

How are we? If you have your Bibles, go to 1 Timothy 3. For the last few weeks, we've been talking about what the church is, what it isn't, how it functions, how it works. We kind of tracked history the first week, and then the second week we talked about the church at a macro level. Like the church is all believers everywhere over all time. So we kind of walked through the text and showed, "Okay, here's believers in a house that are called a church, here are believers in a city that are called a church, all the believers in a region are called a church and all believers everywhere are called the church." And we said what marked us as believers in Christ as a church is the right teaching of the Word, the unpacking of the gospel consistently, and then the sacraments of baptism and communion. And then last week, we got into church at the micro level. Like what does it look like locally? And I pushed pretty hard last week on what it means to be a local member of a congregation. And I believe and I believe it's in the text that it's God's expectation that you're part of a local church and that to not be apart, to not belong to a local church is an act of disobedience. Now, that takes us to the next two weeks. This week we'll talk about elders, what they are, who they are, what they do. And next week we'll talk about members and how members function and what they do and who they are. And so today, we're going to talk about elders.

Now if you don't have a lot of church background, I'm guessing that the idea of elder and some sort of elder counsel probably stirs up some sort of thought in your mind like a Jedi counsel or maybe the Mormon kid that comes to your door on Saturday. And you really don't have some sort of framework to understand what it really is. Or maybe you do have a background in church and you have been in church for extended periods of time and your understanding of eldership has been bent negatively by what you've experienced in those settings. Maybe there were men who were domineering and there were men who were power hungry and there were those who demanded and didn't do what I'm going to show you God has asked them to do well. Maybe you've been a part of church splits or you've seen that type of thing happen. It happens all the time. And so maybe it's not that you're coming in here and you don't understand it but that you've seen it and don't want any part of it. Well, the Village Church for several years now has been elder led. A group of men leads us, governs us and walks with us. So I'm not trying to roll out a new here this weekend; I'm just trying to explain how we function and how the role of elder biblically works. And so I want to come out of three texts, and in that I want to answer three questions.

The first question that I want to answer is: Who are the elders? To do that, we're going to be in 1 Timothy 3. Starting in verse 1, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." So right out of the gate, you've got your first qualification. They're men who aspire the office. There is something in them that says, "I love this place. I love these people. I have been called by God in the deepest parts of my being to lead, serve and work with this local context." So they aspire the office. It's going to keep going here. "Therefore an overseer must be above reproach,..." It can't be a guy who you put up on stage or who men see out in the community who, by his life, shames the gospel and shames the local community. He is "the husband of one wife,..." There's a lot of debate about what's going on in this text. Some people say, "Okay, if he has to be the husband of one wife, then he has to be married to be an elder." Okay, but we know that's not true because Paul is not married. In fact, he's not married and says, "It's a good thing that I'm not married. I can do more for the kingdom." And then there are others who say, "Okay, this is a man who can never be divorced. If he's ever been divorced at any point in his life, then he can't be an elder." But there's not a lot of support for that either. So this text is saying that he has only eyes for the woman he is with. He is a one woman type of man. Let's keep going. He is "sober-minded." So he's not prone to be carried away by his passions. He's able to think, he's able to react well. He has "self-control." So he's not a hot head. He's not a guy that blows up very easily. He's

“respectable.” A lot of these words are going to start sound synonymous when you define them, but respectable is just this continued idea that as men and women see his life, see the way he has chosen to live, watches him interact with God and others, there’s a respect there. He is “hospitable.” This means that he engages the lost world around him. This is not that he makes a good salad or he can put together a good dinner deal. That’s not what’s happening here. This idea of being hospitable is that he understands that all he has and all has been given has been given to him by God in order that he might engage, in order that he might serve. So the gift of hospitality, inviting the lost into His world is a part of the makeup of an elder. An elder is “able to teach.” This doesn’t necessarily mean that they do what you see me doing. I think some of them will, but not all of them will be stage type teachers. But they have to be able to teach. Which means, at any given point, if you sat down with an elder and needed them to explain the gospel, need them to explain how our faith works, they need to be able to teach if they can. If they can’t, I think they’re disqualified from the office. An elder should be “not a drunkard.” So just a general rule – drunks don’t make good elders. That’s just usually how it works. They should be “not violent but gentle.” And we’ll talk at length here in a little bit why that’s true, why that needs to be who he is. They are “not quarrelsome.” It’s not a guy whose pride exists in him in such a way that he’s constantly the contrarian, which means he might not even believe what he’s arguing about, but he wants to argue. There’s no place for that in an elder. The elder is “not a lover of money.” So they cannot be men whose primary pursuit in life is their own personal wealth. “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” So once again Paul is saying if he cannot serve his wife, serve his children, lead at home, love at home, then how can he do that with the bigger family, the family of God? “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.” So it’s not a man who, when people find out he’s an elder, people go, “Really? Him?.” Most of us, if we were honest, have a bit of compartmentalization in our lives. Which means at church and around Christians, we tend to talk this way, walk this way and see this way, but as we get into business, as we get into other things, there are times where we’ll sell out that faith or we’ll walk this way. Elders can’t be that guy. They have to be a man in their sanctification, in their growth into Christ, who has come to the place where anybody who has done business with them, anyone who has the same hobby as them, they would say, “Yeah, that makes sense.” when they found out he was the elder of a church. The reaction shouldn’t be, “Really? Because I thought elders were supposed to be something different than him.” So if somebody outside the community of faith found out that this man was an elder, they would go, “Okay, sure. That makes sense.” So this is who they are. The Scriptures clearly say men have to be here. Now all I think he’s done here in this text is just put what progressive sanctification leads us all to. Like I don’t think when all is said and done there’s this elite special forces, hybrid, technical, brilliant group of men that is so far beyond what anybody else will ever be, that they’re just beyond us. That’s not what’s happening here. He’s setting up, “Hey, this is what mature faith looks like.” And so if a man is not mature in his faith, then he doesn’t belong in the office of elder. If he’s still immature in parts of his faith, he doesn’t belong in the office. The office of elder is not a training ground for men with potential.

So that’s who they are. Now I want to try to answer what they do. So go over to 1 Peter 5. In the book of Titus 1, there’s also a list of requirements. They almost mirror the Timothy requirements exactly. The only one that’s in the Titus text that’s not in 1 Timothy 3 is just a call for sexual purity or selfcontrol in regards for sex and the lusts of the flesh. So you’ve got the list in 1 Timothy of who they are, and now I want to show you what they do. And we’ll need to talk through some of this because it’s not as detailed as I think we want it to be. 1 Peter 5:1, “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you...” So that’s who they are; this is what they do. They shepherd the flock, that’s the first thing. There’s going to be three here. The first thing is they shepherd the flock. I don’t think this is complex if you think about what a shepherd does. There’s two ways to do this. We could go and study exactly what a shepherd did in the 1st century and go, “Okay, that means we do this, we do this, we do this...” But it’s more a general principle than it is trying to be technical about what a shepherd does. It’s simply saying it guards, leads and directs a

flock of men and women all the while caring for them individually. And we know that because you can go back to Jesus' parable where He says, "Which one of you, if you had 100 sheep and lost one, wouldn't go after the one?" You see in that verse an understanding on Jesus' part talking to men in agriculture that everybody knows that if you lose one sheep, you go after it. And so they are called to shepherd the flock well by shepherding individuals well. We are to point in a direction, we are to lead the flock that God's given us to places that are safe, where we can grow. This is the job of the elder, to shepherd the flock.

Look at the next sentence. "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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock" So you have shepherding and then oversight. In my experience with elder boards before I got here there seemed to be a lot of governance going on and not a lot of shepherding. Although the elders are given oversight of the church, which means they want to see the church as a whole and go "Is this working? Is this working? Is this working? Is this working all in the same direction?" They want to govern well. But then if all they are is a governing board and not a shepherding board, they've left what their biblical call is. It's not just a group of men who get together on Wednesday night and vote over operational issues. That's not an elder board, not according to the Scriptures. Yes oversight, yes governance, but at the end of the day shepherding. We've got ten guys that have been in elder training for a year now. We're going to roll them out to you in the next couple of months. One of the things we've continually said is eldering isn't just what we do in this room. Eldering has to be what we do outside of this room and what you do as an individual in regards to the men and women who belong to this community of faith. Now on this oversight issue, when we started rolling out elders here the first time, I think I found ten different models of how people had set up their elder board to work. Some of them were all staff elder boards. Some of them were hybrids where there were a couple of people who weren't paid staff and a couple of people who were. And then there were some that were all non-paid men and women; they weren't staff at all. So you've got tons of different models, and the Scriptures don't really say "This is the exact one to have." And so sometimes it's the context that you're in that it rolls out of. Here at the Village, there are a few paid staff and there are a few members that are elders. So we're kind of a hybrid animal. And we're not a church that votes on issues in the elder room. There has to be consensus, which means if we can't all say, "This is what we feel God's led us to do," then it doesn't roll out of the room. We press pause, we go back and pray, we come back and have more robust dialogue and then we go back and pray. And this definitely slows things down at times, but we're not voting, we're coming to a consensus. We want to hear from the Lord and respond.

Now, I want to say just a quick word here because I know we have tons and tons of people who podcast. Can I just make an appeal here that if you're a youth minister in some small baptist church that has deacons and has the senior pastor and the executive pastor making most decisions, will you not make war over this issue with your pastor? And if you're a college student hearing this and you're in a church that doesn't have an elder government but has some other form, I don't think this is something for you to make war over. Now I think any pastor should welcome a member of his congregation coming in and asking, "Hey, what do you do with this biblically?" But please don't go on a tirade of eldership here where you who have been asked to come in and lead the youth group or college group or singles group in a church that was deacons when you got there. I guess in a real nice way I'm trying to tell you that you weren't hired to set policy. If you would be a blessing to the leadership God's put in place at your local church, I think you'll find them much more receptive to listen to any concerns that you might have. So I don't think there's anything wrong with coming in and setting up something with your pastor and getting in the Bible and going, "Okay, what do we do with this? Why do we wire it this way? I'm just trying to understand." But at the end of the day, please don't make war over this.

So the third thing that an elder does is teaching. They are setting the theological, doctrinal boundaries of a church. So here at the Village we're reformed, we believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we're what we call "Christian hedonists."

I could go on. This is us saying what we believe as a church, what we're going to teach from the stage, here's how that works itself out. And so we're teachers. We teach doctrine, we teach theology, we teach the gospel.

And so who they are is found in 1 Timothy 3, what they do is found in 1 Peter 5 and found in both of those texts is how they go about shepherding, governing and teaching. And this is where I think the thing breaks down. This is where I think churches get in trouble, and this is where I think elders can go rogue and a church will start to split. It's not just "This is who they are and this is what they've been called to do," but they've been called to do the shepherding, governing and teaching in a specific way. So go back to 1 Peter 5. "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." So an elder goes about his shepherding, his governing and his teaching not by being domineering but by being an example. Not by trying to gain power, trying to gain wealth, exalting himself, but rather serving, not as one who is under compulsion but eagerly. Like we discussed last week, that they would see you as better than them and see that there needs to be sacrifice on their part so that you might be all that God wants you to be. They're never to be domineering, but gentle, patient. And we are to do all that we've been asked with the characteristics that are there in 1 Timothy 3.

We're rolling out a covenant. How we rolled that thing out was not, "Here's what we're doing. Deal with it." That's not how we did it. We did a lot of studying, we wrote the covenant based on what we saw in the Bible and then we rolled it out to our staff and the staff kicked back on it. They were like, "Oh, I don't like that...I don't like that language..." So we went back and we rewrote and rolled it out to the staff again. And then they kicked on it and kicked on it and we rolled it back and took it and made some edits. And then we had five separate meetings with the leaders of this church. Home group leaders, ministry leaders, anyone who is in leadership, we gave it to them and said, "What do you think of this? Give us feedback. Talk to us. What are your concerns?" And in each meeting, they gave feedback and concerns. And we went back and rewrote it and rolled it out to the staff a third time after the five meetings with our leaders and the two meetings with the staff previously and they got to read it again and push on it again. And then we came up with our final document. This is an initiative that I think we as elders handled in a way that's respectable, gentle. We're not called by God to be men that say, "You'll do what we say and like it, or you'll get out of here." That's not eldering. It's definitely not shepherding, is it? So even in this covenant roll out, we're trying to be this for the body.

The other thing I think goes wrong when it comes to elders and why I think a lot of us are banged up is somehow the elders become kind of untouchable. Like they can't be questioned, there's really no way to hold them accountable, they're like otherly. They're just like up in the high heavens and who are we to question them? The problem with that is it's not true. The elders do need to be held accountable. They need to be held accountable by the membership on whether or not they're fulfilling the commands of God in regards to them being elders. In fact, the Scriptures are going to tell us in Matthew 18 that if a brother sins against you, if you see a brother stumbling in sin, then you need to engage him, you need to go to him and go, "Hey, I have some concerns about this." And if he doesn't listen, you go with two and go, "Hey, we both are seeing this. This isn't right. You need to repent of this area." And if they don't listen, if you look at the text, it actually rolls up to the elders. And if you think that an elder's sin being brought to the elders is just the good ol' boy system going to protect him, 1 Timothy says that if you want to bring a charge against an elder, come with two or three people. Come up to two or three people and go, "Hey man, I talked to him about this. I've engaged him about this. Here are the facts, there are witnesses." And then in that moment, the elders handle the situation. So the elders at the Village Church and really elders everywhere are not men who are above being held accountable for how they're leading. The Scriptures have given a clear process on how you actually engage, not just an elder but anyone who is a brother or sister in Christ.

One of the things we want to do with the covenant is every year we want to come back and look at it again, and we want to look at our elders and go, "Are they doing what God has asked them do do? Do we need to repent because we've failed you?" And one of the things we want you to do is look at your life and go, "Man, am I in this thing? Am I doing what God's called me to?" And we wanted to have this yearly process where we could look at ourselves as elders and go, "Biblically, are we living up to what God's asked of us?" And you could go, "Biblically, are our elders leading us well? Loving us well? Shepherding us well? Providing oversight to this place? Are they teaching us well?" And you looking into your life, us looking into ours, us looking into life together here at the Village might produce over the years deeper and deeper and deeper community, faith and sanctification. And that's our hope.

Let me pray for us and then really pray for our elder candidates. Right now, we're a church of close to 6,000 and there are three active elders. So in just a few weeks we're going to start rolling out these men who have been walking with us for the past year. For over a year, every Wednesday night, for three hours, we've gotten together and we've worked through issues in the church, we've worked through certain theological convictions that we have, we've had robust dialogue over certain aspects of theology that we have not defined here in regards to what we believe about specific topics. So they were part of those conversations. They have actively been doing things as elder candidates, and in just a few weeks we're going to start rolling them out to you. And we're going to roll it out slowly and publicly and give you an opportunity to to dialogue and talk with them. And we're going to throw up their pictures and videos of them and we're going to let you meet them. Because if hey're not viewed well by outsiders, if they're not respectable, if they can't explain the gospel, if they don't meet the qualifications that 1 Timothy lays out and we've missed it, then you get your chance to go, "Wait a minute, I know him. That dude owes me money." You can then go to him and say, "Give my twenty dollars or I'll write a little e-mail." Or maybe you know a guy out in the business world and can go, "This guy is known as a shark in business, man. He'll just devour anything he sees to make a buck."

Then you can come in and engage that one and say, "Listen, this is how you're known out there, this is how you're seen out there," and you can start the process of Matthew 18. So I want to pray for those candidates and I want to pray for the church. I was told by a professor in college, and I really think this has held true. He said what you don't like about your church five years after you go there is what you don't like about you and your leadership team. People are going to take on the characteristics of the leaders of the place. So it's just imperative that we have strong, spiritual, transformed, godly men that sit on top of this place and set direction. It's just imperative.

And so let me pray for us and pray for them. "Father, I thank You for mature, godly men. I thank You that You in Your mercy stir up their hearts towards You, towards Your bride, towards the local context of Your bride. And so I thank You for the men who have faithfully served here as elders for years. I thank You for the new ones that are coming in. I just pray a blessing over them. I pray protection over them. And if there's secret sin of if there's darkness in their hearts that we haven't seen, God, I pray that in the roll out process it would become obvious. I pray that when all is said and done, we might have the strongest body of leaders that we can assemble out of this place to lead us well. We love You. We want to love You more. Help us. It's for Your beautiful name. Amen."