

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Ministerial Qualifications: Part 4

One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity.... (1 Timothy 3:4)

Any discussion of Paul's qualifications for ministry or for deacon typically spend a lot of time on this characteristic, but often these discussions seem to generate more heat than light. One side of the discussion outright rejects that the man's family should enter into his qualifications, a clear rejection of this verse's inspired purpose and authority. Another view requires the man to demonstrate near despotic, iron-fisted domination of his family. What did Paul intend with this verse? What should a church look for in a man regarding this quality as they consider him for ordination? Where is reality versus pretense? I am amused and frustrated at the logical disconnect that occasionally appears in this area of qualification. I recall one situation involving a man who taught a rather hard line on this question, but his wife occasionally would quietly remind the women around her that she gladly filled the submissive role in her family. Her husband was the head, and she was the sweet, submissive neck, but she would gleefully remind these women that the neck can turn the head any way it wishes, and she had a way of controlling her husband without his even knowing she did it. I cannot erase from my mind the subdued smirks on the women's faces when this preacher delivers a sermon on this question to his church.

On the other side of the unbiblical extreme, you will occasionally observe the wife who claims to accept her role, but she somehow misses the simple word "ruleth" in this verse, for she will be sure that everyone knows that she, not God, is in charge of her husband's ministry. They will live where she decides. He will preach where she decides, and most likely *what* she decides.

The simple word, "ruleth," establishes a central truth to this qualification. The man who fulfills this qualification is the leader, not the follower, in his home. No pretense, no cute games about who is the neck and who is the head.

The real issue at the heart of this question is not whether the man is the leader of the home, but *how* he leads it. If he doesn't lead it, he doesn't qualify; period. Thus the operative word in the verse is "well." *How* does he lead his family?

I have observed over more than fifty years of preaching that a man's role in his family will clearly and accurately predict how he will behave in the church. If he "leads" his family with an iron fist, buckle up. He'll be a tyrant of a preacher and pastor. If he "leads" his family in something of a

passive-aggressive manner, you'll see the same behavior in church. No, I am not a trained psychologist, so I do not intend this term in any clinical way. The point is simple. If the man passively holds himself aloof from the activities in the home, but occasionally explodes and reacts with excessive emotion, you will see that same behavior in the church. If he resents being reminded by a wise and loving wife of things that need his attention, he will also resent any form of authority or reminder that he is anything less than perfect from the members of his congregation.

The examples of failed leadership and failed qualifications are sadly endless. Let's turn to the positive side of the question. What does a godly man's family look like? How does his family view him? How do they respect him? Why do they respect him?

Family members submit to his leadership out of respect for him (cf. Prov. 24:3-4; 27:23; Eph. 6:4). The elder's responsibilities in the church are quite parental, so he should have proved his ability in the home before he receives larger responsibility in the church. The home is the proving ground for church leadership (v. 5). Again, Paul assumed children in the home but did not require them, I believe.¹²⁴¹

Focus on the simple idea, "...out of respect for him." His family submits to him gladly, not out of fear. Ah, and they do submit to him; they do not politely ignore him. Earlier in this study we reflected on the distinction between a man "demanding" respect from people and "commanding" it. "I'm the elder, presbyter, bishop. I know more about what the Bible teaches than you. You must submit to my authority." This is the attitude of the unworthy man who demands respect, merely because he has gained the title and position. I recall many years ago an experience that illustrates the incredible parallel between a man's behavior in his family and his behavior in his church. I was preaching a meeting at a church in another part of the country. On this particular morning the pastor and his wife planned to drive two cars to church because of their

¹²⁴ 124. Cf. Lea, p. 112.

Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, 1 Ti 3:2 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

individual duties and the press of time. She was to drive separately and start doing some things at church. He, with me tagging along in the car, was to drive by a senior citizen's home to pick up his mother-in-law. When we arrived at the home, his mother-in-law didn't immediately run out the front door of the complex. She was old enough that she very likely wasn't physically able to stand at the window looking out to know precisely when her son-in-law arrived. The longer we sat in the car waiting for the mother-in-law the more the pastor steamed and fumed, so much so that I felt rather uncomfortable just being in the car with him. When his aged mother-in-law finally got situated in the car, he scolded her for making him late to church. That afternoon after church the pastor severely scolded his wife because she was some way responsible for her mother's slowness in walking out to get in the car. No surprise, this man also built a reputation for similar impatient and demanding interactions with the members of the church he served. For several years my wife and I drove by a senior citizen's home to pick up my mother-in-law. Sometime, when the weather was pleasant, she'd get ready and sit on a bench in front of the facility, waiting for us. Other times we'd park and walk up to her apartment and help her down to the car. Did her slowness ever inconvenience us? Yes, it did. Did we fight or fuss about it? No, we did not. We understood that she was old and had to work hard just to be able to attend church at all. I recall one particular Sunday. When we drove into the parking area of the facility, my mother-in-law was seated on the front bench. Although she saw us drive into the parking area, it took her several seconds to process the information and start to stand up and meet us. It dawned on me at that moment what a significant effort this lady exerted, just to go to church on a Sunday morning. She's home in glory now, enjoying a far better "church." My wife and I are thankful for every time we were able to help her mother attend our church and participate in its worship and fellowship, however long we needed to wait for her or assist her to the car.

Peter adds a simple and quite powerful insight into just what Paul intends by his term "...ruleth well...."

Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.... (1 Peter 5:3)

No mystery words here; "ensample" is KJV spelling for our contemporary word "example." The worthy and qualified minister leads, not by coercion, intimidation, or by a "bully pulpit" kind of overbearing force. He leads by example. He preaches his sermon with his feet before he preaches it with words in the pulpit. Whether in a simple act, such as picking up a senior citizen so that he/she may attend the church's worship and fellowship, or in the most demanding of tasks, the preacher/pastor must lead by example.

The "How to" of this qualification defines its intent and necessity. No Biblical church models a dictatorship or a despotic government. The New Testament church, as described in Scripture, is far more like a home. People must submit voluntarily, or they will not submit at all in this New Testament model. A friend once told me about a comment that his uncle, a preacher in the prior generation, often made. A loving and very effective pastor, this man quietly observed that people tend to do what they want to do, and you can't force them to do otherwise. The effective preacher/pastor so graciously models Christian conduct that his very action encourages people to want to follow his example.

The second facet of this verse shifts to the children. They are "...in subjection with all gravity." What does "gravity" describe in this setting?

...behavior which is befitting, implying a measure of dignity leading to respect—'propriety, befitting behavior.'²

This man's home cannot be a storm of defiance and confusion. His leadership must impact it with a sense of dignity and respect.

In the first century culture, children transitioned from childhood and their position in the home into adulthood at a surprisingly early age to our minds, likely around age sixteen. Some Bible scholars suggest that Mary was fourteen to sixteen years of age when Jesus was born. The cultural norms of our industrial, high-tech society require that children delay their entrance into full adulthood. College or other career training replaces the typical vocational training of first century Judaism in which young men began quite young as apprentices in their father's trade. The extended delay of transition from childhood to adulthood imposes demanding strains on both children and parents. However, contemporary culture does not void the teachings of Scripture. Rather it requires that the faithful seek wise, "dignified and respectful" ways to apply Scripture's teachings to their culture, whether they are the parent or the child. In recent years, I have encountered several adults, who allowed their adolescent age to justify open rebellion against their parents and their parents' lifestyle, including early and excessive use of alcohol or illegal drugs of some kind. I have observed a consistent and quite alarming pattern in every one of these people. At the precise age when they began to use these drugs, their emotional development ceased, dead in its tracks. As a consequence, you see a forty or fifty year old body with a fifteen year old set of emotions. A friend with a Ph. D. in psychology from

Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 746 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

UCLA tells me that numerous studies verify this pattern, something that he often encountered in his practice. However, long before any psychological studies, Scripture verified the dangers of childhood rebellion, as well as the blessings of godly parents and godly children.

The Biblical pattern requires certain behaviors and attitudes in both the father and in the children. Specifically, Paul lays the responsibility on the father to help the child mature in a “befitting,” “dignified,” “respectful” manner. A despotic father will drive his children to controlling, destructive anger. (Ephesians 6:4) A passive father will leave his children with no moral compass when they most need it.

It is altogether possible that a father may exemplify godly leadership, but his children choose to ignore his example and follow a sinful course. Paul does not reject this possibility. Nor does he use this potential to disqualify the man. His emphasis is on the father’s model of leadership and influence. Does the father model the kind of example and leadership in the home that most predicts a good outcome from his influence on his children?

Likewise, a pastor/preacher cannot control how the members of his congregation will respond to Scripture’s teachings. He may preach a balanced and complete gospel, but, being sheep as they are, they will make bad decisions and shipwreck their lives. Some folks, even within Paul’s sphere of ministry, did just that, but their choice was not due to Paul’s failure.

When we examine a man’s qualifications for ministry, his example, his role in leading his family, either qualifies him or disqualifies him. In every case the man’s attitude toward his family—and theirs toward him—will predict his success or failure as a minister. This qualification may be the very best predictor available to a church considering a man for ordination. Never ignore it.

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