

## The Pillar: Chapter 5 (Part 3 of 3)

Caring for Those who Care for the Church

1 Timothy 5:17-25

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*<sup>17</sup> Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. <sup>18</sup> For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." <sup>19</sup> Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>20</sup> As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. <sup>21</sup> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. <sup>22</sup> Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. <sup>23</sup> (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) <sup>24</sup> The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. <sup>25</sup> So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.*

One of the many values of preaching through a book of the Bible is that you run into passages that, as a preacher, you wouldn't intentionally choose to preach. By walking through a book of the Bible, we are forced to deal with texts that are hard, uncomfortable, confusing, or even awkward. While we might not choose to deal with them in a "one-off" sermon, it is helpful to work through these passages for a number of reasons.

First, it makes church interesting, doesn't it? As we approach a number of passages in this book, I know that many of you were counting down the weeks until I had to deal with a difficult passage. You would read ahead and think (or say to me!), "Wonder what he's going to do with that one!" There is something helpful in anticipating a sermon even if it is out of curiosity.

Second, it makes us think hard, and this is important because there are difficult questions in the Bible. It doesn't serve us or the advancement of the gospel to avoid those issues. Christianity is not just an experiential faith; it is intellectual. It makes sense. So we need not shy away from hard questions or difficult passages.

Third, these hard, but especially awkward, texts remind us what is truly authoritative. By this I mean that there are times when a Bible teacher or preacher has to explain what the Bible says even if it is uncomfortable. Those moments are valuable because they make clear that the Scriptures are our ultimate authority. The goal is to teach the whole counsel of God, and that goal supersedes the understandable desire to avoid the risk saying something uncomfortable. These texts test whether or not preaching is about the preacher's comfort or about the truth of the Word.

Finally, these texts, when handled with respect and humility, create a greater bond within the family of God. It is a strange but lovely thing. I found that a congregation feels more like a family when we deal with hard, awkward, and difficult texts. Wrestling with these passages gives evidence that what we are doing here is not a game or a show. It is real. It is honest. And like life, it is not easy.

Somewhere in our understanding of church, we long for this – to know that this truth that leads to life is also truth that works in life.

Today we are going to talk about the relationship between the church and its pastors/elders. We will dive into the dynamics of how the church should treat pastors/elders in a variety of situations. The awkwardness of this is obvious: I'm pastor telling you how to treat pastors. I want to acknowledge that but also recognize that Paul thought that this was important enough to address head-on, knowing that Timothy might be in an uncomfortable spot too.

### **The Pastoral Leadership Problem in Ephesus**

It helps to soften the text a bit by thinking through the context in Ephesus. Let me remind you that Timothy was sent to this established church to correct some false teaching. The nexus of this heresy was a group of leaders – likely elders – who were leading the people astray. The short-term and immediate solution was to teach people the truth (see 1 Timothy 1:6).

But the long-term, and more difficult, solution was dealing with the elders who were creating the problem. That is why there is so much material in 1 Timothy about the qualifications of elders and deacons. Most of chapter three is dedicated to this theme of the being sure that you have the right people in the right place to make the right decisions.

I'm sure that you understand the importance of this. My guess is that you, like me, have seen church leadership at its best and church leadership at its worst. And the challenge is the fact that church health is directly connected to leadership. So this was an important issue for Timothy to deal with.

Our text deals with the issue of how to care for those who care for the church. It addresses not only the problem of the bad leaders; it also speaks to how we are to help or encourage those who are doing a good job. The issue is not just dealing with bad leadership but also retaining good leadership.

There are three things that Timothy is called to do.

#### **1. Honor them appropriately (vv 17-18)**

Chapter five has been a collection of various instructions regarding the care of particular people. We studied Paul's general instruction in verses 1-2 about treating people like family. In verses 3-16 we looked at the compassion program of the church and how to care for widows.

In this final section of chapter five, Paul turns his attention toward elders. Paul chooses to use the Greek word *presbyteros* which was previously used for old men in 1 Timothy 5:1 and the council of church leaders in 1 Timothy 4:14. When we studied the qualifications for church leadership in 1 Timothy 3 we ran into the English word “overseer” or *episkopos* in the Greek. The difference in meaning is slight. “Overseer” seemed to emphasize the role of spiritual leadership and oversight. “Elder” had its roots in the culture of the synagogue where a plurality of leaders cared for the congregation. To be a synagogue elder was a great honor and carried with it an implied authority. Paul may have chosen this term because of its close connection with honor, as we will see in moment. Regardless, Paul is now talking about those who are spiritual leaders in the church.

Paul’s main concern here is that good elders should be honored. What kind of elders? The requirement is that they “rule well.” This phrase identifies the main role of church leaders, and it fits with word “overseer” in 1 Timothy 3. Elders are all called to the task of spiritual leadership, a varied task and role which is summarized here as “ruling.” The word means to influence others to a course of action and to guide or lead. Good and helpful elders are those who provide effective spiritual leadership. In light of that, it makes even more sense why Paul in 1 Timothy 3 would list a series of character traits as opposed to series of skill-sets. All elders are to lead the church and spiritually influence people, and the means by which they do this is their lives. Therefore, to “rule well” is to fulfill this spiritual modeling role successfully – their lives and their ministry are spiritually effective.

Interestingly, he says that these elders are worthy of “double honor.” What does that mean? The word for honor here generally refers to respect or regard. Like the elders in the synagogue who were honored because of their spiritual leadership role, elders of a church should be treated the same. Paul wanted this church to understand and appreciate the value of spiritual leadership. Remember that in chapter 3:1, Paul encouraged the aspiration to this calling. Those who serve in this way should be considered worthy of honor.

There is another sense of the word “honor,” and I think it explains why Paul says “double honor” here. The word can also refer to financial support. In other words, Paul believed that “those who give leadership to the community . . . should be maintained by the community.”<sup>1</sup> Now Paul personally chose, for a number of reasons, not to be supported financially by the churches, and he is not saying that all elders are to be financially supported. Yet, he makes the point in a number of places about how it is right for a church to support its elders:

*<sup>7</sup>Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?*

*<sup>8</sup>Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? <sup>9</sup>For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? <sup>10</sup>Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the*

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee, *The New International Biblical Commentary – 1-2 Timothy, Titus*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 129.

*crop. <sup>11</sup> If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? <sup>12</sup> If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?*

*Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. <sup>13</sup> Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? <sup>14</sup> In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel (1 Cor. 9:7-14).*

Why would Paul make this point? I think that we get a hint in the latter part of verse 17 and verse 18. There seems to be two reasons. I'm going to take them in reverse order.

First, there is simply a fairness issue. In verse 18 we read, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and "The laborer deserves his wages." The first statement is a quotation from the Old Testament law (Deut. 25:4), and the second is a statement by Jesus in Luke 10:7. It is unfair – even stingy – to muzzle an ox while it is treading grain out of a concern that it might eat a bit of the product. Similarly, it is unfair – even oppressive – to expect a worker to work without receiving appropriate wages. So it is only fair.

Second, there is a priority issue. Notice in verse 17 that Paul calls something out. He says, "especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." Now it is not that the other roles within the eldership are less honorable or less worthy of respect. All elders who rule well are considered worthy of double honor. Yet, Paul calls out the labor of preaching and teaching here because of its essential role in the spiritual health and vitality of every church. In other words, instruction in the Word of God is so important and so vital to our souls that it is right for the community of faith to do everything in their power to ensure that the dynamics are set for their growth – including financial support. Paul knows that what we spend money on is what we really value. Without being crass or rude, he simply and plainly says that instruction in the Word of God should be important enough that the people in the church would make personal financial sacrifices to provide for this spiritual instruction. It should be a priority.

This is one of the reasons why I believe it is biblical for every person who regularly receives spiritual blessing from this church to be a part of the financial provision for this ministry. And I'm not saying this to increase our budget, nor am I specifically identifying what level of financial support you should give. My point is because I think it is important for your own soul to regularly express what you value through your money. We invest in what we believe is truly valuable, and spiritual growth through the Word of God is worthy of your sacrificial giving.

Finally, let me express my gratitude to you as a congregation. I'm not preaching this portion of God's Word out of any sense of lack, and I think that is the way it should be. You need to know that our lay elders understand and value the idea of taking care of those who take care of the church. So I believe that we are living this out very well. What's more, I know that our spiritual leaders feel loved by you as a congregation. I think because of a long tradition of careful and consistent teaching of the Bible, there is a great spirit here of love, support, and encouragement. It is a rare and refreshing combination, and it makes for long-term pastorates, which is good for you and for our pastors. So thank you for honoring our elders appropriately.

## 2. Correct them carefully (vv 17-21)

The second area that Paul addresses here relates to the problem at hand in Ephesus, but it also stems from the understandable reality that elders are not perfect. Elders are fallible; they make mistakes, and the church needs to know how to correct sinful, erring elders.

First, notice where Paul begins. He starts by advising caution: *"<sup>19</sup>Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses" (1 Tim. 1:19)*. Paul seems to be recognizing here that due to the prominence of the role of elders and the nature of their spiritual leadership role, they may be accused of things that are not true. Dealing with soul-related issues is often complicated, messy, emotional, and personal. When you put those dynamics together, there is potential for problems. When a person in spiritual authority begins to press in on an issue, it can create strong push-back or spiritual "red herrings." A familiar way to skirt the real issues is by attacking the messenger. Therefore, a charge needs to be on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Remember that Paul is talking about how to address erring elders. It seems that he is telling Timothy to not assume that everything he hears about the bad elders is true. Matthew 18:15-20 establishes the important process of dealing with accusations, and part of that process is establishing the truthfulness of what is happening by "the evidence of two or three witnesses." Therefore, even suspicious and potentially heretical elders are still under the authority and protection of the Scriptural process.

Second, we learn that care needs to be given to how confirmed sin issues are handled in the body regarding elders. Verse 20 says, "As for those who persist in sin . . ." This is probably the impetus for why Paul wrote this section of 1 Timothy. The elders were continually sinning, and it needed to be stopped. It is not that they have sinned; there is a continuation here. They are sinning.

Notice what Paul commands here: *"rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear (v 20)*. Due to their public leadership role and because of their substantial spiritual influence on people, the elders who continue to sin must be exposed publicly. If the charges are supported by two or three witnesses, if they refuse to repent when confronted, then the issue must be brought to the entire church. This step, while often extremely loaded and difficult, is important not only for the soul of the elders, but also for spiritual health of the entire body. When Paul talks about the rest standing in fear, he means people will be spiritually woken up to how serious the care for their souls really is. By slowly and appropriately addressing these issues, it does a number of important things in the life of a body:

- It shows them the serious consequences of sin
- It reminds them of their own potential for error and sin
- It causes them to be more discerning in the future regarding teaching and leadership
- It creates a natural filter for future leaders
- It affirms the significance of spiritual accountability
- It demonstrates that the ultimate authority is the Word, not people

Notice how these last two points show up in verse 21: *<sup>21</sup> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.*” Paul reminds Timothy about the spiritual authority behind what they are doing. He cites the presence of God, Christ Jesus, and the elect angels. He is elevating the seriousness of what is at stake and who is watching. But he also talks about not prejudging or doing anything from partiality. Timothy is not to move too quickly nor is he to be timid. Great wisdom is needed here because there are dangers on either side, issues that can create enormous problems in any church. On the one hand, not everything that is said about an elder should be believed. They should be protected. John Calvin said, “None are more exposed to slanders and insults than godly teacher. They may perform their duties correctly and conscientiously, yet they never avoid a thousand criticisms.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there can be a real temptation to not address an issue at all or not to do so publicly and be guilty of partiality.

One of the reasons we have an active feedback and evaluation process for all our pastors, including myself, is to be sure that blind-spots and weaknesses can be addressed. We want to have some process to help each grow and change. But there is another reason. I think that people need to have the reassurance that no one gets a “free pass” when it comes to accountability. I think people feel safe (appropriately so) when they know that there is a commitment to address issues without partiality.

Elders are to be corrected carefully – not hastily nor apathetically. The church is too important and the gospel too precious to neglect appropriate protection or rebuke.

### **3. Appoint them wisely (vv 22-25)**

The final way to care for those who care for the church is to be sure that the right people are appointed to positions of ministry leadership. Timothy has to address the difficult problem of erring elders, but the long-term solution was to avoid this scenario by appointing the right people. Therefore, Paul wisely warns him about the importance of being careful with guarding the gate.

We hear this caution very clearly in verse 22: *“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, not take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.”* When Paul talks about “laying on of the hands,” he is referring to some kind of ordination or official appointment into ministry. It refers to the moment when the elders prayed over a person for a ministry position, affirming that person’s gifts and qualifications. It is one of the most important things that elders do. And Paul warns Timothy about doing it hastily or too quickly. As I’m sure you know, people are not always what they seem to be, and there can be real danger in giving a person the authority of spiritual leadership before they are really qualified. That is why Paul gave so much detail in chapter 3 regarding the qualifications of elders.

Further, this could have a negative personal effect on Timothy and his ministry. He could be implicated by the sinful issues of others or he could be drawn into their sinful pursuits. He could be guilty by association or be pulled into a regrettable situation. Timothy needs to be pure.

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<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 138.

However, in calling Timothy to be pure, he does not want Timothy to be guilty of the extreme asceticism of the false teachers. Therefore, he adds a parenthetical statement in verse 23 about the appropriate use of wine – *“no longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”* Notice how much must be balanced here! He must remove bad leaders, appoint new ones, appoint people into the ministry - but not too quickly, work hard, take care of himself, use some wine - but not get drunk.

Timothy must be exceptionally wise. The pitfalls on either side are significant and filled with many consequences. He needs great discernment. Verses 24-25 are very helpful in this discernment process in that they advocate for taking time to really know a person because what a person is all about is not evident quickly. Paul nearly gives us a proverb here: *“The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden (1 Tim. 1:24-25).”*

First impressions can be terribly deceiving, but eventually the fruit of a person’s life will be evident. Sometimes it is obvious right away, but more often than not it takes time to see what is really going on in the soul. One of the reasons we are trying to develop a culture of leadership development at College Park is because we believe that it is important to the health of the church to appoint people to ministry leadership that we know really well. A few bad leaders, and the entire ministry can suffer.

Beyond a church leadership context, there is something important to think about here because Paul is just taking a biblical principle and applying it to church leadership. But it applies more broadly. Are you the kind of person that the closer people get to you, the safer they feel spiritually? In your relationships – even dating relationships – are you more impressed or less impressed as you spend time with someone? If I were to ask the people near you – the people who really know you – what kind of fruit report would they give? And what does that say about the status of your relationship with Jesus? Time reveals what people are really like, and that is what is so remarkable about the gospel – it changes you when you could never have changed yourself. And time only verifies how radical the change really is.

Therefore, because of the power of the gospel to produce fruit in the lives of people and because of the power of sin to produce bad fruit, the church should take its time with selecting leaders. Fruit is going to be apparent; it is only a matter of time. So appoint leaders wisely.

## **Truths to Remember**

Once again, we’ve seen the practical wisdom of this great book. But what is really going on here is simply the application of important, biblical truths to a very specific situation. So let’s take one step back and just remind ourselves what we see here:

### **1. Sin is deadly and costly**

This text reminds us again about the serious nature of sin. Paul wrote all this material and gave this instruction – some of it very sobering – because sin causes so many problems. But it is not just a

personal problem. Sin is doubly terrible because of its effects on others. People, families, and churches are destroyed by sin. Therefore, we should tremble.

## **2. The Word of God is our ultimate authority, hope, and security**

Hearing, understanding, and obeying the Word of God is everything for the believer and the church of Jesus Christ. Authority doesn't come from the people, the size, or the reputation of a church. Hope doesn't come from how many years a church has been in existence or from its innovative ministry. And security is not found in structure, constitutions, or leaders. It is the Scripture that makes us mature, competent, and equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16).

## **3. The gospel transforms us in obvious ways**

Jesus said that you will know a tree by its fruit (Matt. 12:33). Notice that over time, fruit is going to be obvious. Do you know why this is? It relates to the horror of sin and the power of the gospel. Bad fruit comes out of person's life because there is no power to do anything else; he can't help himself. And when a person receives Christ, a new power takes control. There is a new motivator, a new love, and a new Lord; he can't help himself. The fruit of the Spirit now flows out of his life because the source –the heart – has been eternally changed. It doesn't mean a person is perfect, but good fruit must be evident or there is no real relationship with Jesus (see Galatians 5:16-26).

The gospel is so transformative that over time the fruit will be obvious.

The church of Jesus Christ is a beautiful thing – full of life, hope, and power. But this is especially true when she is led by leaders who do what is right and when a congregation understands its responsibility to care for those who care for the church. A loving and appreciative congregation, combined with a church that is well led and well fed, should never be taken for granted.

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