

THOSE WHO LABOR AMONG YOU

It is my privilege to come before you this morning to speak with you again in support of the effort underway at this time to find and appoint additional men into the eldership. I brought a lesson two weeks ago entitled "Aspiring to the Office of Bishop." Maybe I did not succeed in that, but my purpose with that lesson was twofold: Number one, to show that **1 Timothy 3:1** which says, "*If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task,*" is NOT one of the qualifications. The writer, Paul, was simply saying that if a person does have that aspiration, their desire is a good one. The second purpose for my lesson two weeks ago was to encourage some of you men to at least be open to taking on this work. I asked, "If not you, then who?" And, "Why not you?" Many men have the same thought that Moses had when God spoke to him out of a burning bush and told him that He want him to go down into Egypt and deliver the Israelites out of the captivity. Moses said, "Who me?" "Not me!" "I'm not qualified," and "I'm not capable."

For those of you who may feel like that, let me try to encourage you with these two thoughts: First of all, Let others help see if you are qualified. I am sure the elders we have already are aware of what the Bible says about that. It is always possible that a person can set the standard for himself too high; higher than God Himself intended. If people are approaching you, it is because they have some confidence that you are qualified. The second thought I would pass on to you is this; I know you do not want to be guilty of telling God, "no." Just as Mordecai said to his niece Esther, in **Esther 4:14**, "*Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*" Who know but that God's hand has been at work in putting you here at this place and at this time? I know that many times we are happy to have someone else do the job, but sometimes, if we don't do it, it might not get done. Think about that and if God needs you to do a job, be careful about telling Him no.

This morning, I want to spend some time thinking about what that job is.

What is it that an elder is supposed to do? What is it that the Lord is expecting of a man who takes on this responsibility? Let's think about that this morning, and let's allow the scriptures to be our guide in thinking about these things.

In **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13**, Paul wrote: "*We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13) and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.*" I want to draw your attention to two words in this passage: First, in verse 12, Paul uses the word "labor." In verse 13, he uses the word work. The word in verse 12 is *labor* in the KJV, the ESV and the NKJV. The NASB gives it as *diligently labor*, and the NIV has *work hard*. Thayer's Greek Lexicon tells us the word means to "*grow tired, weary and exhausted, to labor with wearisome effect.*" You get a feel for this word, for example, in **John 4:6**, where we read that Jesus had grown weary from his journey. The second word, *work*, is from the Greek word *ergon* which means, "an act, deed or thing done, that which one undertakes to do, enterprise, undertaking."

Let no one be confused, what an elder does, is work. It is not just a title, it is not something one does for fun, it is work. Now, I realize that in talking to older men, most of the time, they are not looking for more work to do. They are looking at doing less work; of having less responsibility, fewer demands on their time and energy. I also realize that most men by this point in life have worked. They may have devoted much of their adult life to a particular profession or job. They may be in, or at least looking forward to, retirement. So why in the world would any sane man want to take on more work, or at least be willing to do so?

The answer is, because it is they are faithful, committed servants of God. They realize this is not about them. They have died to self. They know they are not their own, that they have been bought with a price. They know they cannot do enough to repay everything God has done for them. They also know that Christianity does not offer a retirement plan, at least not in this world. Brother Carl Maples use to say, “There is no retirement for a Christian.” Is that true, beloved? I think it is!

Being an elder requires work but it is a good work and faithful, devoted Christians understand that they are to be zealous for good works—Titus 2:14.

Secondly, an elder’s work involves providing leadership to the flock. That’s what Paul emphasized to the Ephesian elders he met with at Miletus. In **Acts 20:28-32**, we read what Paul said to them.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 29) I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30) and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31) Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. 32) And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

I call your attention in this passage to the word “overseers.” That word, from the Greek *episkopos* means “one who looks over, or watches out for.” Thayer tells us that the word is used for *a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly; a superintendent*. Probably a good word synonym for our purpose would be manager. And elder’s work involves management; making sure that congregationally, things are getting done that are necessary and good. A really good example of this kind of work is evident there in Acts 6 where we read about the appointment of the seven men to serve over the daily distribution of food to the widows and other saints in need. I’m not thinking about the seven men as managers, but the apostles, to whom this problem had been made known. What did they do? They didn’t take that task on themselves. They said to the church, find seven men and we will appoint them to this task. That’s a good illustration of management, or being an overseer. Incidentally, why seven? Well, what was this for? It was for the daily distribution of

food. How many days are there in a week? Seven! Do you think maybe they asked for seven men so they could appoint one to take care of it on Monday, another one on Tuesday, etc.

In the ongoing work of any congregation, there are a number of things that need to be done. I can think for example, of making sure that things are ready for the weekly assemblies.

- Since we make use of somewhat permanent facilities today, there are concerns about the building.
- Since we want to make sure that everything is done decently and in order, there are concerns about who is going to do what and when; do we have teachers, material, etc.
- Since we want to strengthen the fellowship of the church, there are concerns with how we are going to make that happen.
- Since we want young and old coming to Bible study and worship, there are concerns with specific issues related to that.
- Since we want to get the gospel to as many other people in many other places as possible, there are concerns regarding the missions we are involved in.
- Since there are people who are sick, sometimes dying, there are concerns about ministering to those people.
- Since we have a number of young people, there are concerns about working with them through a particularly difficult time in life
- Since we under Christ's charge to take the gospel to everyone we possibly can, there are concerns about how to do that right here in our own community.
- Since there are Christians who fall away from the faith, who depart from the faith, who get caught in a trespass, who get cross-wise with some of the other members, there are concerns about how to work those things out.

You see, these are all things that need to be take care of. Somebody has to pay attention to these things and make sure that they are done, and done correctly. Part of the work of an elder is to keep an eye on all those things and make the right people are in the right place and that things are getting done in the best way possible.

Part of the work of elders is in providing leadership for the congregation in all of its aspects.

Third, an elder's work involves providing spiritual guidance and help. You know, something is said in **1 Timothy 3:2** that has scared a number of men away from serving the church as an elder. Among the other things that Paul mentions, he says that an elder must be "apt" or "able to teach." So, that is usually taken to mean, that an elder must be someone who can stand up before the congregation or before a group of people and present a good lesson. And I have known a number of good men who have looked at that and thought to themselves, they could never do that. They would rather come down with measles! And yet, some of those have taught me some things; not in a formal classroom setting, but often times, one-on-one, sharing their wisdom and knowledge of the scriptures.

Have you thought about the words of **1 Timothy 5:17**? In that passage, Paul is talking about elders, and he says, *“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”* Well, Paul, are you saying there are some elders who do not labor in preaching and teaching? Probably that is what Paul was saying. Some men serving as elders would have been gifted and trained in that way, but probably many were not. Do you have to be a certified instructor to be a father or mother? Some of you have been teaching for thirty or forty or fifty years. Do you have to be a certified instructor to answer someone’s question, give them counsel, and show someone what the Bible says about some particular issue? Some of you teach almost every time you go to class, not from up front, but from where you sit. How many teachers do we have on Friday nights, John? It is not just one, is it?

You know, there in **1 Timothy 3**, Paul also likens the work of an elder to that of a parent. In **verse 5**, he says, *“For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?”* You see, that’s what an elder does. He is doing what he does as a father, as the head of the house. He talks to ones who call that home; he helps them with their questions and their problems. He gets on them when they need it, he encourages them when they need it, he resolves their disputes, helps them to keep them on track and to do what is right. In all of that, he might never stand up in front of them as a teacher, but most of us will admit, we learned an awful lot from our fathers.

Now it is true that in Paul’s words to Titus, Paul did say that one to be appointed as an elder, *“...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.”* And so, yes, an elder must be someone who is knowledgeable of the Word, and who is strong in his convictions, but even in this, it is not said that he must be someone who can stand up in front of a class or congregation and teach. His work is to provide spiritual guidance and help to the flock.

In the fourth place, an elder’s work is like that of shepherds. They are watching out for the sheep entrusted to them. In that **Acts 20** passage we looked at a few minutes ago, Paul told those elders, *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock.”* He told them to feed, or shepherd the church of God. The apostle Peter said almost the same thing, when he wrote in **1 Peter 5**, *“shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you.”* **Hebrews 13:17** tells us Christians to

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

This is not rocket science brethren! What do you think a shepherd does? Of course he has to be on the alert so the flock is not attacked by predators. Of course he has to make sure they have plenty of food and water. But in addition to those things, the shepherd’s job is to keep an eye on the sheep. Thankfully an elder is not out in a field somewhere all by himself with a

bunch of helpless, defenseless sheep. That is why the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that there is always a plurality of men, never just one. It takes many eyes to keep watch of many sheep, and that is why the elders have asked us to assist them in finding and appointing some additional men. The three of them—John, Art and Ed—need help.

Elders keep their eye on the membership, and they have different ways of doing this, but you see their job, if at all possible, is to keep the sheep from becoming lost again. They were once lost, as the Bible says, “Without God and without hope in this world,” but they were found, and rescued, and washed and made a part of the family. The elder’s work, to the best of their ability, is to keep those sheep secure and safe and alive and well. Admittedly that is not always easy. Sometimes it requires them to go in search of them to see if possibly they might be able to lead them back to the fold once more. Sometimes they have to lovingly discipline some erring sheep to keep them from hurting themselves or having a harmful influence on the rest of the flock.

That’s hard work, brethren. It is painful work. I know, I’ve done a lot of it in my lifetime, even though I’ve never been an elder. But do you know what else? It is a good work! Do you remember what James said in **James 5:19 and 20**? He said:

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20) let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

An elder’s work is like that of shepherds, and finally,

An elder’s work involves his being an example, a role-model if you will to other Christians. An elder is a living example of what a Christian looks like, sounds like, and acts like. **Hebrews 13:7** tells us, *“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”* The apostle Peter put this same point this way, he said (**1 Peter 5:2,3**):

“shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3) not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

We are not expecting anyone to be perfect. Elders are mortals just like the rest of us, and they are going to make mistakes. They are going to have bad days. We are not asking you to become a superman! We are just asking you to be who you are, and to be all that you can be as a Christian. Show the rest of us what loving the Lord God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength looks like. Show us what humbling ourselves when we mess up looks like. Show us how what patience and love, and faithfulness looks like. Show us what it is like to grow old with God!

Conclusion

There is a great work building here brethren, and we need to build up and strengthen our eldership. There are some of you who can help do that, and I'm hoping and praying that you will.

- I am hoping and praying that you will not tell the Lord, "No;" that you are ready unto every good work.
- I am hoping and praying that you help take on the important work of managing the many needs and aspects of the work here; that you will become one of our leaders.
- I am hoping and praying that you will do what you can to provide spiritual guidance and help to those you can.
- I am hoping and praying that you will add your eyes to the eyes of the men we already have watching out for the sheep.
- And I am hoping and praying that you will put your example out there for the rest of us to see and learn by.
- I am hoping and praying that some of you will know the privilege and honor of serving the Lord as an elder in this congregation.