

## Sound Judgment The Character of the Christian Tim Challies

Today we continue our 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 *exhibit* 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. Today we will look at a set of three traits that are closely related to one another.

First Timothy 3:2 (which is paralleled in Titus 1:8) says that elders must be “sober-minded, self-controlled, [and] respectable.” We can group these words together because of a shared emphasis on self-mastery that leads to sound judgment.

*Sober-minded* is a word that relates primarily to the mind. The sober-minded man is clear-headed and watchful, free from excesses and wild fluctuations in thinking and ideas. This trait allows him to keep alert so he can protect himself and others from any kind of spiritual danger. He is not rash, but thoughtful.

Where “sober-minded” relates to the mind, *self-controlled* relates to decisions that lead to action. The self-controlled elder is free from excesses and wild fluctuations in actions and behavior. He willingly submits his emotions and passions to the control of the Holy Spirit and, with his wisdom, makes wise, thoughtful judgments. He shows restraint and moderation in all areas of life. Thabiti Anyabwile says those who exhibit this trait are “sensible, discreet, and wise.” They do not live for the moment, but consider the future consequences of their actions.

Those who are sober-minded and self-controlled are also *respectable*. They live orderly lives and are wise and prudent in their dealings so that others have respect for them, both in their character and their behavior. They know how to make wise decisions and live out the kind of practical wisdom described in the book of Proverbs. They are people for whom others have high esteem.

When we put these traits together we see a person who has mastered his thinking and behavior so he is now capable of making wise judgments. His own life is a showcase of such wisdom. Anyabwile aptly summarizes the importance of this trait: “The ministry and the church are always being watched by people inside and outside, and the church's enemies continually look for opportunities to condemn it and slander it. Churches are greatly helped to withstand this onslaught when its leaders are respectable in their conduct and are men of sound judgment.”

Of course, God does not call only elders or prospective elders to be “sober-minded, self-controlled, and respectable”—He calls every Christian to pursue these traits. Let's start with sober-minded. In Romans 12:3, Paul writes, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” Later, in 1 Thessalonians 5:6, he says, “So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.”

When it comes to self-control, Solomon warns, “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls” (Proverbs 25:28). Paul lists self-control as part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23) and warns that those without self-control fall prey to Satan’s temptations (1 Corinthians 7:5). He explicitly commands it of all believers in Titus 2:2-6. What Alexander Strauch says of elders is true of every believer: He must be “characterized by self-control and self-discipline in every aspect of life, particularly in his physical desires (Acts 24:25; 1 Cor. 7:9; 9:25). An undisciplined man has little resistance to sexual lust, anger, slothfulness, a critical spirit, or other base desires. He is easy prey for the devil.”

As for respectability, Peter says, “in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:15–16). Paul writes, “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed” (Romans 13:7).

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The Bible is clear that while these traits must be exemplified in elders, they are to be present in all believers. The character of the elder describes the character we should all pursue and exhibit.

### **Self-Evaluation**

Would others say of you that you are “sober-minded, self-controlled, and respectable”? I encourage you to evaluate yourself in light of questions like these:

- When things do not go your way or when someone points out sin in your life, do you tend to respond with patient humility or with fits of anger? Would your spouse, children, or parents agree?
- Do you have any unrestrained or unhealthy habits in what you eat or drink or in your entertainment? Or in all of these things are you joyfully submitted to the Holy Spirit?
- Do you exhibit consistency and discipline in the spiritual, devotional, relational, and bodily aspects of your life?
- Do you maintain a schedule? Do you generally bring your tasks to completion and do so with excellence?
- Are you confident in what you believe, or are you easily swayed by new books, new teachers, or new ideas? Do people seek your counsel when they are uncertain or facing a difficult decision?

### **Prayer Points**

Apart from Christ, we can do nothing (John 15:5), so we need his strength if we are to grow in holiness. Let me encourage you to pray in these ways:

- I pray that you would fill me with your Spirit so that self-control reigns in my heart and life. (Galatians 5:23)
- I pray that you would help me to put others first so that I do not think of myself more highly than I ought to think. Help me to think with appropriately sober judgment. (Philippians 2:3; Romans 12:3)
- I pray that you would help me to be slow to anger so that I might have mastery over my temper. (Proverbs 16:32)
- I pray that others would ask me about the hope within me because of my joyful, respectful life. (1 Peter 3:14–17)

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