closest acquaintances are not Christians, I would say it raises immediate questions. In fact, might that not be true of all of us? But secondly, Mr. Gill says he must "love their souls." That's what's most important! Yes, it's important that he enjoy the company of good people. But ultimately, his main concern and focus should be on the spiritual state of others. After all, that's true "*agape*" love. Every member may not be best friends with an elder. He may not be the first person they make weekend plans or go out to dinner with. But he *should* be one they entrust the oversight of their soul and the oversight of the church to. They should trust that he always has their best *spiritual* interest in mind.

A Lover of Good Things

But an elder must also be a lover of good *things*. Things such as worship, prayer, preaching, reading, meditation, Bible conversations. In much of the denominational world today, the office of an elder has sadly become a glorified board of directors. A group of men and sometimes women¹ in charge of the finances and everyday "business" of the church, with little to do with the things that actually matter most. These men (and women) may be reputable business owners or political officials or local judges in the community. But whether they are actually knowledgeable or even interested in "good things" as I described—well, that's optional. As I said, that's the way the world views the eldership. But that most certainly is not God's view! When it comes to "good things," I'm reminded of the passage in Philippians 4:8 where Paul urges the church,

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Paul was speaking to all Christians there, but certainly an elder must be an example of one who puts good things first. Not his career or his investments or his hobbies or anything else.

A Lover of Good Deeds

Along those same lines, an elder must most certainly be a lover of good deeds or good works. In fact, I lean toward thinking that is the kind of "good" Paul had in mind here in our text. As I said, perhaps he meant all of these good things. But in context, good works seem to be a theme of his entire letter to Titus. In chapter one, as soon as he finishes listing the qualifications of elders, Paul takes aim at those in Crete (which is where Paul had left Titus) who were "insubordinate, detestable, disobedient, *unfit for any good work*" (Titus 1:10-16, emphasis added here and following verses). In contrast, in chapter two, Paul instructs Titus to teach sound doctrine to the older men, older women, younger women, and younger men. And he tells Titus to practice what he preaches. In verse seven he says, "Show yourself in all respects to be a model of *good works*"

¹ By the way, maybe that's another qualification that we need to study—that an elder must be a man. Hopefully it's obvious to all of us, but apparently it's not obvious to the world.

(emphasis added). In verse fourteen, he says that Jesus “gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for *good works*.” Continuing in chapter three, Paul continues his instructions on what Titus is to teach Christians there in Crete, and he includes in verse one, “Remind them...to be ready for every *good work*.” And then twice more, in verses eight and fourteen, Paul stresses this theme. He says, “...I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to *good works*” (Titus 3:8). And again, “And let our people learn to devote themselves to *good works*, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful” (v. 14).

Another interesting piece of evidence which suggests this Greek word *philagathos* may refer primarily to good works is a historical one. Historians and scientists who study ancient engravings tell us that the word *philagathos* was often used in inscriptions to praise admirable people for the good works they did in life.

Finally, I think it’s worth noting that this qualification of “lover of good” immediately follows the requirement that an elder be hospitable, which as we’ve studied before, is literally translated as “lover of strangers.” Hospitality is certainly a good work that all Christians must perform and that elders must be an example of. And so, it’s almost as if Paul says, “Elders must love to be good to strangers. In fact, elders should love everything that’s good.” In Galatians 6:10 Paul would write, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us *do good* to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Elders are to be examples to the flock, according to 1 Peter 5:3. They are to model the attitudes and actions that the Lord requires of His people. He taught in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your *good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” And as always, Jesus left us the perfect example. Acts 10:38 tells us that Jesus “went about *doing good*.” So, likewise, His followers, and especially the overseers of His church, must be “lovers of good.”

Upright

Moving on, the next qualification or quality of elders under our consideration is that an elder must be “upright” or “righteous” or “just,” as many translations of Titus 1:8 have it. In fact, almost all versions have one of these three translations, other than the Common English Bible which has “ethical.” The Greek word that Paul uses here is *dikaios* [dik'-ah-yos]. Unlike the previous qualification we studied, this word is used many times throughout the New Testament; at least 81 times according to **Strong’s Lexicon**! However, like the word “good” that we’ve already noticed, this word translated as “upright” or “just” can take on a broad range of meaning. Strong’s defines it as “equitable (in character or act); by implication, innocent, holy (absolutely or relatively): — just, meet, right(-eous).” Thayer defines the word as “righteous, observing divine and human laws; one who is such as he ought to be.” I think that’s a good way for us to think of it—a man who is what he ought to be. But Thayer further emphasizes the ambiguity of the word by saying that it means “in a wide sense, upright, righteous, virtuous, keeping the commands of God; in a narrower sense, rendering to each his due and that in a judicial sense, passing just judgment on others, whether expressed in words or shown by the manner of dealing with them.” Again, I can imagine someone asking Paul, “Paul, what did you mean here? Do you mean an elder must be

righteous, or that he must keep God's commandments, or that he must judge fairly?" And Paul would most likely reply: "Yes!" But let's see if we can break that down somewhat.

Righteous

In a general sense, *dikaios* means to be righteous or virtuous. To the extreme, this would be one who is innocent, faultless, and guiltless. Obviously, that describes no one other than God Himself, as well as His Son. Other than Jesus, no man or woman is perfect. Paul admits that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). In fact, in Romans 3:10 Paul states, "None is righteous, no, not one." However, as imperfect as we may be, the Bible teaches that we can be viewed as "righteous" or "just" in God's eyes. God, in His grace, mercy, and love, had a plan to redeem humanity and gather to Himself a people. We can be declared righteous by God through Christ. Because of God's work to redeem the lost, all the world falls into one of two categories: the just or the unjust, according to passages such as Matthew 5:45 and Acts 24:15. The determining factor is how one responds to God's Word.

Keeping God's Commands

However, that's most likely not all that Paul means by his qualification that elders must be upright. Obviously, they must be saved—that is, a baptized believer. But there must be more to it than that. Which brings us to the next layer, if you will, of this word *dikaios*. It can also apply to one who conforms to the will of God or keeps the commands of God. Once again, only Jesus has done so perfectly. But I think we are getting closer to Paul's application to elders. While no other man ever has nor ever will follow God's laws perfectly, an elder must be one who strives in his everyday life to do so. He will fail, from time to time, just as we all will. But that is his goal. It is not enough to be a hearer of God's Word; one must be a doer of the Word to be justified, according to many passages such as Romans 2:13 where Paul says, "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified." And, of course, James 1:22-25 compares a person who is a hearer only and not a doer of the Word to a man who looks intently at himself in a mirror, but then goes away and forgets what he saw.

We have several examples of "just" or "righteous" men and women in Scripture. This adjective is used of people such as Joseph, the husband of Mary (Matt. 1:19); Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist (Luke 1:6); Joseph of Arimathea in whose tomb the body of Jesus was buried (Luke 23:50); and Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10:32), just to name a few. And of course, as always, Jesus is held up as the perfect example. First John 2:1 refers to Him as "Jesus Christ, the righteous." In fact, I think John sums it up well in First John 3:7 where he says, "Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever *practices* righteousness is righteous, as He [that is, Christ] is righteous."

Judgment

And then there is yet another layer...a more specific application of the word *dikaios*. Thayer says that in a narrower sense, the word "upright" or "just" can refer to the way a man passes judgment on others. **Vine's Expository Dictionary** notes that *dikaios* can refer to judgment "without prejudice or partiality." An elder of the church holds a position of leadership and authority that require him to sometimes make what we refer to as "judgment calls." Of course, those decisions must always be based on God's Word. But they must also be unbiased and fair. I'll again quote

John Gill who said an elder must be, "...righteous in his dealings with men, giving to everyone their due; upright and sincere in his conversation with the saints; and faithful in his counsel, admonitions, and reproofs." And David Lipscomb, in describing this quality of "upright" or "just" said that it describes "one who tries strictly to perform his duties toward men – the duties which integrity and justice seem imperatively to ask of him in his relation with his neighbor."

Holy

Well thirdly and finally, let's move on to the last qualification or quality of elders that we want to consider from Titus 1:8, and that is that an elder must be holy. I must admit, of all the qualifications outlined by Paul in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, this one gives me the most pause. In other words, if I were to judge myself on these qualities—whether as a prospective elder or as a Christian in general (because again, these characteristics are expected of us all)—this is the one I would be most hesitant to "check off," so to speak. Holy? Am I holy? Are any of us holy? So, let's take a closer look...

The Greek word Paul uses here is *hosios* [hos'-ee-os]. When I looked it up in **Strong's Lexicon**, I immediately noticed that its etymology (that is, its root word, its origin, the historical development of its meaning) is "of uncertain affinity." Simply put, that means it is unknown how this word is similar to or related to other words. Strong could not connect the word (with certainty) to some other, more original word or to a "lower-level" root word. As we might say today, "it is what it is."

Yet I was surprised to find that the word *hosios* is not used that often in the New Testament. It's only found eight times, and five of those are quotations from the Old Testament. It may, however, be similar if not synonymous, with another Greek word *hagios* [hag'-ee-os] which is found a whopping 233 in the New Testament! Both words are most often translated as "holy." In our text, "holy" is used in the ESV, KJV, NKJV, ASV, and NIV. The word "devout" is used in the NASB, NRSV, and AMP. A few other translations have "godly," "pious," or "pure."

Now, as I said, I think most of us would hesitate to describe ourselves as "holy." Isn't that a word that describes God? Yes, it most certainly is! In fact, it's used in Revelation 15:4 where John heard them sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb, saying "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For *you alone are holy*." Both Peter and Paul use the word in the book of Acts, quoting one of the Psalms, which says of Jesus, "You will not let your *Holy One* see corruption." (Acts 2:27, 13:35). The word is also applied to Jesus in Hebrews 7:26, where it says, "For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, *holy*, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." So, what does this word mean? And how can we live up to it?

Divine vs. Human

Well, according to Strong's, the word *hosios* describes something that is "right by intrinsic or divine character." Thayer offers this definition: "undefiled by sin, free from wickedness, religiously observing every moral obligation, pure, holy, pious." Again, that sounds like a standard too high for any man to reach. In fact, another definition I found (and I'm not sure of the source of this one), but it said *hosios* was "pertaining to being holy in the sense of superior moral qualities

and possessing certain essentially *divine* qualities *in contrast with what is human*.” In other words, it sounds like “holy” is not humanly possible! But I think the key is that it must be a standard we are reaching for. All Christians, and elders in particular, must live our lives in a way that strives to mimic God and Christ and their perfection. In fact, we’re commanded to do so. In 1 Peter 1:15-16, which says, “but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”

Obviously, if God commands us to be holy, then it is not impossible. Paul said that he and his companions had lived this way before the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 2:10 he said, “You are witnesses, and God also, how *holy* and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers.” Paul didn’t think it presumptuous to claim that he’d lived in a holy manner, and by the way, I believe that’s the adverb form of the same word *hosios* that’s in our text. Here are a couple more definitions, or at least interpretations, of the definition of this word that helped me better grasp how we as mere humans can live holy lives...

- “Conduct which is true to one’s moral and religious obligations” (Kent)
- “Conduct which observes the true and established ordinances of the Lord” (Lenski)

Again, I think the expectation is that Christians should be striving for a holiness like that of God and Christ, and we do so by following God’s commands. And this is especially true of elders. Commentator Matthew Henry said of this qualification that an elder must be “one who reverences and worships God, and is of a spiritual and heavenly conversation.” And John Gill wrote that an elder must be “devout towards God, constant in all religious exercises in the closet, family, and church; and living soberly, righteously, and godly in the world.”

Before we close, I think it’s worth noting that in addition to Titus 1:8, there are a few other passages where the qualities of “upright” and “holy” are used together. In Mark 6:20, we read that Herod feared John the Baptist, “knowing that he was a righteous and holy man.” And in Luke one, after the birth of John the Baptist, we read a prophecy by his father Zacharias concerning the Messiah that was soon to be born. He says in verses 74-75, “that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in *holiness* and *righteousness* before Him all our days.” The words Zacharias uses there are the noun forms of the two qualities we’ve been studying: *dikaios* and *hosios*. Brother Smith Bibens wrote an article in the **Christian’s Expositor Journal** concerning these qualifications of an elder, and I love what he said here about this prophecy from Zacharias. He said:

Zacharias is thanking God for the redemption to be brought by the Messiah, of whom his son, John, would be the fore-runner. This deliverance results in a holy and righteous life, or it should. Jesus didn’t come to this world and die so we could go on wallowing in our sin; to give us a license to sin—no! He did not pour out His blood at Calvary so we could please ourselves! He gave His life so we could be reconciled to the Father and please Him! He came to rescue us from sin, and His under-shepherds must live in that light before the world, modeling the reality of the redeemed life in Christ.

That “redeemed life” that brother Smith pointed out is emphasized in one final passage that we will notice. In Ephesians four, Paul is describing this new life we must have once we learn of and become followers of Christ. He says in verses 22-24,

To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true *righteousness* and *holiness*.”

New life in Christ is a life of righteousness and holiness. And those who lead Christ’s church must be men who lead the church in these qualities.

Closing

In closing, let me stress again that the qualities we’ve noticed in our study today are ones that are expected of *all* Christians—not just elders. We all have the responsibility to be lovers of good, and to live upright and holy lives. But as we’ve already stated, elders are to *model* what is expected of all Christians. They are to live an exemplary life that illustrates the mature, full-grown character of Christ. And I hope we can see and agree that the characteristics we’ve studied today are crucial to being the kind of leader that the Lord’s church needs and deserves.

Sermon by: James Smith

Sources

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