

Instructions Concerning Elders: 1 Timothy 5:17-25
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We've been away from 1 Timothy for two weeks, but we return there this morning. The passage we're going to study today contains various instructions concerning elders. In chapter 3 we saw the qualifications for overseers, which is a synonym for pastors / elders. And now we come to another passage that discusses this role of leadership in the church. What Paul communicates to Timothy here in chapter 5 deals with honoring elders (verses 17-18), disciplining elders (verses 19-21), and appointing elders (verses 22-25), with a parenthetical comment about drinking wine in verse 23, which will be interesting to look at.

One of the things I love about this letter of 1 Timothy, and one of the reasons I'm so glad that we're studying through it together is the fact that it contains so much instruction for us concerning the nature of the church and responsibilities of the church and the structure of church leadership and the qualifications for church leaders. We read about the danger of false teaching in the church. We read about church discipline. We read about the roles of men and women in the church. We are given the qualifications for elders and deacons. And Paul is clear about the purpose of these instructions. He says in chapter 3:14-15, "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." In other words, these instructions are serious because they have to do with the household of God, the church of the living God, a pillar and foundation of the truth. We're not a club. We're not a business. And we're not free to conduct ourselves however we like. We're not at liberty to structure ourselves in whatever way we think would be most efficient or most fair or most peaceful or most successful. We are bound to follow the clear instructions of God's Word, which are for our good and for His glory. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and He understands the true nature of things far better than we do. He created this universe. He designed things in a certain way, and He did so for a reason. Therefore as we seek to figure out what we're supposed to be as a church, we don't default to our own assumptions or ideas. We don't turn to secular thinking or cultural trends. We look to the playbook which God has so graciously given to us. He has not left us to ourselves, and He has not left us to the seductive ideologies of our age. He has spoken to us in His Word.

I find great comfort in this, because if I didn't have God's Word to look to as my ultimate authority and guide, I'm not sure where I would look. I would be confused by the conflicting and changing ideas of our culture. I would find myself evaluating different management structures and trying to figure out how to set up the church to be the most successful, whatever that means. I'm so glad that I'm not sinking in the quicksand of human ideas, but rather standing on the rock of God's Word.

And as we've seen in God's Word, and will continue to see this morning, God has very clear guidelines for the church and for the leadership of the church: the structure of the leadership and the qualifications for those in leadership, and as we're about to study in these verses, there are also guidelines concerning financial provision for certain leaders, the protection of innocent leaders and the discipline of leaders who have fallen into sin, and also instruction for appointing leaders.

God cares about the church. He wants the church to be set apart from the world so that we can be a light in the world, pointing sinners to Jesus Christ. We are a pillar and foundation of the truth, proclaiming the Good News of Christ crucified for sinners like us. What a privilege it is to be part of God's family, part of Christ's body, as a testimony to the wonderful forgiveness and transformation that comes to those who repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ. If you're an unbeliever here with us this morning, we want you to know the wonderful news that Jesus Christ died in our place on the cross to receive the punishment that we deserve for our sins. And if you turn away from your sin and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sin, then His blood will cover your sin, you will be washed clean, and you'll be a new person, you'll be a Christian, and you'll become part of the church. We want you to be able to look at our lives and look at our fellowship here at Three Rivers Grace and see that God is great, and Christ is our mighty Savior, and the Gospel has amazing power to save and transform. This doesn't mean that we're perfect, but we are different. We are new creatures, with new desires. And as the church of Jesus Christ we are to be a testimony to the world of the power of the Gospel to change lives.

For the church to be set apart in this way requires elders in the church to be set apart in a very special and unique way to encourage and teach and shepherd the flock so that we will truly be a pillar and foundation of the truth in the midst of a dark and dying world. Some elders will be set apart vocationally. They will be financially supported by the congregation so they can devote their time and energy to teaching and preaching without the burden of working another job. And all elders, whether financially supported by the church or not, are set apart in the sense that they must be

above reproach regarding all of the biblical qualifications for elders. They must be examined closely and cautiously. They must not be appointed quickly. And then if, at any point, an elder disqualifies himself through some form of immorality or false teaching, there must be a public rebuke.

This is how much God cares about the purity of His church. This is how much He cares about the testimony of the church in the world. This is how much He cares about us, His children, and how much He cares about His own glory—that the qualifications for elders are clear, the process of appointing elders is to be slow and cautious, and the consequences for sin are so severe. So as we examine these verses, keep the big picture in mind. This is not about church politics. This is about the reputation of the Gospel. It's about taking extreme measures to preserve the witness of the church, to the glory of God and for the advancement of His Kingdom.

Honoring Elders (verses 17-18)

The first part of chapter 5 dealt with honoring widows, which involved financial support. Now Paul turns to the matter of honoring elders, which likewise involves financial support. He describes the elders as those “who rule well” and then adds, “especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” Here we see two of the key roles of elders. Ruling and teaching. These are both included in the qualifications for elders. Chapter 3:2 requires that an overseer be “able to teach,” and then verses 4-5 say, “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” There are both of these aspects: Managing and teaching. And each elder must be gifted and qualified to carry out these tasks, and each elder should receive honor and respect from the congregation for serving in these capacities. But what Paul seems to be saying in chapter 5:17 is that there are also certain elders who are uniquely called to “*labor* in preaching and teaching.” All elders must be able to teach, but certain elders *labor* in this work day after and day and week after week. And those elders should receive double honor, that is, respect *and* financial support.

It's interesting that Paul repeatedly makes this point about financial support for those who labor in the ministry, and yet he was often reluctant to accept support for himself. He did not want it to be a stumbling block in any way for the people he was serving (1 Corinthians 9:1-18). But he also did receive support from certain churches (2 Corinthians 11:8-9; Philippians 4:14-15). And he clearly taught this principle that those who give their lives to the

preaching and teaching of the Word and the spread of the Gospel should receive financial support from the church.

The practical question is what exactly should this look like. How much should an elder be paid? It is a delicate matter, isn't it? I think there are two important ingredients in getting this right. On the one hand, pastors / elders must not be in it for the money. One of the qualifications for elders is that they must not be lovers of money (1 Timothy 3:3). And in chapter 6 Paul writes, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils." An elder must not love money or view the ministry as a means of getting rich. All kinds of horrible things happen when that is the case. Pastors who have extravagant lifestyles. Pastors who are stealing money from the church. The love of money will discredit the Gospel. It makes a god out of money and uses the Gospel as a means to that end. And in subtle ways, too, the love of money can hollow out a ministry and steal one's passion for the Gospel by replacing it with a passion for the comfort and ease that money can provide. So on the one hand, elders must constantly battle against the love of money and must be content in all circumstances and must stay focused on the calling to labor in preaching and teaching. This is the responsibility of those elders who labor in preaching and teaching and are supported by the church.

The responsibility of the church, then (and this is the other important part of the equation), is to generously support those who have been called to this role. To bestow on them double honor—not only respect, but also financial support. Paul backs this up with two quotations from Scripture. The first quotation is an interesting one, and you might wonder what feeding an ox has to do with paying a pastor. It's not a very flattering illustration. But you have to appreciate how Paul always has a way of getting his point across. His point is this: If your ox is treading out the grain, you don't restrict him from eating any of the grain. You don't put a muzzle on him. You let the ox have a share of the grain which he has worked hard to produce. That's the point of the command in Deuteronomy 25:4. It's about treating your ox well. And then Paul uses this quotation from Deuteronomy to make the point that if you're supposed to do that for your ox, how much more should do this for those elders who labor in preaching and teaching. They're working hard, treading out the grain. Shouldn't they be able to receive some sustenance from this work? Shouldn't the church support them and provide for their needs?

The second quotation happens to be from the mouth of Jesus. It is found in Luke 10:7, and it's noteworthy that Paul refers to it as Scripture. Paul understood that the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels is Scripture, and is just as authoritative as the Old Testament. Jesus, when he was sending out 72 disciples to

go from town to town, He instructed them to go to a town and enter a house and “remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages.” So Paul sees this principle both in Deuteronomy in the command about how to treat your ox, and he also sees it in the teaching of Jesus.

Paul does speak to both sides of this issue, and both sides are important. He’s aware of the danger of having church leaders who love money and are trying to use the ministry as a way of getting rich. But he also knows that it is a benefit to the elders and to the church to have men who can labor in preaching and teaching without worrying about how to provide for their families. There’s a danger in having vocational pastors who are in it for the money. But there’s also a danger in not having any vocational pastors. Therefore there needs to be contentment on the part of the pastor and generosity on the part of the congregation. D. A. Carson summarizes this well, “In practice, this means that the ideal situation occurs when the church is as generous as possible, the ministers do not concern themselves with material matters and are above selfish material interest. The worst situation occurs when the ministers are grasping and covetous, constantly comparing themselves with other ‘professionals,’ while the church adopts the attitude, ‘You keep him humble, Lord, and we’ll keep him poor’” (*When Jesus Confronts the World: An Exposition of Matthew 8-10*, page 125). So there are responsibilities on both sides.

You should know that this church has 5 elders. I’m one of those 5 elders, and I’m the only one who receives a salary from the church. I hope that in the future we’ll be able to add other elders who are full-time laborers in the work of the ministry, but right now it’s just me. And I also want to say to you that I count it a tremendous privilege to be able to devote my life to this work and to know that my family is provided for. I don’t have to work another job. My wife doesn’t have to work outside the home, but can care for our children and our home and labor alongside me in the ministry. Preaching and teaching is what I absolutely love to do, and it’s such a blessing that I don’t have to divide my time between this and some other job. Because there’s no other job that I would enjoy half as much as this. There’s no other vocation that is half as appealing to me as this, and so I’m grateful to you for calling me to serve here and supporting me and my family so that I can labor in preaching and teaching. It’s not easy work, but it is very fulfilling work, and it’s the work that God created me to do. So thank you for entrusting me with this responsibility and supporting me in this work.

Stacy was on a plane this week going to visit her sister in Portland, and she was chatting with the person next to her on the plane. And in the course of the conversation she shared that she’s

a pastor's wife. And then as she tried to ask some spiritual questions, the guy kind of cut her off and said he didn't like to talk about religion. Stacy said it's hard for her *not* to talk about her relationship with Christ. He responded by remarking that Christianity is just our vocation. It's the job that I have, and so naturally it's something we're going to be interested in. I hope none of you view vocational ministry in that way. It's not merely a job. It's not a profession. It's not just a way to bring home a paycheck. It's a calling to devote one's life to the exhilarating work of the Gospel, because it has changed my life. Wretched sinner that I am, I've been forgiven because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and I want to share this Good News with others. This is not just my job. It is my life's passion.

Disciplining Elders (verses 19-21)

The next issue that Paul deals with here is disciplining elders. And there are two situations he has in mind. First is the situation in which an innocent elder is falsely accused. And second is the situation in which an elder is, in fact, guilty. Verse 19 deals with the first situation. "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." This takes us back to Deuteronomy again, because we find there the same instruction. Deuteronomy 19:15-21 give the commands for how accusations are to be handled, and great precaution is taken to determine if an accusation is true or false. Similar precaution must be taken in the case of an accusation against an elder in the church. Gossip and slander cannot go unchecked, and especially when the reputation of an elder is at stake. Therefore this clear and simple guideline makes a lot of sense. One person's accusation cannot be enough to bring down a leader.

Paul knows that sometimes elders will be accused falsely, especially in the volatile situation at Ephesus. And therefore he reiterates this Old Testament principle in order to protect innocent elders. It is not meant to protect, and must not protect, elders who are actually guilty. If there are two or three individuals who can bring credible evidence that an elder has indeed fallen into some form of immorality or false teaching, then that charge needs to be heard. And if the charge is found to be accurate, there needs to be discipline.

Verse 20, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." The ESV, in the phrase "those who persist in sin" is simply trying to bring out the sense of the present tense verb. The New King James renders it simply "those who are sinning." Or the NIV, "those who sin." And since this verse follows verse 19, I think it is referring to those elders who are guilty as charged. It's not a matter of whether they

are repentant or not, or whether or not they continue in the sin after being charged. It's simply a matter of innocence or guilt. Verse 19 protects the innocent elder. Verse 20 tells us how to respond when an elder is found to be guilty.

What is Paul thinking of here when he says, "those who sin"? All elders sin, but Paul isn't saying that every sin needs to receive a public rebuke. Going back to the qualifications for elders in chapter 3, we can understand that "those who sin" are those who have somehow violated those standards. They have sinned in some way that brings reproach. They are no longer above reproach. We should also remember Paul's admonition to Timothy in 4:16, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching." From what we read in this letter, there were apparently discipline issues both in the area of life and in the area of doctrine. So we need to understand the scope that Paul has in mind here. He's not only thinking of immorality in a man's life, but also false teaching. In either area, if an elder's life or teaching is found to be contradicting the Gospel, then he needs to be rebuked publicly. Paul says, "rebuke them in the presence of all," that is, the whole congregation.

These instructions are somewhat different than the general guidelines for church discipline in Matthew 18. In Matthew 18 Jesus is talking about any member of the congregation who is entangled in sin. He says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17). In those situations, the issue is only brought before the church if the person remains unrepentant even after being confronted privately. And then if the individual is still unrepentant when the issue is brought before the church, the person is removed from the fellowship of the church and considered to be an unbeliever. 1 Timothy 5, though, is a different situation. It's not about dealing with sin generally in the congregation, and there's no mention of removing anyone from church. Rather, it deals with the particular issue of elders who have fallen into sin. And since elders are the visible leaders of the church and their personal reputation is so closely tied to the reputation of the church and the reputation of Christ, the stakes are higher and the consequences are more severe. The public nature of the office requires a public rebuke.

The last phrase in verse 20 gives the purpose for this, "so that the rest may stand in fear." This is especially referring to the

other elders, but also applies to the congregation as a whole. It is meant to show all of us the seriousness of our sin, and thus purify the church. This is for the good of the person disciplined, and also for the good of the church as a whole. It is good for the person disciplined in that it is meant to help that person see the gravity of their sin and bring them to a point of brokenness over their sin. And the purpose of discipline in the church is always redemptive. The hope is that the person disciplined will be changed and sanctified, and will possibly even be restored to leadership. This discipline is also good for the church by fostering holiness among the elders and among the congregation and by maintaining the purity of the church's witness in the world.

These are not easy situations to deal with, and they can be very painful. But you should that this church is committed to and has followed the instructions of this verse. And even though it is difficult and uncomfortable, the alternative is far worse. To sweep sin under the rug and cover it up, ignore it, minimize it—that is devastating to a church. It may keep things looking good on the surface, but it severely compromises the church's credibility.

So let us all stand in fear. For myself and the other elders, let this be a vivid reminder of our responsibility to fight the fight of faith and hold one another accountable so that, by God's grace, we may remain above reproach. We should fear the public rebuke that will come if we fall into sin. This is, in fact, a means of grace to us—part of how God motivates us to live holy lives. It's certainly not the only motivation. We should be far more motivated by the rewards of obedience, the enjoyment of following Christ and becoming more like Christ. But God also motivates us through the fear of discipline, so we shouldn't ignore this.

In verse 21 Paul emphasizes the importance of these instructions with a reference to God, Christ Jesus, and the elect angels. Paul is giving this charge to Timothy, these instructions of verses 19-20, in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels. In the context of making these judgments within the local church, Paul alludes to the ultimate day of judgment, which will come when Jesus returns, and he is reminding Timothy to carry out these instructions with that final day in view. Matthew 16:27 says, "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done." This should remind Timothy, and all elders, that God is going to hold us accountable for our actions. And it should also impress upon us the need to judge as God judges, that is, without any prejudice or partiality, which is what the rest of verse 21 says. "I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality."

In any situation, there is the temptation to jump to a conclusion before all the facts are known, based on how we feel about certain individuals. The first word, “prejudging” or “prejudice” or “bias,” could be referring back specifically to verse 19 and the case of an accusation made against an elder. We shouldn’t make a hasty assumption about the accusation just because of how we perceive those who are bringing the charge or how we perceive the elder being charged. There needs to be fairness and careful examination of the facts. The second word, “partiality” or “favoritism,” may then be more focused on verse 20 and the need to publicly rebuke an elder who has fallen into sin. Just because a leader is well-liked cannot be reason to ignore his sin.

Paul is exhorting Timothy in the most serious terms that he must handle these cases with the utmost care and fairness, without any fear of man but only a reverent fear of God and a passion for the purity of the church. Alexander Strauch, in his book *Biblical Eldership*, says, “The failure to publicly discipline church leaders demonstrates a grievous lack of love for God and His Word. It reveals that we do not fear and serve God, but want to play church games. No matter how difficult or unpleasant such discipline may be, we must ‘maintain these principles’ in obedience to God” (page 220).

Appointing Elders (verses 22-25)

The third issue Paul deals with in this passage is appointing elders. Verse 22, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.” When a man is set apart as an elder, the way of symbolizing that and commissioning that man to this role, is by laying hands on him and praying for him. Paul may have in mind here the restoration of elders who were publicly rebuked and removed from office, in which case he would be saying that they must not be restored too quickly. But he’s probably also thinking more generally of how to prevent discipline situations. There should be much patience and intentionality in the appointing process in order to make discipline less likely in the future.

The danger in hastily appointing elders is that Timothy may somehow take part in the sins of others. Obviously Paul doesn’t want Timothy to fall into the same sins for which others must be disciplined. But there also seems to be a more subtle participation in sin that Paul is talking about. There is a sense in which Timothy and the other elders are responsible for one another’s actions and teaching. So if the elders lay hands on a man and appoint him as a fellow elder, and they do so without sufficient time and examination, and then it becomes apparent that the man is in sin,

then the other elders share in his sin. Especially if they do not do something about it, if they bury it and ignore it, then they are effectively condoning the sin and justifying the sin. In this way Timothy, and any elder, takes part in the sin of others if he is not careful to appoint only qualified men and if he is not courageous to confront sin.

Gene Getz, in his book *Elders and Leaders*, says that he has seen the devastating effects of hiding sin. He writes, “I’ve seen elders and deacons duped and deceived by a strong spiritual leader. Not only did they ‘cover up’ the sin, but some eventually followed their leader’s example and committed the same sins. Tragically, once this happened, these men began to cover for each other and became trapped, knowing that if they blew their leader’s cover, they would be blowing their own. What an insidious situation; but it demonstrates the devastating results of hiding sin, particularly in the leadership of the church” (page 144-145). I exhort you, fellow elders, and all of us, not to cover up sin. Your own sin, or someone else’s sin. We, of course, need to be sensitive in how we handle such information—it should never be a matter of gossip—but we cannot just look the other way. For the sake of the Gospel and the purity of the church we must confront sin and deal with it biblically.

Lastly in verse 21 he says, “keep yourself pure.” As Timothy deals with issues of discipline, he must make sure that he remains pure. He must watch his own life and doctrine. He must keep a close watch on his motives as he carries out these instructions, a close watch on his personal character, a close watch on the teaching. He must be sure that his life remains above reproach. Robert Murray McCheyne, who was a pastor in Scotland in the early 1800s (he died at the age of 29), said, “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness.” That applies to all the elders of this church as well. There are plenty of things we can do and teach, plenty of work and ministry to be done, but far more important than any of that is our personal holiness. Let us be attentive to that first and foremost.

Now we come to this parenthetical statement about wine. It’s hard to tell why this comment shows up here. It seems a bit out of place. But it may be that the mention of purity at the end of verse 22 made Paul want to qualify that in a practical way. He remembers that Timothy drinks only water, and is concerned for Timothy’s health and possibly also concerned that Timothy was falling into a kind of asceticism that was similar to what the false teachers were promoting. Remember in chapter 4 the false teachers who “forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods.” Paul is now interjecting this statement to say, Don’t think that abstaining from wine constitutes purity. Timothy, don’t let your

health suffer just because you're trying to appear holy and righteous. Drink a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.

I'll make three brief observations to aid you in how you ought to apply this to your life. First, we observe that Paul is recommending wine for medicinal use. His intention is to help improve Timothy's health. Secondly, we notice that he says "a little wine." He is not telling Timothy to drink a lot of wine, only a little. He must not be a drunkard, which is clearly stated both in the qualifications for elders and for deacons. But then, thirdly, we must also acknowledge that biblical purity is not defined by legalistic guidelines. The Bible condemns drunkenness, but it does not condemn alcohol altogether. We certainly must not abuse alcohol, and we don't want to cause a brother to stumble, but that doesn't mean that there's anything inherently sinful about having a little wine.

In verses 24-25 Paul explains further why it is necessary to be patient and to take great care in appointing elders. Don't be hasty in the laying on of hands because "the sins of some men are conspicuous [evident, obvious], going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later." You can't be hasty about appointing elders, because you can't see everything about a person all at once. There are two contrasting examples in verse 24 and then two more in verse 25. Verse 24 refers first to those individuals who are obviously not qualified for eldership. Their sins are evident, making the judgment easy and simple. But for others, their sins are not as evident. Their sins don't appear until later, and so time needs to be taken to really get to know someone and evaluate their character and their teaching. On the other hand, verse 25 tells us that the same can be true of good works. "So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden." For some, their good works will be clearly seen right away, but for others their good works are not immediately seen. But eventually good works will come to light. They cannot remain hidden.

These are the reasons for being slow and cautious in the selection of elders. On the one hand, to make sure that unqualified men are not appointed. And on the other hand, to make sure that gifted, qualified men are not overlooked, just because their good works are not as obvious.

As I studied these verse I reflected back on my own journey into the ministry, and I certainly see the wisdom of this caution. Because when I first felt called into the ministry, when I first aspired to some kind elder-type leadership in the church, I was not at that time equipped or qualified to do so. But God clearly laid that on my heart, and the preparation process began. I was in

my freshman year at college, thinking that I was going to become a chemical engineer. And all of that changed as God put it in my heart to pursue full-time ministry. I was getting involved in a local church, and I started teaching a children's Sunday School class. I was given small leadership opportunities. I led a small group Bible study with some of my fellow football players. I then had some preaching opportunities and other leadership roles. I was involved in a college ministry. During seminary I taught another children's Sunday School class. I then worked as the minister of students at a church for about three years. And finally, I was given this amazing privilege and responsibility to serve as an elder here in this church. About 10 years elapsed between the time I felt called into the ministry and when I was appointed as an elder. I say this to encourage those of you who may aspire to eldership. 1 Timothy 3:1 says, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." It's good that you desire to be an elder. Don't give up on that hope and dream, if God has put it in your heart. But also be patient. God may take 10 years to prepare you for that. It may be shorter. It may be longer. But don't think that aspiring to the office of overseer is the same as being equipped and qualified to step into that role. It will take time for God to prepare you, and it will take time for the elders to discern whom they should lay hands on. We should all keep in mind that if someone is appointed an elder a couple years later than they hoped, that's OK. If a man is appointed a couple years too early, it could be devastating.

God cares about His church, and the church's witness in the world. I pray that we will heed these instructions and these warnings so that this church can be a bright light in a dark world, bearing witness to the transforming work of the Gospel in our lives. And I pray that through the witness of this church many will come to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ.