

Message #11

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1 Timothy

1/3/2021

## HONORING ELDERS

### 1 TIMOTHY 5:17-25

#### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

We Christians are faced with a temptation to drift toward one of two extremes in our attitude toward Christian leaders. On the one hand, some Christians will follow a particular leader almost blindly. If the leader in question is well known, they will go to his or her conferences, they will listen to him or her on the radio, watch the person on TV, read his books, send him money, and quote him on various subjects more than they will quote the Bible.

If the Christian leader has his integrity challenged, as we have seen with many leaders in recent years, committed followers will not question the fact that he or she lives an extravagant lifestyle. They will buy into the justification that God's choice servants should live like children of the King. If there are justifiable charges of immorality in regard to the leader, they will assume that it is all a plot to destroy an anointed servant of God.

On the other hand there are some Christians who treat their Christian leaders like targets on a firing range. These critics are convinced that they have the spiritual gift of criticism, and they see their life mission as one of pointing out the shortcomings of the leaders in question. If Jesus Christ in the flesh was pastor of their church or Christian organization, He would not escape attack. They would criticize Him for having a pride problem, for having a messiah complex. Then the next week they would criticize Him for having no sense of self-respect because He humiliated Himself in washing the feet of one of His parishioners.

As for His sermons, they are just way too deep. The guy expects you to know the Old Testament. He is always quoting these Old Testament passages without giving the verse reference, and He expects you to know what they mean. Then when you ask this Jesus a question, He responds by asking you a question. You can't get a straight answer out of the guy. If He doesn't answer you with a question, He tells you a story instead. Who can understand what some of them mean? This guy also goes to way too many

parties. Some of them are hosted by pretty questionable people, certainly not members of our church, and once I even saw Him drink an alcoholic beverage.

It was after a church service one morning in which the minister had preached on spiritual gifts that he was greeted at the door by a lady who said, "Pastor, I believe that I have the gift of criticism." The pastor looked at her and asked, "Remember the person in Jesus' parable who had the one talent?" The woman nodded her understanding. "Do you recall what he did with it?" "Yes," replied the lady, "he went out and buried it." The pastor responded, "Go, thou, and do likewise!" (Back to the Bible, 1/24/2019)

The New Testament prescribes a middle road that Christians ought to take in their attitude toward Christian leaders. One of the primary terms which is used to describe our responsibility toward leaders is the word "honor." The passage before us this morning explains what is involved in honoring leaders.

Having recently been released from prison, Paul was writing to his longtime friend and understudy Timothy. The church at Ephesus in Asia Minor was faced with challenges. Chief among them was a group in the congregation which was promoting unbiblical ideas. We don't know exactly what they were teaching, but we know that it included speculative genealogies about Old Testament characters, encouragement not to marry, restrictions on diets, and fruitless discussions.

Timothy was a young man. He seems to have had a quiet, low-key disposition. But he also had a lot of ability, and he had spent much time with Paul. So the apostle had placed Timothy in that church to serve as his apostolic representative.

In #1 Paul told Timothy to stick it out in Ephesus and to confront the false teaching. In #2 he talked about worship services and the role of prayer and of women. In #3 he told Timothy about what qualities to seek in elders and deacons. In #4 he talked about the importance of pursuing godliness. In #5 Paul is telling Timothy how he and the church as a whole should treat various groups within the congregation: the old, the young, men, women, widows, and now elders.

I.

In vv. 17 & 18 Paul talks about HONORING ELDERS IN FINANCIAL SUPPORT. (PROJECTOR ON--- HONORING ELDERS IN FINANCIAL SUPPORT) He writes, "**Let the elders who rule well be considered**

**worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'"**

We saw from #3 that the leaders of a local church are called "elders." Sometimes they are also referred to in the New Testament as "overseers," or "bishops." Here the responsibility of elders is described as "ruling." Preaching and teaching is involved in this ruling, at least on the part of some of the elders. Those who do well at it, Paul says are worthy of double honor.

There are several implications from this. **First**, Paul implies that there is to be more than one elder in a church. It is not just those who function as preachers and teachers who may be elders. In many churches it is only the person who has the title "pastor" who functions as an elder. It seems to me to be more consistent with the New Testament teaching to have several men who function as elders in the local church.

We saw in #3 that all elders need to have some ability to teach. Some Christians are really good at communicating Christian truth one-on-one but not so great in front of a group. There seems to be a distinction recognized here between the good public teachers and preachers and the not-so-great-in-front-of-a-group elders. This distinction also seems to argue against the idea that there was only one elder who led every congregation. For it is only the preacher/teachers whom Paul seemed to think should be compensated financially, at least who are given double honor.

The **second** thing to notice here is that honor has a financial aspect. Paul is not just talking about respect. Respect is part of it. The original Greek word for "honor" is *time*. It is ironically part of the name "Timothy." *Time*--- honor--- plus *theos*--- God. Timothy--- "honor of God," or "God's honor."

Verse 18, which we will look at in a minute, makes it clear that financial support is in view here. Occasionally use of this Greek word in the New Testament has an obvious reference to money. Matthew #27 v. 9 (MATTHEW 27:9) is speaking about Judas Iscariot. It reads, **"Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price--- *time*--- of him on whom a price--- *time*--- had been set by some of the sons of Israel..."** It is possible that all of the elders in the Ephesian church received some financial support. I suspect that, with limited resources, only the preacher/teachers did.

**Third**, Paul indicates that those who are especially effective as elders are to receive double honor, especially preachers and teachers. (PROJECTOR OFF) It is possible that he meant that they should get twice as much as the other elders. My suspicion is that he was speaking in a more figurative sense. He was saying that preaching/teaching elders should be paid well. They should be paid well enough so that they did not have to work at second jobs and could give the ministry their full attention. My preferred interpretation of what he meant, however, is that he intended that the teaching/preaching pastor's salary should be doubled every year. What do you think?

I do feel well provided for by this congregation. Don and I are also especially appreciative of the generous Christmas bonus gifts which we have received. If you have been around here for a while, you know that we do not stress the need to give money a lot. We talk about it when we come to a Biblical passage that speaks about it. But my philosophy is that financial giving is a reflection of the spiritual maturity of individuals and a congregation. If we are doing a good job of nourishing a congregation's spiritual health, financial giving will be one evidence of that. In looking at the church's financial year end status, we find that we are over \$40,000 in the black, which is pretty amazing, given the pandemic year that we have had and the stories of hardship that many Christian ministries have had. We praise God for that. I will also mention that I have no involvement in the receiving of offerings. I don't know what individuals give. I don't really care to know. We try to keep financial giving as much as possible between you and the Lord.

**Fourth**, we commonly refer to people who do what I do as "pastors." That probably isn't going to change. But it is important to realize that Biblically, in my interpretation, we would be categorized as elders whose work is preaching and teaching. For the New Testament says that all elders have the responsibility to pastor the congregation. Thus it is that we have divided up the congregation to make sure that every member and regular attender has an elder, or a deacon or deaconess, who regularly prays for you and keeps up with you. If you haven't received a post card, or don't receive a post card in the next week, let us know, and we will make sure that someone in leadership is assigned to keep up with you and pray for you.

**Fifth**, notice that there is a Biblical basis for the idea that people should be compensated according to the value of their work. The Communist idea was that pay for work should be done according to the principle: From each according to his ability to each according to his need. The twentieth century proved that this idea doesn't work. Our verse shows that there is a basis for being paid according to our ability and diligence. For Paul said that those elders who are especially effective should receive double honor.

Early in ministry I candidated at a church in Vermont that was looking for a pastor. It was a small congregation, and at one point one of the elders asked us, "What would be the smallest amount of money you would be willing to take to come here?" We could appreciate the financial situation that they faced, but the attitude conveyed was that they were going to pay us the least amount of money possible to keep us there. That is not the kind of attitude that the Apostle Paul expected churches to have.

On the other hand, Paul does not say that effective elders are to be given triple honor or quadruple honor. For pastors or leaders of Christian organizations to expect huge bonuses and salaries typical of CEOs of large secular organizations doesn't seem to me to be right. I was looking this week at the estimated compensation of the four highest earning pastors in the US. According to Beliefnet, Kenneth Copeland has a net worth of \$760 million. For TD Jakes it is \$150 million, Benny Hinn \$42 million, and Joel Osteen \$40 million. I have a hard time seeing how Jesus or Paul would be saying, "Way to go guys. I am proud of what you are doing."

I was also looking at the compensation of the leader of a large Christian relief organization. It is a good organization in many ways, but he makes \$660,000 in salary and bonuses from the group. At the same time he is CEO of another Christian organization from which he makes, as of 2015 according to the *Washington Post*, an additional \$258,000 a year. I don't know how you can be comfortable in asking for sacrificial donations from elderly people on fixed incomes when you take that large a salary from them.

So we need to be generous to our Christian leaders, but we need to also hold them accountable. We need to know where our money goes that we give to Christian organizations.

Verse 18 provides a reason for Paul's exhortation in v. 17: **"For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain...'"** This is a quotation from Deuteronomy #25 v. 4. In ancient days sheaves of grain were put about a foot deep on the ground, and oxen were made to walk back and forth on them, or they were tied to a post and went around in a circle. This walking on the sheaves would cause the grains to be separated and the straw to break up. When the wind came, the whole mixture would be tossed up in the air. The heavier grain would fall pretty much straight down, and the straw would be blown away.

The Old Testament law required that even the animals be allowed to eat some of the results of their work. Paul's point is that if animals are allowed to have some material return for their work, then certainly as much should be done for Christian leaders.

Paul cites another statement that says the same thing even more directly: **“The laborer deserves his wages.”** Usually when the term “Scripture” is used in the New Testament, the author is talking about the Old Testament. But there is no statement like this second clause in the Old Testament. This exact statement is attributed to Jesus in Luke #10 v. 7 and Matthew #10 v. 10. Some commentators contend that Paul did not intend his readers to understand that this second clause should also be regarded as Scripture. But it seems to me that the most natural reading of the sentence is that Paul is saying that both sayings are Scripture.

If this is indeed the case, this lends support to the idea of the inspiration of the Gospels. According to the Book of Acts, Luke was a traveling companion of Paul for many years. So it is conceivable that Paul later had access to Luke’s record of the life and sayings of Jesus and regarded his work as being inspired by God and on a par with the Old Testament.

So it is that Paul writes in 1 Corinthians #9 v. 14 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 9:14), **“In the same way the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”**

The church’s responsibility, then, is to care for the financial needs of its leaders, especially of those who are devoted to the work of preaching and teaching. On the other hand, as we shall see in the next chapter, the elder’s responsibility is to be free from the love of money. Money is not to be the focus of his attention.

II.

(II. HONORING ELDERS IN DISCIPLINE) Verses 19-25 of #5 deal with HONORING ELDERS IN DISCIPLINE. Verse 19 introduces the subject of RECEIVING ACCUSATIONS. (II. HONORING... A. RECEIVING ACCUSATIONS) Paul writes, **“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”**

Honoring elders, especially effective elders, means not only supporting them but also respecting them. Respect for elders includes protecting them from unfounded and petty criticism. Elders are leaders, and the leaders of any organization are more likely than others to receive criticism, sometimes justified and sometimes not.

Consider this description of leadership in the face of criticism: **“The leader is assailed because he is a leader... Failing to equal or excel, the follower seeks to depreciate and destroy--- but only confirms once more the superiority of that which he strives to supplant. There is nothing new in this. It is as old as the world and as old as the human passions--- envy, fear, greed, ambition, and the desire to surpass. And it all avails nothing. If the leader truly leads, he remains--- the leader.”** This description comes from *The Saturday Evening Post*--- in 1915--- in an advertisement--- for the Cadillac Car Company.

Leaders will always face criticism. But Christians in a church or other Christian organization have a responsibility before God in how they respond to their leaders. Honoring leaders means being cautious about criticism. Again there are two extremes that may unfold in how church members respond to perceived misbehavior on the part of an elder: Nothing may be said or done when something should be said or done. Or, a lot may be said or done when nothing should be said or done.

If a pastor or elder or Christian leader is messing up, if he is sinning against God, if he is exhibiting bad behavior, he needs to be held accountable. If Christians are being petty and picky, they need to be quiet. That doesn't mean that people can't make suggestions or come up with ideas for ministry. That should always be welcomed.

The basic responsibility in all matters of Christian accountability is laid out by Jesus Himself in Matthew #18 vv. 15-17. (MATTHEW 18:15) There 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. (MATTHEW 18:16) 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. (MATTHEW 18:17) 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.”**

The Old Testament Law required that there be at least two witnesses present before the judges could even receive a charge or accusation against anyone. That requirement was applied by Jewish law to all people. The subject here is honoring elders. The apostle's concern is that church leaders, who may be subject to more criticism than most people, should be shown honor by having this protection which should be granted to all people. Paul wants Timothy and other church leaders to put a restraint upon people who have petty complaints or false charges by insisting that they not even listen to accusations against an elder unless there are at least two people who have a substantive complaint.

The following item was supposedly found in the Sunday bulletin of a church. The pastor wrote a brief response to rumors floating around about alleged misbehavior on his part. This is what he wrote: **“I have learned that a story is being rather widely circulated that on a recent occasion I forbade my wife to attend the services of another church, which were of a highly emotional character, and that when she refused to obey me and attended without my permission, I went to that church and dragged her out by the hair of the head, and beat her so severely that she had to be sent to the hospital. I feel it necessary to make a statement in regard to the story. In the first place I never forbade my wife to attend any services to which she might wish to go; I have left her at perfect liberty to do as she pleases in matters of this kind. In the second place, I did not drag her by the hair of the head from such a service, nor did I beat her when I brought her home. In the third place, she was not so badly hurt that she had to be sent to a hospital... And in the fourth place, as some of you know perhaps, I have never been married...”**

Some such incidents are not so humorous. When I was a youth pastor, there was a teenage boy who had marginal involvement in the church, though his parents were very involved. I made some attempts to get him connected, but he was not very responsive. The mom blamed me for not doing more. The real problem was that the dad worked 80 hours a week, and both parents were very legalistic Christians. They were not investing the time in their son which they should have invested.

One day I heard from two different people that the mom was complaining that I wasn't doing my job because I was too busy working on my master's degree. I had completed my degree several years earlier. I wasn't taking any courses. I don't know where she came up with the story. So I had the parents in and tried to straighten things out. The mom still was unhappy with me and complained to the elders. It is in those kinds of situation where elders and Christian leaders need the protection which Paul is describing.

B.

Honoring elders also means EXERCISING DISCIPLINE. (II. A. B. EXERCISING DISCIPLINE) Such is what is needed for Christian leaders who abuse their position. That is what vv. 20 & 21 tell us: **“As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. 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.”**

When elders do mess up, they need to be held accountable. When an elder starts messing around with another man's wife, when he starts cheating the church out of money, he needs to be confronted. Exercising church discipline is a hard thing to do, but failure to do it when it is merited is a failure to



show honor to the elder involved. For the purpose of confrontation is not just to keep the other elders from sinning but also to restore the offending brother to a right relationship with the Lord.

The teaching of false doctrine can also be a problem that needs confrontation. That seems to have been the main challenge in the church at Ephesus. There are also hints in 1 Timothy that this wrong teaching was also accompanied by bad behavior.

The present tense of the verb “persist in sin” in v. 20 suggests that the situation envisions ;an elder who has not yet admitted his wrongdoing. In that case he is to be rebuked, the text says, before all. It is unclear whether this is before all the elders or before all the congregation. It makes sense to me that if the sin involves wrongdoing against the whole congregation, there should be an admission of guilt before them. If the wrongdoing is less public, perhaps not. In v. 21 Paul gives Timothy an extra encouragement to follow through on this and to do it objectively.

C.

In vv. 22-25 Paul describes the importance of MAKING CAREFUL CHOICES. (I. A. B. C. MAKING CAREFUL CHOICES) The best way to avoid problems with elders is to be careful about who is chosen in the first place. In v. 22 the author writes, **“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.”**

In #4 v. 14 we are told that elders put their hands on Timothy, perhaps signifying his appointment to lead the church at Ephesus. Given the context in our passage, Paul is probably referring to a ceremony where new elders are appointed. Paul is urging caution in choosing new elders. When elders chosen too hastily mess up, those leaders responsible for picking them share part of the blame for the bad things that happen.

How v. 23 fits into this discussion is a little unclear: **“(No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.)”** Maybe the subject of Timothy’s stomach problems just popped into his mind. But notice that reference is made to Timothy’s frequent ailments. Timothy had health challenges. Sometimes godly leaders struggle with their health. Some preachers today would say that Timothy just didn’t have enough faith or didn’t know the right formula to obtain healing. Perhaps he needed to go to a faith healer. Why didn’t the great Apostle Paul just heal him?

Paul seems to accept the notion that ailments are part of God's plan for Timothy. He makes a practical suggestion that may alleviate some of his symptoms. Use a little wine. This was a commonly recognized remedy in ancient times. In the latter part of my dad's life, a doctor encouraged him to drink a beer each night before he went to bed.

Verses 24 & 25 add, **"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."** These verses appear to tie in with Paul's encouragement to be cautious about choosing elders. Some candidates for elders can be eliminated from consideration quickly. Their shortcomings are obvious. They are visible before the time of judgment--- perhaps God's judgment. Other sins are less obvious and are revealed only over time. So it is good to be careful in choosing elders.

On the other hand, some men's good deeds are obvious. But if choices are made too hastily, some men may be overlooked whose good deeds are less obvious. Some men exercise their spiritual gifts in a quiet but effective way behind the scenes. Timothy may have been a person like that. Careful, cautious choices of elders, not made in haste, will avoid the problem of overlooking capable people like that. It is the general practice of our church leaders to have men serve as deacons first before asking them to be elders. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The church has lost much of the influence that it once had in American society. Academia, the news media, modern education, the government, and the entertainment industry have sought with considerable success to make the church a separate compartment of life for religious people, rather than the dominant influence in their lives and a significant influence in the broader society. In reality the church is central to God's plans for the world. For it is the church which has the message that is the most important thing that people can ever hear--- that they can go to heaven and receive forgiveness of sins simply by trusting in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

That is why Christian leaders have such a key role. That is why they should be honored--- honored by being well provided for materially and by being treated with respect. At the same time, church leaders, especially elders, need to be chosen carefully and need to be confronted and dealt with in a Biblical manner when they mess up. We need to be held accountable.

Ted Engstrom, who served as president of Youth for Christ and then served as an executive in World Vision, writes in *The Making of a Christian Leader*, **"Solid, dependable, loyal, strong leadership is one of the desperate needs in America and in our world today. We see the tragedy of weak men in important**

**places--- little men in big jobs. Business, industry, government, labor, education and the church are all starving for effective leadership. So today, perhaps more than ever before, there is such a need for leadership and teamwork to cope with the needs.”** Let’s pray that the Lord will continue to give us godly, mature elders and staff members and deacons and deaconesses and Sunday school teachers and other leaders.