

A One-Woman Man The Character of a Christian Tim Challies

Today we continue this series on the character of the Christian. We are exploring how the various character qualifications of elders are actually God's calling on all Christians. While elders are meant to *exemplify* these traits, all Christians are to *display* them. I want us to consider whether we are displaying these traits and to learn together how we can pray to have them in greater measure.

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Our topic today is a qualification Paul repeats in both 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6. The ESV translates it as “the husband of one wife,” a common rendering of the Greek which says, literally, “a one-woman man.” There are several ways we could interpret this qualification. Does Paul mean to say that a pastor cannot be a polygamist? Does it mean that an elder must be married? Does it mean that the pastor cannot have been previously divorced and remarried? None of these quite get to the heart of the matter. John MacArthur says, “It’s not concerning status, it is concerning character. It is not a matter of circumstance, it is a matter of his virtue. And the issue here is a man who is solely and only and totally devoted to the woman who is his wife. It is a question of his character. He is a one-woman man. Anything less is a disqualification.”

Similarly, in his book *Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch reminds us that the first qualification, above reproach, is a summary that is defined by the virtues that follow. He writes, “In both of Paul’s qualification lists, he places the qualification ‘the husband of one wife’ immediately after ‘above reproach.’ So the first and foremost area in which an elder must be above reproach is in his marital and sexual life. ... The phrase ‘the husband of one wife’ is meant to be a positive statement that expresses faithful, monogamous marriage. In English we would say, ‘faithful and true to one woman’ or ‘a one-woman man.’” Philip Ryken says Paul “wants the leaders of the church to be living examples of biblical marriage: one man and one woman in a love covenant for life.”

Just as an elder is to be an example of sexual integrity, so the call goes out to all Christians to “abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). This is true whether the Christian is married or single, male or female. Paul commands the whole congregation in Corinth to “flee from sexual immorality” and warns “every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18). Writing to the gathered church in Ephesus, Paul sets the standard so high as to demand, “Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints” (Ephesians 5:3). If you are “sexually immoral or impure,” he says, you have “no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Ephesians 5:5). Writing again to an entire congregation, Paul calls such sexual immorality one of “the works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19).

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Of course, as with all of these qualifications, we will not exemplify them perfectly so must always return to the good news of salvation and sanctification through Jesus Christ. Paul also says that even though some in the congregation had been “sexually immoral” and therefore had no inheritance in the kingdom of God, he goes on to rejoice, “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). He reminds them that their sexual sin is related to the old man and its evil ways, not the new man and its righteous ways. Still, the call to sexual purity is among the most prominent and repeated commands in the New Testament.

Thus this qualification is a call to devotion—devotion first to God and then to a God-given spouse. It is a call away from adultery to be sure, but also from a wandering heart, wandering eyes, or wandering hands. It is a call on each one of us to be pure and chaste, to be exemplary in character and conduct whether in marriage or singleness. It is a call for the married to pursue and enjoy the sexual relationship with their spouse and a call for the unmarried to willingly submit their sexuality to the will and the care of their loving God.

Self-Evaluation

To strengthen your fight against sexual immorality and your striving toward sexual purity, I encourage you to evaluate yourself in light of questions like these:

- Even though you are imperfect, can you stand before the Lord and honestly say, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24)?
- Are there any sexual sins you have committed that you need to confess and repent of? Are there any sins you have been hiding that you need to expose? (Psalm 32:3-7)
- Are there certain settings or contexts where you are especially prone to sexual failure? What precautions have you taken to avoid these settings? Are there radical actions that you still need to take? (Matthew 5:27-30)
- Does your marriage serve as an example of God’s design and ideal for marriage? Are you in love with your spouse? Do you regularly pursue sexual union with your spouse? (1 Corinthians 7:3-5)
- Do you regularly indulge in entertainment that displays explicit nudity or sexuality or that debases God’s design and purpose for sexuality? Or do you willingly abstain from every form of evil and refuse to make light of it? (1 Thessalonians 5:22; Ephesians 5:3)

Prayer Points

If we are to gain sexual purity, to maintain it, and to increase in it we must pray. Let me encourage you to pray in these ways:

- I pray that you would give me the desire and the wisdom to guard my heart from all forms of sexual immorality. I pray that I would be quick to confess and turn from all known sexual sin. [Consider praying through Proverbs 6:23-35.]
- Men: I pray that I would regard older women as mothers and younger women as sisters, in all purity. (1 Timothy 5:1-2)

- Women: I pray that I would regard older men as fathers and younger men as brothers, in all purity. (1 Timothy 5:1-2)
- I pray that you would purify my heart so that the sin of adultery—expressed even in lustful thoughts and glances—would lose all of its power over me. (Matthew 5:27-30) Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)
- I pray that I would not become despondent when I sin. Please let me take comfort in the knowledge that when I confess my sins, you are faithful and just to forgive me my sins and to cleanse me from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

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