

1 Timothy 5:17-25 A Sermon

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We are continuing this week with our study of Paul's First Letter to Timothy, picking up at chapter 5, verse 17 and working through to verse 25 of that same chapter. Throughout this letter, we have seen Paul's concern to *encourage Timothy by promoting the good order and functioning of the church*. Here, in what might be considered the "home stretch" of the letter, Paul continues to show his concern for these things as he shifts attention from issues related to *widows* - in the preceding verses - to matters related to *elders*. If you have been with us for this series, then you will know that this is not the first time Paul has spoken on this subject. The fact that Paul takes up this matter for the second time in the same letter shows just how important he feels this matter is for the well-being of the local congregation.

So, as Paul returns to matters related to the elders in verses 17-25, he does so a little more indirectly than before - this time focusing not so much on the elders *themselves* but more on Timothy and the rest of the congregation and how *they* ought to think about and respond to this whole matter of having elders in the local church. Specifically, Paul wants his readers to: Look after their *faithful* elders, be firm with their *struggling* elders and most importantly, keep unqualified persons from *ever becoming elders in the first place*.

Lord willing, we will expand on those things during our time this morning, looking at them under four headings: 1) the recognition of elders, 2) the protection of elders, 3) the discipline of elders and 4) the appointment of elders. Before we look at those things, let us pray together.

(Pray and read)

The first thing to notice here are Paul's words having to do with the *recognition of elders*. He says that "the elders who rule well" should be considered worthy of "double honor" and that this is especially true for the elders who labor in preaching and teaching. Now, before we get to the question of what Paul means by "double honor," it needs to be recognized that there are at least a couple different ways in which evangelical scholars have understood Paul's words here.

Some have taken these words as indicating a distinction between elders, namely, *elders who rule* and *elders who are involved more specifically in the ministry of teaching and preaching*. In this view, while it is admitted that, in one sense, all elders are the same, in reality there is a fairly hard distinction made between "ruling elders" and "teaching elders." Ruling elders are ones who, while "able to

teach” - according to 1 Timothy 3:2 - they do not regularly engage in this activity and so exercise their authority *administratively and pastorally* in overseeing the affairs of the congregation and through a more personalized ministry of the Word.

Teaching elders, on the other hand, are men who, while involved in the oversight of the congregation, are especially gifted for the task of preaching and teaching - and have been set apart specifically for that purpose and, as a result, exercise their oversight and ministry of the Word in a more public fashion.

Accompanying this view are also certain understandings related to the administration of the sacraments and the use of strange titles like “reverend”, etc. That is one approach that has been taken and it IS an exegetical possibility.

However, others have looked at this passage and have not seen the distinctions between elders quite as firmly as all that. In this other view, while all elders are able to teach, and *might legitimately* labor in preaching and teaching, the reality is that not all of them *will* and that those who do are especially worthy of double honor. Of course, as the passage makes clear, the elders who do not labor in preaching and teaching, but who rule well, are worthy of the *same* double honor. In this other view then, there is not any sort of *de facto* two-tier system amongst elders and the differences are seen primarily in terms of function. As with the previous view, this one also has implications for how one understands things like the administration of sacraments and the use of titles, etc.

Those who would argue for the first view - a more strictly maintained distinction between ruling and teaching elders - do have this passage to lightly lean upon. But apart from that, there are no other passages which really are open to that sort of interpretation, which is an argument for the other view. At the end of the day, I think what you have to say is this: In light of this passage, and in light of the *absence* of any other passages on this matter, to say that there is or may be a difference between ruling elders and teaching elders is not *unbiblical*, but it may be *extra-biblical*. It may be more of a matter of wisdom and practicality than a direct mandate.

Now, within the PCA denomination, we do recognize a distinction between ruling and teaching elders and, since our denomination has done this, such will be the case then within our own congregation. However, I am among a number within our denomination who would like to see some more study on this issue with a view to possibly coming to a changed understanding of these things. Not huge changes mind you, but changes nonetheless. Until then, though, we will continue to support and submit to the wisdom of the Church on this matter. Let us move on.

After thinking about whether these verses indicate a distinction between elders or not, we can return to ask about the meaning of Paul’s phrase “double honor”.

What, exactly, does Paul mean by this and for whom does he intend its application?

Well, thankfully, Paul does not leave us without any clues on this one. Immediately after talking about “double honor” he goes on to make a couple of different quotations - one from the Old Testament (Deut. 25:4) and the other from Jesus Himself - which has some interesting ramifications for the dating of Luke’s Gospel (Luke 10:7) - but for our purposes it is more important to simply point out that both of these quotations have the same thing in view - the legitimate right of someone to expect material support from that which is the main occupier of his time and efforts. People apply this principle to oxen and to those who do manual labor. By analogy then, it would be unfair to think that somehow it does not or should not apply to those who labor in the “field” that is the Church.

So, judging from the immediate context, it seems clear that at least part of what Paul means by “double honor” includes the idea of providing material support to the elders in question. The other part of the “double” honor is simply referring to *the giving of respect* so that what is in view here is, as one commentator puts it, is both “respect and remuneration.” The elders who rule well are worthy of both *honor* and *an honorarium*, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Now, of course, a question that this passage raises is, “to whom does this double honor apply”? And the response you make to that question must, again, be shaped by your understanding of whether or not Paul is making clear distinctions here between ruling and teaching elders, or whether he is not. Because, while the traditional practice, at least in our PCA churches, has been that both teaching and ruling elders are given respect - the “single honor” - if we can put it that way – it is only the *teaching elders* who are given the *double honor* of both respect AND remuneration. However, Paul’s words here seem to leave open the possibility that *any elder* - regardless of function - if he “rules well” - might be deemed worthy of the double honor. To be sure, Paul stops short of *mandating* these actions, but it is something for us to ponder as to its application.

I know, for example, of several PCA churches which, in the light of these things, have taken the step of bringing on board some of their ruling elders and placing them in staff positions where they exercised their oversight and carried out their ministry along side the teaching elder(s) in that congregation. In the examples I know of, not every ruling elder was brought on board in this way, but some were. And so I throw that out as something to consider.

I know from experience that the work of ruling elders who labor all week at another vocation - sometimes 50 hours or more - and then on top of all that maintain an active eldership – that sort of pace can take its toll on a person. So, in light of Paul’s words to Timothy here, it seems to me that some serious thought needs to be given to these things.

The second thing I want you to see is not only Paul's words regarding the *recognition* of elders but also his caution on the matter of *protecting* elders. "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses" Now the OT background for these words can be found in Deuteronomy 19:15:

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established

Related to the general theme of looking after one's elders, Paul issues some instructions here which are designed to protect Timothy's elders from frivolous, trumped up or unsubstantiated charges. Paul knows what it is like to be slandered. He knows what it is like to be falsely accused. He knows how much damage a person can do and how disconcerting these things can be. So, he instructs Timothy on this matter, hoping that if he will follow what Paul has said, he will spare himself - and his elders - a lot of grief.

Of course, the situation which Paul addressed back then is no different today, is it? Elders are still vulnerable to the slanderous accusations of disgruntled persons. People will, for all sorts of reasons, but usually in response to some sort of discipline, take it upon themselves to compound their sin by engaging in smear campaigns, designed to hit back at an elder and cause a great deal of hurt and hardship for him. It is a favorite strategy of Satan's, and it happens all the time.

Of course, one reason it happens all the time, and it *keeps happening*, is because *it works* and Satan, being the ultimate pragmatist, only does what works. Part of the reason that this strategy keeps working is because churches are not always careful to follow Paul's instructions in this regard. That is, rather than insisting that these unhappy people handle their grievances in a biblical fashion - by talking to the person they are upset with - we will allow people to avoid doing that very thing by letting them talk to us instead. Rather than insisting that people back up their accusations with other witnesses who will substantiate their claims, church leaders will often just assume the worst and regard the accused with suspicion - as if he is guilty until proven innocent.

But that is not the way that Paul counsels Timothy. He tells him not to even *receive* or *entertain* an unsubstantiated accusation. Why? Because he knows how easy it is for people, in their anger and frustration, to say things which are not true, things which are unfair but which achieve their intended goal nonetheless. He knows how hard it is to take back an accusation once it is made. He knows how hard it is for an elder to regain any sense of confidence or

passion for the ministry when he has been unfairly accused - and then unwisely doubted by those who should have known better.

So, if someone had come to Paul with a complaint against an elder, he would have asked them if they had talked with the person with whom they were upset. And if they hadn't, that would have been the end of that particular discussion. If someone had come to Paul and said, "You know, Paul, a whole lot of people have been coming to me complaining about Elder so and so" - Paul would have said, "Which people? Who are they, and why are they not here with you now? Until you can round up another one of those people, I don't want to hear any more."

That is the sort of thing that Paul is talking about here. That's the kind of response he wants God's people to have when certain individuals start making accusations against elders whom God has gifted and set apart for that task and that office. That's the sort of response that, if the church would be faithful to practice more consistently, there would be a lot less heartache involved with the office of elder. As a good friend said to me once, "No good deed ever goes unpunished". And, while there is a certain, sad truth to that, it is also true that fewer good deeds would get punished if you and I would be more faithful to re-direct people to handle their grievances in a biblical fashion - if the church would insist that people back up their unsubstantiated claims - if you and I would not be a party to un-warranted smear campaigns.

The third thing that I want you to see here is not only Paul's concern for the recognition of elders, and the protection of elders, but also his concern for the *discipline* of elders. "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."

While protecting elders against frivolous charges is important - it is equally important to protect congregations by responding adequately to charges that are NOT frivolous, that have been substantiated and thus need to be dealt with. That this is a reality and possibility should, of course, come as no surprise to anyone since elders are sinners like the rest of the congregation and, thus, will be as liable to need discipline as everyone else.

So Paul speaks about what to do with elders who persist in sin saying, basically, that they are to be treated no differently than anyone else in the same situation. The fact that Paul uses the language of "persistence" here suggests that what is likely in view is something along the lines of what we find in Matthew 18, where Jesus taught his disciples about how to respond to someone who sins against you. In that process, if you remember, after a person is confronted personally, and then in the presence of a witness, there comes a point when, if there is no

satisfactory response, the matter is brought before the church and becomes a public issue.

In the same sort of way, Paul instructs Timothy with regard to elders who *persist in sin* - i.e., who apparently have not responded to initial attempts at rebuke and correction. Because of their stubborn-ness, elders such as this will need to be rebuked publicly and made an example of - for their own good AND for the good of those looking on.

Instruction such as this would have been a useful reminder and warning to Timothy, lest he, or the Ephesian people, might be tempted to regard elders as a special case and perhaps “look the other way” when they were struggling with some particular sin. Or, perhaps, some might be intimidated by an elder and so not address issues that needed to be addressed. Whatever the case, Paul’s concern was that, far from being reluctant to rebuke an elder, they were to rebuke, and rebuke him WELL – when the case merited it. They were not to leave any doubt in anyone’s mind as to the seriousness of what had happened or of their commitment to exercise responsible leadership for the *entire* flock - including their fellow elders. Paul knew that doing such things would inspire the congregation’s great confidence in their leadership. And he knew that the failure to do such things would do incalculable damage to the congregation’s willingness to trust their leaders and thus greatly hinder the elders’ ability to function effectively for the Kingdom.

In encouraging the people to be faithful with these things, Paul provides two further warnings attached to his instructions about elder discipline. Firstly, he reminds them, by means of a strong oath, that they are to carry out his instructions on these matters *without pre-judging*. Timothy is not to enter into a disciplinary situation with any presumptions about guilt or innocence but rather with a desire to know and make known the truth.

Secondly, he is not to act in these matters with any sort of partiality. That is, he is not to show any sort of *favoritism* - either toward families or friends or any other circumstance. He is not to look the other way and ignore sin simply because it happens to be connected to a person with whom he is a close personal friend or a family member.

Finally, I want you to notice this morning, not only Paul’s words about the recognition of elders, and the protection of elders and the discipline of elders, but notice also what he has to say about the *appointment* of elders. After talking about elders who deserved appreciation, and then elders who needed discipline, Paul gets to this issue that lies at the heart of the whole matter - the appointing and setting apart of elders. Which, of course, makes perfect sense because one of the best ways to avoid the scandal of publicly rebuking one’s elders is to insure a thorough screening process on the front end. This is why Paul wants Timothy to take the necessary time to apply the criteria he has already laid out in

this letter. He doesn't want him to be hasty or rush into anything, especially this matter of setting apart elders - which, as we see from Paul's other uses of this phrase - is what the reference to the "laying on of hands" is all about.

In Paul's view, to hastily set apart an unqualified person as an elder is to, in some way, share in their sins. It is to take some measure of responsibility for one's part in bringing about a state of affairs that ought not to have happened in the first place. So, for example, if Timothy was to knowingly set apart a person who - contrary to 1 Timothy 3:1-7 - had a history of loud, violent temper tantrums - then he would, by setting this person apart, in all likelihood be seen as *condoning* that particular behavior. So, Paul says that he wants Timothy to have no part in that sort of thing but, instead, to "keep himself pure".

Now, after saying these things, Paul adds a comment which, at first, may seem sort of odd or out of place - talking to Timothy about a fairly personal matter, telling him that he ought to stop drinking water and instead drink some wine because it would be helpful for his "stomach". Now, we don't know exactly what was going on with Timothy but then that's not really all that important, at this stage. The main point is that Timothy has some health issues which Paul feels would be alleviated somewhat by adding some wine to his diet.

But why talk about that here? What is the connection with what has already been said? Well, as one commentator has pointed out, you have to keep in mind that, judging from other things that Paul has said, Timothy was something of an *ascetic* - i.e., a person who had a pretty strict personal code which included getting a certain amount of rest, and a certain amount of exercise and eating certain foods and avoiding others - including alcohol most likely. So when Paul says what he says about "keeping himself pure" - he wants to make it clear that in saying that he is not affirming Timothy in his asceticism and, in fact, wants him to abandon it, at least to the extent that he would be willing to drink some wine, which would help with his stomach. Paul knows Timothy well enough to know that he might misunderstand his comments about being "pure". So, Paul makes it clear by what he says that the sort of purity he has in mind is being innocent of sharing in the sins of others by not hastily setting apart unqualified men as elders. On that score, he wants Timothy to have a spotless record.

Following his comments about Timothy's dietary habits, Paul qualifies his remarks about the appointment of elders a little bit more, in verses 24-25, providing even further rationale for not being too hasty in setting apart people as elders. In these verses Paul reminds Timothy of two basic truths, namely that:

- 1) Some men's sins are obvious, but some are not and take time to become evident, AND
- 2) Some men's virtues are obvious, but some are not and also take time to become evident to others...

So, if Timothy were to rush to set apart certain persons as elders before there was enough time to really carefully consider them then he stood a good chance of making one of two mistakes - either setting apart men whom time would show to be un-qualified AND/OR *passing by* men whom time would reveal to be extremely qualified.

Of course, the truth behind Paul's words is something which is not unfamiliar to any of us, is it? It is not unusual to discover that the person with the flamboyant, outgoing personality can sometimes be masking some very serious weaknesses and patterns of sinful behavior. Likewise, the person who, at first glance, might appear to be quiet, shy and reserved can often be one who actually has great strength of character and who can be involved in all sorts of helpful things - but in a "behind the scenes" sort of way which escapes the notice of most people.

Because of this reality, Paul wants Timothy not to rush into this matter of setting apart some for the eldership. He knows that people are like icebergs - 9/10's of them is below the surface, hidden from view. He knows that it takes time for things to surface - both good things and bad things - and that this is a reason for caution.

And this too, like so much of what has been discussed this morning, is something which is crucial for us as a congregation as we will be in a position, very soon, of doing this very thing - "laying hands" on certain persons and setting them apart for the eldership, Lord willing. And in approaching this event, we need to take Paul's words to heart and not be hasty ourselves in setting apart people prematurely to this task. As you consider those who would be candidates for the office of elder, you need to ask yourself what is this person's track record? How long have you known this person? How long has this person been in *the* church? How long has this person been in *this* church? And is that long enough for you to have some confidence that *what you see is what you get*? While no one can know these things infallibly, we need to think and pray about these matters and be prepared to err on the side of caution. That is, if you are not sure about someone in this regard, it would be far better to wait until you are sure, than to foolishly plunge ahead out of impatience and a lack of faith. God can be trusted to provide for the leadership needs of this congregation, without our having to abandon *any* of the principles and guidelines which he has so graciously provided for us in these things.

So, if I could summarize Paul's words here, it would go something like this: Because Paul is concerned for the good order of the church, he is vitally concerned that Timothy and the Ephesians should be careful to *look after their faithful elders, to be firm with their struggling elders and to keep unqualified persons* from ever being set apart as elders in the first place.

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