

The Character of the Christian

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

As Christians, we all want to grow in spiritual maturity and Christlikeness. At least, I hope we do. We all want to become what we are in Christ, to put aside patterns of sin and unrighteousness and to replace them with patterns of holiness. Ultimately, we want to become like Christ, to think how he thought and to behave how he behaved. We do well to aspire to the highest standards of holiness and godliness.

The Bible holds out one group of people who are to serve as models of Christian maturity: Elders (referred to at times as elders, and at other times as pastors or overseers). Elders are qualified to the office primarily on the basis of their character. While the Bible provides one quality related to skill (the ability to teach) and one related to the amount of time a man has been a Christian (not a recent convert), all of the other qualifications are related to character. Yet while these traits are demanded of elders, they are not unique to elders.

Episcopos (overseer – oversight/responsibility); presbyteros (elder - personal maturity) = elder (see Acts 20:17,28). Those who taught, guided, led, etc. Synagogues had “elders” and the early church took some of its structure from the synagogue. Elsewhere these are referred to as undershepherds (poimein) referring to their responsibility.

Other similar lists of qualifications appear in extra-biblical literature for leaders in other fields (military, government, etc).

Why such standards as “not given to wine” or “not violent” or “not given to dishonest gain?” What class of men were elders being drawn from? Should there be a higher standard for leaders?

D.A. Carson [has said](#) that the list of qualifications for elders is “remarkable for being unremarkable.” Why is that? Because these traits are repeated elsewhere as qualities that ought to be present among *all* believers. Carson says, “The criteria mentioned are demanded of all Christians everywhere. Which is another way of saying, elders are first of all to be exemplars of the Christian graces that are presupposed as mandated on all Christians.” Every church is meant to be full of men and women who display these traits.

This means that if you want to grow in holiness, one great place to begin is by knowing and imitating the character qualifications of elders. Today I am beginning a new series on the character of a Christian, and I will structure the series around these character qualifications. I want to answer questions like these: In what ways do the qualifications of an elder and the calling of all Christians overlap? Very practically, what do those qualities look like in the life of the believer? How can I know if I am displaying these graces? And how can I best pray for them in my own life?

I hope you will join me as we consider how to spur one another on to love, good works, and great Christlikeness! I hope you will join me as we learn together how we can exemplify the highest Christian virtues. Here is how I anticipate progressing through the series:

1. Introduction
2. Above Reproach
3. A One-Woman Man (and One-Man Woman)
4. Sober-Minded, Self-Controlled, Respectable
5. Hospitable
6. Sober, Gentle, Peacemaking
7. Not a Lover of Money
8. A Leader at Home
9. Mature and Humble
10. Respected by Outsiders

This series will kick off next week with the qualification that serves as a summary or an umbrella for the rest of them—the quality of being above reproach, of being blameless and free of any great defects in character and behavior.

The Character of the Christian: Above Reproach

“A small item I read in the news twenty years ago has stuck in my mind ever since. The Rockdale County High School Bulldogs basketball team of Conyers, Georgia, won their first-ever state championship in March of 1987, rolling over all their opponents. After eighteen years of coaching the team without a championship, coach Cleveland Stroud was ecstatic.

But a few weeks after the championship game, Coach Stroud was doing a routine review of his players’ grades when he discovered that one of his third-string players had failed some courses, rendering the player academically ineligible for the basketball team.

The struggling student was by no means a factor in the team’s victory. He was an underclassman who suited up for games but hadn’t actually seen

any playing time all season. During one of the semifinal matches, however, with the team leading by more than 20 points, Coach Stroud wanted to give every player an opportunity to participate. He had put that player in the game for less than 45 seconds. The ineligible man had scored no points. His participation had in no way affected the outcome of the game. But it was, technically, a violation of state eligibility standards.

Coach Stroud was in a distressing predicament. If he revealed the infraction, his team would be disqualified and stripped of their championship. If he kept quiet, it was highly unlikely anyone outside the school would ever discover the offense.

Yet the coach realized that at the very least, the player involved was aware of the breach of rules. It was also possible that other students on the team knew and thought their coach had purposely ignored the eligibility guidelines. But more important still, Coach Stroud himself knew, and if he deliberately tried to keep the facts from coming to light, his greatest coaching victory would be forever tainted with an ugly secret.

Coach Stroud said from the moment he discovered the violation, he knew what he had to do. He never even pondered any alternatives. His priorities had been set long before this. He realized that his team's *championship* was not as important as their *character*. "People forget the scores of basketball games," he said. "They don't ever forget what you're made of."

He reported the infraction and forfeited the only state championship his team had ever won." (from Ligonier TABLE TALK)

I told you [last week](#) about a new series that looks at the character of the Christian. What I mean to do is explore how the 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 actually do display these traits and to learn together how we can pray to have them in greater measure.

We begin today with the qualification of "above reproach." This is given in 1 Timothy 3:2 ("Therefore an overseer must be above reproach") and repeated twice in Titus 1 ("If anyone is above reproach ... For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach"—verses 6 and 7). Whatever it means to be above reproach, it is not only for elders or church leaders. Colossians 3 teaches that the great hope and comfort of every Christian is that God himself will one day "present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him" (Colossians 1:22). Every Christian is to be and to live above reproach. As John MacArthur says, "The reason [this

qualification] is called for at the pastoral level is because we are the example which you are all to follow. And if [being above reproach] is part of that example, then guess what is required of you? The same [trait].”

Above reproach – literally – “not to be laid hold of” – having given no just reason for censure or criticism (among the believers because his reputation among outsiders is considered later).

Above reproach means that the overseer’s life is free from sinful habits or behaviors that would impede his setting the highest Christian standard and model for the church to emulate ([Hebrews 13:7](#); [1 Peter 5:3](#)).

What does it mean to be above reproach? What the ESV translates as “above reproach” is first a legal word that indicates a kind of innocence in the eyes of the law. It means that no one can legitimately rebuke you or make any charges against you that will stick. They may accuse, but your conduct will eventually acquit you by proving you blameless (“blameless” being a far more common translation than “above reproach”). Your life is so consistent that your reputation is credible, you are an example worth following, and you do not make the gospel look fake by teaching one thing while doing another.

Naturally, we want to know the law before which we must be found blameless and the standard we must uphold. In his book *Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch explains that, “What is meant by ‘above reproach’ is defined by the character qualities that follow the term.” Thus, being “above reproach” is expressed through those other qualities in 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1, and, by extension, 1 Peter 5. Being above reproach in your marriage means you are “the husband of one wife.” Being above reproach in your thought life means you are “sober-minded.” Being above reproach in your actions means you are “self-controlled.” What we see is that this is a kind of summary attribute and that the blameless Christian is the one who upholds all of God’s revealed will. Of course, being above reproach does not mean being perfect. But it does mean that, when we sin, we confess it and turn from it because our standard is perfection (Matthew 5:48).

The primary means through which you gain this characteristic is taking advantage of God’s means of grace—reading the Bible and deliberately applying it, praying privately and with your family, faithfully attending your church’s worship services, participating in the sacraments, and so on. These are the very means through which God extends his sanctifying grace and you cannot expect to be or remain above reproach if you neglect them.

Self-Evaluation

The most thorough evaluation of your life will come in the weeks that follow as we examine the more precise character qualifications that are summarized by this one. But in the meantime, these questions may be worth thinking through as you consider whether or not you are above reproach.

- Are there any ongoing sins in your life that would bring shame to you, your family, and your local church if they were made public? Are there any parts of your life you deliberately hide from others?
- Do you know what sins you are particularly prone to and do you have measures in your life to guard against the temptation to these sins?
- Are you taking advantage of God's means of grace? Are you regularly attending church and participating in the life of the church? Do you have times of private and family worship?
- Do you think your life right now is pleasing to God? When it is not, are you quick to seek the forgiveness of both man and God and to display repentance by making significant changes?
- If your close friends or people in your church heard charges against you, would their reaction be, "That's not possible!" or "I knew it!"? What does this response say about you?

Prayer Points

As we begin to consider character qualifications, we need to acknowledge that they are gifts of God's grace that we receive and display in obedience to him. As God's children, he works in us what is pleasing in his sight (Hebrews 13:20-21). So as we aim to be above reproach, we acknowledge that we can be this and have this only through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit who works in us to do and even to have the will to do (Philippians 2:12-13). And this is why we must pray to gain these qualities, to maintain them, and to increase in them. To that end, here are some ways you may wish to pray:

- I pray that I would joyfully and obediently "do all things without grumbling or disputing, that I may be blameless and innocent, a child of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom I shine as a light in the world" (Philippians 2:14-15).
- I pray that your Holy Spirit would help me identify sin in my life wherever it exists and to quickly put that sin to death.
- I pray that I would diligently pursue personal holiness by and through the gospel.
- I pray that I would be and remain blameless in your eyes and in the eyes of man. Make my conduct match my profession so my life does not display even a trace of hypocrisy.
- I pray that when I sin I would be quick to seek the forgiveness of both man and God.
- I pray that if I am ever accused of sin or evil, I would be able to be found innocent, blameless in your eyes.