

The Church's Responsibility to Its Elders

1 TIMOTHY 5:17-25

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This morning we return to our study of 1 Timothy, and we come to a passage where Paul addresses the responsibility of a congregation to the elders. We looked at the qualifications and the role of elders back in Chapter 3, and in that study, we learned that God's plan for leadership is for each local congregation to be completely independent and to be overseen by a group of men known as elders, shepherds, or overseers. Just a few days ago, I was talking to a friend from this community. He is a denominational "pastor," and he was trying to explain how frustrating it is to deal with his denominational hierarchy. Every time they want to do something, they need to check with their headquarters. And I took that as an opportunity to explain how we do things in the Lord's church - it's just us and the Bible! We have no structure beyond this congregation. And he was really intrigued by that. But each church is overseen by a group of spiritually mature, godly men. God gives some qualifications, the church finds men who meet those qualifications, and those men are then responsible to God for the spiritual health and direction of the congregation, using the Word as their guide. But, as we know, elders don't really have the ability to lead, unless they are supported and encouraged by the congregation.

We know that the book of 1 Timothy is actually a letter written by the apostle Paul to the young preacher Timothy who was serving the church in Ephesus. And as we come to the second half of 1 Timothy 5, we have Paul's inspired advice concerning the church's responsibility to the elders of the congregation (p. 1858). If you will, please look with me at 1 Timothy 5:17-25,

¹⁷ The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." ¹⁹ Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. ²¹ I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. ²² Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin. ²³ No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. ²⁴ The sins of some men are quite evident, going

before them to judgment; for others, their sins follow after. ²⁵ ***Likewise also, deeds that are good are quite evident, and those which are otherwise cannot be concealed.***

As we look at God's message to Timothy, I'd like to make four observations concerning the church's responsibilities to the eldership. And even before we get into the text itself, I would just briefly point out that I will be referring over and over again to "our" responsibility to the elders. And I put it that way, because even though I am one of the three shepherds we have right now, I am also a part of the flock. Sometimes when we get together as elders, we refer to the fact that "shepherds shepherd shepherds." And I hope that makes sense, but the idea is: As shepherds, we are also a part of the flock, and as such, we as shepherds have some responsibilities to each other.

- I. **So, with this in mind, the first lesson (for all of us) comes in verses 17-18 as we find that congregation has an obligation to HONOR the elders of the congregation.**

Already in this chapter (in verse 3), Paul has told the church to "***honor***" the widows who are widows indeed. And as you might remember from that discussion, the reference there (literally) is to treating those widows as if they have value, as if they have weight, as if they are important to us, and now, Paul applies this to the elders. This is in keeping with what Paul also wrote to the church in Thessalonica (in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13), ***"But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work...."*** So, this is "***honor***," and as we discussed a few weeks ago (concerning the widows), the idea of "***honor***" might involve financial support as well.

With this in mind, we get back to the idea of "***double honor***," and it doesn't seem that Paul is telling Timothy to pay the elders double what they are worth, or to pay them twice, or anything like that, but it seems that he is encouraging the church to go above and beyond. Treat them with an attitude of honor, but you might choose to actually pay them as well, ***"especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching," "especially those who labor in the word and teaching."*** Paul has already addressed paying the preacher in 1 Corinthians 9, and now he opens it up to the elders. If an elder decides to devote himself to full-time teaching and preaching, and if the church sees a value in this, this is within the realm of possibilities. Right now, Jim's dad currently serves as a full-time elder at the church down in Crystal Lake. This is how they have decided to "***honor***" one of their elders.

But I want us to notice something interesting. As Paul makes this argument, he appeals to "***scripture***" (in verse 18). The first reference goes back to the Law of Moses, with a direct quote from Deuteronomy 25:4. The second reference, though, is a direct quote of Jesus from Luke 10:7. And what I want us to notice is not just the content of the quote, but notice how Paul apparently classifies the book of Luke as "***scripture***." We piece some things together, and it seems like Luke was written in the late 50's to early 60's. 1 Timothy was written at some point in the mid-60's. So, as Paul looks back just a few years, he quotes from Luke and refers to it as "***scripture***." I know, this is not the point of this passage, but it is still awesome! It's another reminder that these documents were considered to be "***scripture***" as they were written. The gospel accounts and the letters are scripture, not because some church council voted on them hundreds of years later, but they are scripture because they came from God, and the people who wrote them knew that they were writing scripture.

But the first idea here is: The church is to honor its shepherds.

II. The second big idea is that we as the church must also PROTECT our shepherds, we are to TREAT THEM FAIRLY.

In verse 19, we must, ***“...not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.”*** As elders do their work, accusations will be made, some unflattering things will be said, especially as they confront sin, as they make difficult decisions (especially in those cases where no one else might have the same information they might have at the time). So, Paul gives the reminder: Treat these men fairly. Do not even entertain an accusation as perhaps being accurate, unless it comes from two or three witnesses. This goes all the way back to the Law of Moses. This is something that is repeated by Jesus. And one thing I find interesting here is: This really applies to all of us, doesn't it? So instead of making some special rule to hold elders on a pedestal, it seems that perhaps Paul is reminding Timothy and the church in Ephesus: Just because someone stands before the church as a shepherd, that doesn't mean that he gives up his right to be treated fairly. People have a tendency to think they have a special license to openly criticize anybody in a position of leadership. We think about all of those false accusations made against Jesus. We just studied this this past Wednesday evening. They hated what he said, and so they accused Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners; they accused him of being possessed by a demon. And at his trial they really struggled to come up with some consistent testimony - did he or did he not threaten to tear down the temple, did he or did he not put himself out there as a king, as a threat to Caesar? Leaders seem to open themselves up to criticism. They seem to attract it. Words are taken out of context. Accusations are made. But Paul's reminder here seems to be: Yes, an elder might lead the church, but the rest of us still need to treat him like a brother. And if we have a legitimate issue with the man, we still need to follow Jesus' plan in Matthew 18. We go to him privately, then we involve witnesses in the process, and then we take it from there. So, we have the reminder here that we protect our shepherds from false accusations. We don't even listen to those accusations. And really, this is true for all of us. If somebody comes to me and says, “Hey, you'll never guess what I saw that guy do!” You can tell they're getting ready to share some juicy bit of gossip. I do the best I can to be quick enough to respond like this, “Is this something you personally saw him do? And if so, will you go with me to that person so we can work it out?” If it's a real concern, we take care of it. But often, we just shut down the sharing of an unfounded rumor. So, we need to be careful that we protect our shepherds from false accusations.

However, this does not mean that elders have a free pass on sin, and that leads us to the next big idea here, and that is...

III. ...we as a congregation do have a process for addressing SIN IN THE ELDERSHIP - we have A PROCESS FOR DISCIPLINE (verses 20-21).

So, we do not gossip behind his back, but here we have witnesses to the kind of sin that would disqualify a man from serving, and not only that, but it is apparently PERSISTENT sin. This isn't just a one-time failing, but notice how Paul refers to ***“those who continue in sin.”*** So, this is a matter of an elder continuing in a lifestyle of sin. When that happens, and when he refuses to turn away from that behavior, we bring it out in the open, and the sin is to be rebuked publicly. Elders are not above God's law, but they are subject to it like the rest of us. And if you remember our discussion several months ago, it seems that Timothy was perhaps having trouble with one or more of the elders. For some reason, the congregation seemed hesitant to rebuke those who were causing trouble. And one of the leading theories on this is that the trouble was coming from within the eldership. And this would certainly fit with Paul's warning in Acts 20, that savage wolves would rise up from

within the eldership, not sparing the flock and pulling away some of the sheep. Here, then, Paul reminds Timothy: If you have a bad elder, you need to deal with it.

And notice the reason for the public rebuke (at the end of verse 20) - this is to be done, ***“...so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.”*** This, by the way is the result of the very first church discipline, carried out by God himself, against Ananias and Sapphira, in Acts 5, as ***“great fear came over the whole church”*** (Acts 5:11). Discipline helps keep the sin from spreading.

And as he carries out this public discipline, notice Paul’s special and solemn warning to Timothy in verse 21, ***“I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.”*** The word ***“bias”*** in this passage literally refers to “judging beforehand,” to “pre-judge,” or “prejudice.” Do not pre-judge the situation, Paul says. So, this is to be carried out in a fair, open, and impartial way, knowing that God himself is a witness to what is happening. Listen to both sides, consider the evidence, apply the word of God to the situation, and make a decision. And when Paul tells Timothy to do this without a spirit of ***“partiality,”*** he uses a word that refers to “leaning.” Don’t go into this leaning in one direction or another. When an elder sins and when he refuses to put that sin aside, he is to be rebuked without partiality.

IV. There is one more big idea here, and that is: **A CONGREGATION MUST CHOOSE ITS LEADERS CAREFULLY.**

The solution to removing a bad elder is to only pick good elders. Obviously, mere mortals may stumble and fall, but Paul’s message to Timothy at the end of this passage on bad elders is that he must not lay hands on anybody too quickly. When I was a kid and read this passage, I thought Paul was telling Timothy, “Don’t beat up anybody too quickly!” Don’t ***“lay hands”*** on them too quickly. Before you beat somebody up, you really need to think about it! But somewhere along the line I realized: They appointed elders back then by laying their hands on them - not to transmit some kind of spiritual gift (not that kind of laying on of hands), but they would literally put their hands on these men as they were appointed, as a sign that these men were now elders. It was a public sign of approval. We see something similar in Acts 13:3 as the elders in Jerusalem sent Paul and Barnabas off on the First Missionary Journey. They weren’t giving them any spiritual gifts, but they were making it clear that they were setting these two men apart for a special role. So with this in mind, Paul is basically saying here: Be careful who you appoint to be an elder! Do not lay your hands on anybody too quickly. And in verse 23, by being careful, Timothy can keep himself from ***“sharing responsibility for the sins of others.”*** In other words, if Timothy is NOT careful, he will bear some responsibility for whatever happens next. And then, in the last two verses (in 24-25), we have Paul’s reminder that just as some sin is obvious and some sin takes longer to come to light, so also it is with good deeds - some good deeds are obvious, but some good deeds take a while to be made known. And so the point seems to be: There’s no rush here. Be sure when you appoint someone to serve in this role. Make sure they are truly qualified.

You might have noticed that I have saved verse 23 for the very end, and the reason is: We really need to see this verse in context. This is a “bad elder sandwich.” So often, I have heard this verse used to justify drinking, “I can drink with my friends, because Paul told Timothy to drink wine. It’s right there in the Bible - 1 Timothy 5:23!” What they fail to consider is the context. Context! Context! Context! Verse 23 is addressed to a preacher who is apparently dealing with some bad elders. So, I suppose that if anybody has a right to use wine, it’s a preacher dealing with bad elders! Brian Kenyon is a friend of mine who directs the Florida School of

Preaching, and he had a great article on this that was published in his school's paper back in October 2016, and I'll just briefly summarize a few of the big ideas from that article.

- First of all, 1 Timothy 5:23 seems to be the only passage in the New Testament that positively commands the use of wine. That right there should probably tell us something.
- Secondly, notice that the use of wine is connected in some way to the use of water. There is a reason for this. For some reason, Timothy is advised to no longer drink water *"exclusively."* So, I'm wondering: Why did Timothy have to be told this? Or why was he making it a point to drink water exclusively? My guess is he was probably being extremely careful to avoid drunkenness (or even the appearance of it), and he was avoiding it, even to the detriment of his own health. These are my thoughts, not Brian's: But if I have to be commanded to use wine for medicinal reasons, there's a pretty good chance that I've been making a point to avoid it. And there are some very good reasons to abstain - we could look at dozens of verses that warn against some terrible consequences, there's the addiction factor, there's the influence I might have on my brother who struggles in this area, and on and on and on. I've preached on this before and don't intend to re-preach that lesson today. But the point is: Timothy had to be commanded to use wine in this way, probably because he was avoiding it for some reason.
- But there's something else I noticed (thanks to Brian's article) that I had never noticed before. Timothy is no longer to DRINK water exclusively, but he is to USE a little wine. In parallel fashion, we might expect Paul to encourage Timothy to DRINK a little wine, but he doesn't use that word. He isn't to DRINK wine, but he is to USE it. Is that a big deal? Words are important, and Paul does use two different words here. There is a difference between "drinking" and "using."
- I would also point out the specific reason for this as Paul suggests that using a little wine would help with Timothy's stomach issues. That's a bit vague - but there is a reason - and the reason is not to relax, or to fit in, or so that Timothy could party with his friends. Some have suggested that the water in Ephesus had parasites, and that the alcohol in the wine might serve as a disinfectant of some kind. Maybe so. Perhaps there were other things going on. I don't drink, but I realized a while back that I do use alcohol from time to time. Some of the cough syrup we have used contains 10% alcohol. So yes, I have consumed alcohol, I suppose, but I am "using" it, not "drinking" it. There is a specific medical reason for it.
- And then finally, I would just note that Paul specifically tells Timothy to use a *"little"* wine. In no way does this one lonely "wine clause" in the Bible give us any encouragement to get drunk, or to go out drinking with our friends, or anything even remotely like that.

But the point here at the end is: As a church, we owe it to our elders to be very careful who we appoint to that role; otherwise, the preacher might need to use a little wine for his stomach! That is the point here.

Conclusion:

I am so thankful for the elders who serve this congregation. All of us have a role in keeping the eldership strong. We honor them, we protect them from false and frivolous accusations, we hold them accountable, and we make sure that we choose men who are truly qualified. The image on the wall up here, by the way, is an artist's rendition of the scene in Revelation 4, with the 24 elders sitting around the throne of God. I am looking forward to seeing these men face to face some day, I'm looking forward to hearing their stories, and I'm looking forward to once again seeing some of the great men who have served as shepherds over me in the past.

We become a part of God's family when we respond to Jesus' sacrifice, when we trust and obey. We turn away from sin, and we allow ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism for the forgiveness of our sins. If you would like to know more, please talk with one of our shepherds after today's service (or get in touch during the week), but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com