

Respected by Outsiders The Character of the Christian Tim Challies

Today we conclude our series on the character of the Christian. We have been 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 *exhibit* them. I have wanted us to consider whether we are displaying these traits and to learn together how we can pray to have them in greater measure. Today, as we wrap up, we will tackle what it means for elders—and all Christians—to be well thought of by outsiders. And, of course, we will ask why it matters.

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Paul instructs Timothy, "Moreover, [an elder] must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:7). Paul has already said that an elder "must be above reproach" (1 Timothy 3:2), so being respected by outsiders zeroes in on one specific group: those who are outside the church. Yes, even a man's standing before the world counts as we evaluate his suitability for leadership. John Piper writes, "What it seems to mean is that a Christian leader should at least meet the standards of the world for decency and respectability, for the standards of the church should be higher." This matters, for as Paul has written elsewhere, the glory of God is at stake: "You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'" (Romans 2:23–24).

So, why include a man's outside reputation as a requirement for eldership? Alexander Strauch addresses it practically: "NonChristians may know more about the character and conduct of the prospective elder than the church. Quite often the prospective elder's nonChristian fellow workers or relatives actually have more daily contact with the church leader than do the people in church." He also says, "If a pastor elder has a reputation among nonbelievers as a dishonest businessman, womanizer, or adulterer, the unbelieving community will take special note of his hypocrisy. NonChristians will say, 'He acts that way, and he's a church elder!' They will ridicule and mock him. They will scoff at the people of God. They will talk about him and will generate plenty of sinister gossip. They will raise tough, embarrassing questions. He will be discredited as a Christian leader and suffer disgrace and insults. His influence for good will be ruined and he will endanger the church's evangelistic mission. The elder will certainly become a liability to the church, not a spiritual asset." The gospel itself is at stake in the consistency or hypocrisy of its leaders.

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Now, what exactly is the "snare of the devil" that so concerns Paul? I think John Stott gets to the heart of it when he says, "In his malicious eagerness to discredit the gospel, the devil does his best to discredit the ministers of the gospel." If Satan can discredit the leaders before the watching world, he can discredit the church and its message. Strauch adds, "The devil is pictured as a cunning hunter (1 Peter 5:8). Using public criticism and the elder's own inconsistencies, the

devil will entrap the unwary Christian into more serious sin—uncontrolled bitterness, angry retaliation, lying, further hypocrisy, and stubbornness of heart. What may begin as a small offense can become something far more destructive and evil. Therefore, an elder must have a good reputation with those outside the Christian community.”

What about Christians who are not elders? They too are to pursue the respect of outsiders. For instance, Paul writes, “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:5–6). Again, he states, “We urge you, brothers . . . to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (1 Thessalonians 4:10–12). Christians will “shine as lights in the world” when they live “without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation” (Philippians 2:15). Similarly, Peter commands, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. . . . For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (1 Peter 2:12, 15; see also 1 Peter 3:13–17). What is to be modeled by the church’s leaders is to be obvious in every life. You, too, bear the responsibility to live an unblemished life before the world.

Self-Evaluation

So, how about you? Where do you see signs of encouragement, and where do you see areas that need growth? I encourage you to ask yourself questions such as these:

- Do you know your neighbors? Do they know you well enough to be able to speak to your character and reputation? How would your unbelieving neighbors describe you and your family?
- What kind of reputation do you have among the unbelievers you work with? Do you work hard and avoid meddling? (1 Thessalonians 4:10–12; Ephesians 4:28)
- What would your unbelieving family members say is most important to you? Would they say that your life matches your profession?

Prayer Points

God is able to make more grace abound in your life, so I encourage you to join me in praying these ways:

- I pray that you would make my life reflect the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) so that my life would glorify, not shame, your name.
- I pray that you would help me think about how my attitudes and actions affect others—especially unbelievers.
- I pray that I would model hard work and respect for authority, and that I would mind my own business in the workplace.
- I pray that I would be a model of good works at home, at work, and in my neighborhood so that by doing good to others you would be glorified.

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