We Need Elders

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0:00] Please keep those verses open before you, and let us pray for God's help as we consider them.! Father, how we thank you again for Jesus Christ, the good shepherd of the sheep, how we thank you for his truth, for his purity, for his perfection.

Father, we confess we fall far short of him, but we thank you that you give more grace. You give grace to the humble. So humble us, we ask, as we come to your word. Let us see more of Christ, we pray, for we ask in his name. Amen.
A couple of months ago, maybe you remember, two guys, Andrew Giffen and David Meredith, came to speak to us on a Wednesday night about the vision of our church, the Free Church of Scotland. If you've been around the church for the last year or two, it won't be unfamiliar. We talk about it, we pray about it. A healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.
And tonight, as we come to Paul's vision for the church on the island of Crete, where Titus is, we find it's actually strikingly similar. He wants a healthy gospel church for every community in Crete.
[1:26] But if the vision sounds familiar, the first step might really surprise us. Really, Paul? We heard last time from Ben a bit about the situation in Crete that Paul is writing into.

It's a bit of a building site of a church. It's a young, it's an unfinished church plant. It still needs so much of the groundwork to be laid. Worse still, there are storms brewing, and not ones that blow in off the Mediterranean.
No doctrinal crosswinds from false teachers, verse 10. Many are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers.
And moral riptides in the surrounding culture, verse 12. Cretins are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.
If that sounds harsh, that's only what they said about themselves, let alone what anyone else might say about them. It's a little bit unfortunate because I believe two of our members have just got back from a honeymoon on Crete.
[2:32] I think it's probably quite a nice destination. But back then, it was rough and it was dangerous. And in that really tough situation then, what might you think Paul's number one top priority for Titus might be, Dear Titus, hope you're well.

You should get to work on what? Well, have a look, verse 5. What does he say? This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.
And he goes on to describe then the moral character and doctrinal commitment of those heumetituses to make an elder. Godly local elders then are the beginning of Paul's answer to the problems facing the church on Crete.
In short, Paul writes, we need elders. Now, even as we begin, we might think, you know, having elders is nice, it's good, but do we need elders?
Okay, imagine for a minute with me, we rethought church leadership just straight back to square one. I'm sure we could come up, couldn't we, with a different leadership structure for the church.
[4:00] In fact, for all kinds of reasons, cultural, political, personal, we probably wouldn't come up with the pattern of leadership in the church that we find in these verses.

But would that be a healthy gospel church without godly local elders? Or imagine the guys who were elders here got ill, all of us, or moved away, or left the church, and for a time there were no elders.
Would it be, or could it continue to be, a healthy gospel church? One of the sub-points of our vision is, of course, healthy gospel leadership, but Paul in our passage is more specific than that.

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Not just leaders, but elders in whom the gospel is bearing fruit in a godly life and relationships, and who hold, teach, and defend healthy doctrine.
Because, if we follow his logic, the character and commitment of these men is to be a foil and defense against the moral riptides and doctrinal crosswinds threatening the church.
[5:16] And our passage tonight insists that as we strive to be a healthy gospel church here in Aberdeen and to plant healthy gospel churches, that same need and priority is still there.

Brothers and sisters, we need elders. So we're going to see tonight briefly what an elder is, but more to the point, who an elder must be, and finally, what they do.
And therefore, I hope we'll see why we need them. Our passage tonight should convince us of that. But even more, it should compel us, therefore, I hope, to look to and to listen to our elders as they carry out their God-given responsibilities in the congregation.
And it should also make us ask, am I like that? Not only if you are an elder, though, perhaps particularly if you are an elder, but whether you're an elder or not, or whether you're ever going to be an elder or not.
Ask, am I following my elders' example in their way of life? Am I holding firm to the trustworthy gospel that they teach, the healthy doctrine?
[6:35] Maybe if you're a note-taker, you can write that question at the top of your page as you listen, or maybe just keep it in the back of your mind as we go through this passage tonight.

But before we get there, what is an elder? For some of us, this will be new. I'm aware of that. Others of us maybe know what an elder is, think we know what an elder is.
But even if you are an elder of the church, it's always so good for us to come back to Scripture to kind of check ourselves, isn't it? Because I think a lot of what we think about leadership, even eldership in the church, probably comes from elders that we've known, or maybe just the glimpses that we get of our elders' work, or maybe just the leadership that we see in the world on TV, in politics, at school, at work.
Rather than being set by God's Word. So what is an elder? Well, Paul gives us some clear direction. Firstly, it's elders plural, never elders singular.
Paul clearly teaches that leading the church is not a one-person job. Titus is not to set up little bishops or popes who call the shots. Christian leadership is shared.
[7:56] We might ask, what's Titus doing then? Isn't he the kind of one-man band? Well, no. He is Paul's man on Crete.

He is the apostolic subcontractor, doing what the apostle Paul would do if he was there. But of course, he's not there. Titus is there. And Titus then is doing that hard work of setting up normal gospel churches with a plurality of elders.
And secondly, these elders are local elders. And now I did some research. Apparently, there were at least 20 cities or towns on Crete when this letter was written.
And Paul tells Titus to appoint elders in every town. So there are to be men set apart to lead in each congregation on the island.
Now, perhaps that gives us some insight into the huge task Paul's giving Titus to find more than one man in 20 different places, all of whom meet the character conditions Paul lays out here in a culture which, much like our own, often celebrates the very opposite.
[9:12] If there was ever a time for Titus to cut corners, this would have been it. But for Paul, that need is non-negotiable. It's a reminder in passing, isn't it, how blessed we are as a congregation here to have the number and the quality of elders that we do have and to remember in prayer congregations that don't have that number of elders that they need and that we would pray that God would raise up more men like this to lead.

Then Paul gives us two words that fill out what the role of an elder is. So firstly, verse 7, he uses the word overseer.
Elders are to have oversight of the church. They're to have eyes on what's going on, know who's part of it, be in touch with the life and work of the whole congregation, not ideally in a micromanaging or a heavy-handed way, but with concerned interest.
There are lots of you, lots of you, who work really hard in the church in so many ways, lots of teams that do lots of really important work. But Paul says whatever we do as a church, whoever carries it out, the elders are ultimately responsible for it before God.

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You can think of it like foremen on a building site, making sure the architect's drawings are being followed. There's a right and a good oversight that elders have of the different areas of serving and teaching in the congregation, asking questions like, is this sound and healthy?
[10:58] Is this true? Is this lined up with God's word? Is this right? We also keep watch over your lives. Now, we can't know everything.

In fact, it wouldn't be right for us to know everything about you. But like shepherds keeping watch over their sheep with an eye on their safety and health, so your elders want to keep watch over your life and heart before God, your spiritual health and safety.
So please don't be surprised or put off if your elders ask you questions, want to get to know you better. Please welcome that interest. The other word that Paul uses here is God's stewards. Interestingly, back then, a position in the household like that would have been held by a slave who had been given the task of managing the household.
So elders are no more than slaves, really, in God's household who have been given the honorable and sometimes onerous task of organizing things, taking decisions, making sure things happen as they should in a way that pleases the master as his servants.
[12:19] Tying it together, I think, a helpful way of maybe even remembering what an elder is, is as an under-shepherd of Christ who oversees the church.

An under-shepherd of Christ who oversees the church. Jesus is the chief shepherd. No one can ever take his place. But the Bible is clear that he has given elders a part in his work of pastoring his flock.
And that comes with an immense responsibility for you as his people and the flock as a whole. So as we reflect on what an elder is, please, D, be open to your elders taking that concerned interest in you, especially in your spiritual walk, your life with God.
Lord, understand where we're coming from. Please think the best of us. We were reminded earlier from Hebrews, your elders are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account.
So, says Hebrews, let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. While we're here, before we move on, let me take this opportunity simply to commend your elders to you.
[13:44] At the time that I've known these brothers here, they are so evidently godly men who give of their time, their energy, their resources, their homes to serve this congregation.

Sometimes it costs to themselves, to their families. The elders of this church love you dearly. So, let me commend them to you as elders and as overseers.
You might only see glimpses of their work, but please know they care so deeply. They love you. They pray for you. They're elders that you can get behind and trust. But for now, Paul's focus shifts onto who an elder is.
An elder, he says, is someone you should be able to look to in the church as a model, not of perfection, but of evident godliness and maturity.
Secondly, then, look to your elders. There's quite a few things Paul lists. We'll go through them in a moment. But it helps us to see that they're all summed up in the phrase that Paul repeats in verse 6 and 7, above reproach.
[14:57] Above reproach. So, this is a condition for elders, that they be men whose lifestyle and whose dealings with others can't reasonably be called into question.

That's not to say questions shouldn't be asked if needed, but rather that it should be clear to the church and to others that their lives and relationships commend and don't discredit the gospel.
Let's be clear, it certainly doesn't mean sinless. Only the chief shepherd is sinless, Jesus Christ. We are under him and flawed. If we're in him, we should be making good progress, but we cannot be sinless in this life. Friends, please don't expect out of your elders that we do have sin in us. Please do pray for us that we would know that about ourselves and keep turning from it and repenting towards Christ. The commentaries actually go to pains to point out that all of these conditions are to do with public and observable patterns of behavior.
[16:07] That being said, it's obvious, isn't it, that unless we have anger and arrogance and greed and sin more generally under control by the power of the Holy Spirit in us, then a quick temper, violence, drunkenness and much, much more will be what comes out of us.

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As I studied these verses, I was reminded of times even recently where we've seen, haven't we, that hidden sin doesn't stay hidden for long in leaders, pastors, leaders, well-known speakers who have had to step down because of moral failure or who have fled.
Their lives become no longer above reproach on the outside because ultimately they are no longer slaves to Christ on the inside. We heard recently from Acts, Paul said to the elders in Ephesus, brothers, keep a close watch on yourselves.
So that inner health is surely a precondition then of living the kind of life that Paul describes here.
And so he says, elders should be above reproach or publicly squeaky clean in two main ways.
Firstly, at home. So this is verse 6. If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.
[17:40] Literally, the Greek says he's to be a one-woman man. Now that's not to say he must be married. Clearly, if he is married, then to only one wife.

But it says more than that, he should have eyes only for his bride. And that should be evident to everyone around that when he said on his wedding day, forsaking all others, he meant it.
And his children are to be believers or faithful and essentially obeying the fifth commandment, honor your father and mother.
Sadly, I think this has sometimes resulted in elders or ministers' children being given an especially hard time in the church for their behavior. In fact, I think the opposite is actually the point.
it's saying, if the godliness that people see in public is also what your children see and hear at home, then that is going to show in the way that they grow up.
[18:46] Now, not perfectly, as indeed none of us are perfect parents, but if there is a consistent Christ-likeness in their parents at home, at church, at the restaurant, at the football match, then at least until they're ready to leave home and cut those ties, they will broadly honor and obey mom and dad, and we can expect them to profess a faith that's appropriate to their age and stage.

Like any generalization, I'm sure we could all tell stories of times where that hasn't been the case, but the point isn't really about each individual child's development, but the integrity of the elder.
Paul is saying that the same standards that he holds in public and teaches to others should be the same standards he lives by behind closed doors at home. Now, that was really important on Crete as it is now because the gospel does rewire family life in really radical ways.
In verse 11, Paul says the false teaching on the island was upsetting whole families. By contrast, in chapter 2, he's going to spell out how a healthy gospel grows healthy homes.
And so, indeed, we all need to grasp, don't we, that connection between what our families value and how our families work, and therefore an elder's family should, in some sense, hold out an example of how the gospel changes a whole household.
[20:28] In the craziness of family life, this is how we experience God's grace, they say. We cling to the gospel, and therefore, however imperfectly, this is how our family strives to live by the gospel.

To paraphrase Paul's words to Timothy, if that's not happening at home, how is this same husband and father going to do that in God's household, the church?
We're going to come to the requirement in a moment for elders to be hospitable, but for the rest of us, let me encourage you, therefore, to take opportunities to spend time in your elders' homes.
I'm sure they wouldn't mind me saying that. Particularly, okay, if you're younger, maybe you have a young family, maybe you're starting out in marriage, take the chance to be at the family dinner table, see how they parent, look at their marriage.
You should expect to be able to learn something from them about how the gospel works at home and in relationships. The other big way Paul says an elder is to be above reproach is in himself.
[21:50] The full stop there in verse 7 isn't in the original, so those traits in verses 7 and 8 run straight out of that phrase, above reproach. Now, interestingly, there are five things he shouldn't be and six things he should be.

It's a reminder, isn't it, that the gospel doesn't just or even mainly give us things to avoid, but rather to positively be and to do. Thomas Chalmers, maybe it's a name familiar to you, is one of the free church fathers.
He preached a famous sermon. You can find it online, not recorded, obviously, but in script. You can read it. It's called The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.
It's already titled, but his basic point is that your heart is never a vacuum. If you want to get rid of sin out of you, he said, you have to have something more compelling, more satisfying to replace it with.

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Otherwise, that sin will just come back and probably worse. A new, pure love for Jesus, he said, will force out the old, corrupt, and sinful loves of our heart.
[23:11] The gospel has an expulsive power that can shift sin out of our heart in a way nothing else can because it replaces our evil thoughts and wrong feelings and poor attitudes with a new, pure, and godly love in Christ.

So, elders of the church are again to be an example by God's grace of the power of the gospel to change our lives for good. And so, as we look at these two lists, there's not a kind of one-for-one comparison, but we can, I think, see a broad kind of displacement theory at work.
If you're hospitable, generous, with your home, food, money, possessions, time, friendship, well, you're not going to be greedy for gain.
A hospitable person's motto is, better to give than to receive. An elder should be like that. If you're a lover of good, you're going to find it quite hard to be violent, always picking a fight with someone, finding fault.
Someone who loves good wants to see the best in others. And when things do need to be challenged, well, you want someone doing it, don't you, who loves good more than they love themselves, their own pride or ego.
[24:40] An elder should be like that. If you're self-controlled and disciplined, you're not going to be controlled by drink or food or entertainment or sex or fill in the blank, you'll have a sober mind free from the constant pull of substances or experiences to numb and to distract you.

I think that takes real focus in a culture, whether on Crete or our own, where the opposite is what is attractive, isn't it? Laziness, gluttony, having one too many drinks is considered so normal.
But that word discipline comes from the sports track or the parade ground. It's the mantra of the athlete and the soldier. Paul says an elder should be like that when it comes to what he puts into his heart and indeed into his body.
If you're upright, you won't be quick-tempered or violent. That word upright has to do with justice. And as James reminds us, the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.
I think Paul's character conditions here force us to ask, don't they, do people feel like they're treading on eggshells around me? Or am I the sort of person that people could come to me and speak about anything?
[26:10] Am I quick to take offense? Do I react quickly without stepping back to look at the big picture, to examine the evidence? An elder should be impartial, just, upright.

If you're holy, you're not going to be arrogant or quick-tempered, drunkard, violent, greedy for gain. Your speech and behavior, the way you carry yourself before the church, the way you relate to others, will be clearly set apart.
Friends, elders should be like that. These words are hard to say. They're deeply humbling.
But I think reflecting on this, it's easy, isn't it, to say we're all sinners and we are all sinners. But sometimes, instead of highlighting our spiritual state, it can actually excuse it.
If we're all sinners and that's that, then it's all much of a muchness, isn't it? My sins, your sins, well, who's to say which is worse? It's all sin at the end of the day and there's clearly truth in that.
[27:21] But brothers and sisters, there is also such a thing as growth in godliness, growing in maturity, progress in sanctification.

And that can be seen in someone's life. We can tell, can't we? It's observable. If the roots of someone's heart are healthy, it shows in the fruit of their character, speech, and behavior in their relationships.
And I think that's what Paul is saying when he says an elder must be above reproach. And we should expect those who are elders and who would be elders in future to have made sufficient progress in these areas such that their conduct in public and private life isn't open into accusation.
And the very existence of such individuals shows us that it can be done. I think this is the big point for Titus on Crete. It's a big point for us too. In a culture which tolerates and often celebrates pride and arrogance, drunkenness, violence, greed, outrage, laziness, and says that these things are normal or even good and healthy, we need people, don't we, in the church to look at and say living in God's way is good and by his grace it's not impossible.
We need not only words but examples to follow, people who put flesh on the bones of their confession. And Paul is saying where better to look than after the chief shepherd Jesus Christ than to his appointed under shepherds.

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[29:05] the elders of the church. Friends, look at your elders and their lives, get to know them, watch how they speak and act, we should be confident that we can learn from them how to put the gospel into practice in our lives because godly elders will be above reproach.

Which in turn backs up their teaching, which is where Paul turns next. What do elders do? This is our final point. Verse 9, he says, he must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it.
Therefore, our third point is listen to your elders. Listen to them. Some of you will know that Ben Traynor was licensed last month. The short version of that is that he's now the Reverend Ben Traynor, which is very exciting.
As part of the vows that Ben took to become a gospel minister, which are pretty much, if not identical, the same as the ones taken by elders to you, he promised not only to teach and defend our confession of faith, but also to give up any opinion that does not align with our confession.
Friends, the relationship between elders and sound doctrine is an exclusive one. It does not allow any extra added opinions on the side or a loose grasp of this or that area.
[30:43] The elders are to hold firm to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And that's necessary for them doing two things in the church, verse 9, giving instruction in sound doctrine, and also rebuking those who contradict it.

And so brothers and sisters, you should be able to rely on your elders to keep you right on what God's word says. Of course, the elders you hear most from are Donald, myself, Ben, as teaching elders.
You'll have also heard our ruling elders preach and teach occasionally on a Sunday, more often on a Wednesday night, a prayer meeting or life group. verse 9 reminds us, doesn't it, that whether there's one, two, three, or zero ministers in a congregation, we should be able to ask any of our elders to teach us and trust what they have to say.
And so, friends, use your elders. Sure, again, they wouldn't mind me telling you that. Go to them with your questions. You have an elder in your life group that you can go to, but you can go to any of these guys to check your understanding.
I have a question about that, and rely on them to be able to guide you by God's word, because they are here to water and feed the roots of our faith with sound or literally healthy doctrine.
[32:15] The elders can provide a healthy diet of doctrine for you to live by. And of course, they're here to protect you, too.

I started becoming aware of current events about the time that Jamie Oliver started taking turkey Twizzlers out of schools. If he wanted to be the friend of Essex school children, he shouldn't have touched our lunch.
But Jamie knew something that we nine or ten year olds didn't, which is that if you eat enough turkey Twizzlers, you're going to die. And friends, the elders sometimes have that unpopular job as well.
False teaching is often delicious. It does not taste like the kind of five a day or seven a day, whatever it is.
Your regular diet, okay, of healthy gospel teaching, sometimes we have an appetite, don't we, for something that tastes a little bit different, but that actually kills us.
[33:19] People who do drift from the gospel don't normally do it today because it kills them, but because it tastes so good. False teaching tells you what you want to hear, doesn't it?

And yet it does hurt them, it does corrupt the church. Rotten roots grow rotten fruits. And sometimes the elders' job is not only to teach the truth, but to correct lies in the church as well.
And that is not an easy job. Let me say, when I became a minister, I didn't imagine that part of this job would involve telling people not to come to church.
But on two occasions since I've been here, really sadly we've had to tell individuals kindly but firmly no longer to come here because they were coming to spread false teaching.
On both occasions it began with saying that the passage that had been preached that Sunday was not God's word, spread, and it spiraled from there.
[34:23] Friends, the most beautiful path in the world is the path of least resistance. But an elder who takes the hard path for the health of the church is an even more beautiful thing.

We need men, don't we, who love good, who are self-controlled and holy, and are therefore willing to do and say the hard thing even when it's the right thing to do.

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And because they hold to the truth, therefore can model to us and teach us the grace and godliness and Christ likeness that we all need to flourish in the Christian life.
So, brothers and sisters, let's look to our elders, let's listen to our elders, and let's please pray for our elders. as we will now, let's pray together.
Gracious Father, how we thank you again for Jesus Christ. Truly, he is the chief shepherd of his flock. We thank you that we have a perfect pastor who has died and risen again for us and who lives to lead us and to sanctify us in his truth.
[35:43] He will lead us home and who shepherds his church. Father, we confess our faith in him and reliance upon him to do that. Father, we thank you that you've provided here elders to lead under Christ, to oversee your church.

Father, we thank you for such men and pray that you bless them and uphold them. Father, we pray that as Christian brothers and sisters, we would learn from those who are an example to us.
Father, we thank you that you have given us these examples. And, Father, we pray that you would raise up more godly leaders in your church to continue to hold firm to the truth, to teach it the trustworthy gospel and to model it in their life.
Lord, protect your church, we pray, and grow us in maturity, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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