

1 Timothy – The Household of God

This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare (1 Timothy 1:18 ESV)

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ 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. (1 Timothy 3:14-15 ESV)

Leadership In The Church

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1 Timothy 5:17-25

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 5.

Before we go any further, I will confess: This was not the passage I had planned for baptism Sunday. Our baptism service was originally planned for Easter, and I had selected Romans 6 – a beautiful gospel passage – to prepare our hearts to understand what we were about to witness. It was going to be great!

But then COVID rolled in. And then our baptismal tank sprung a leak. And now here we are.

As it turns out, God had a different plan for us.

“And what is that plan?” you ask. Well, as we continue to work our way through 1 Timothy, the passage that’s next is a passage about paying your pastor, and handling allegations within the church.

Allow me to acknowledge off the top – this is not the text that I would have chosen on a day when we have a high volume of guests. However, because I truly believe that God is sovereign, I know that *He* was ultimately the one who changed my carefully laid plans. I stand here this morning convinced in my heart that this is *exactly* the text that we need to hear today. God doesn’t make mistakes.

Perhaps you've had a bad experience with leaders – and particularly with church leaders. Perhaps the thing that keeps you from the church is not actually any intellectual doubt, but instead it's a deep-seated distrust of the church and her leaders.

Our culture doesn't know what to do with leaders. We ebb and flow in our approach. Sometimes we worship them. We idolize them in such a way that we become blind to their glaring flaws. More recently, however, we tear them down. When a public leader falls nowadays, we resemble kids at a birthday party swarming around a pinata, swinging away with glee.

How do we relate to leaders? Are we going to continue to follow the ebbs and flows of culture? Is there a better way? Our text this morning provides us with tangible, realistic instructions on how to relate with leaders within the church. These instructions take into account the reality that leadership is difficult and important. But these instructions also take into account the reality that every single leader in this world is a sinner. So, how do we move forward?

Look with me to 1 Timothy 5:17-25. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.²¹ 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.²² Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.²³ (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.)²⁴ The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later.²⁵ So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden. (1 Timothy 5:17-25 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Before we get to the heart of this passage, I want to quickly address verse 23. Paul gives Timothy some instructions about his drinking habits, and the advice seems oddly out of place. What is going on in this verse?

Well, let's stop and remember that this is a *real* letter written from Paul to Timothy. Paul cared about Timothy, and it seems as if – as he called Timothy to “keep himself pure” – he remembered a report he had heard about his young friend. For some reason, Timothy had resolved only to drink water.

Why is that? Well, we know from the rest of this letter that there was a problem of drunkenness in Ephesus, and that was probably a factor in Timothy's decision. Commentators suspect that Timothy had probably decided to abstain from alcohol so as to be entirely above reproach.

But, as noble as that was, it also created a problem. Timothy had some health issues, and apparently, cutting wine out of his diet was making his stomach issues even worse. He thought he was being noble! He had great intentions! But Paul took this opportunity to remind his young friend that he wasn't going to be much use in Ephesus if he wound up bedridden. So, after commanding Timothy to keep himself pure, as if Paul suddenly remembered the pain that Timothy was enduring because of his abstinence from wine, Paul adds the personal note:

(No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) (1 Timothy 5:23 ESV)

That seems to be what was happening in verse 23. The ESV even decided to put the verse in brackets because it is so clearly a temporary aside from Paul's argument. So, having dealt with the aside, let's turn our attention now to the main point.

In our passage this morning, Paul deals very practically with how Timothy – and how we – should relate with the elders in the church. In particular, he gives some practical instructions on how we are to honor, protect, discipline and appoint elders.

Honoring, Protecting, Disciplining and Appointing Elders

First, Paul instructs us to:

1. Honor the elders who rule well

We see this in verses 17-18 where Paul writes:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.¹⁸ For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” (1 Timothy 5:17-18 ESV)

In our passage last Sunday, Paul called on Timothy to honor the widows who were truly widows. As we saw, “honor” in that passage referred to respect, but it also clearly included a monetary gift. We are meant to see both ideas here as well. Elders who rule well – especially those who labour in teaching – are to be considered worthy of double honor.

Now, in chapter 3 of this letter, we saw that *every* elder must have the capacity to teach, so it’s not as if Paul is introducing a new division here – the *teaching* elders and the *ruling* elders. Paul is simply giving practical instructions to address a scenario that plays out all the time. While every elder is to be *able* to teach, some elders are *particularly gifted* in that area. Naturally, then, those elders wind up teaching more frequently than the others. Those extra teaching responsibilities require time and effort, and the church should honor those men by compensating them for their service. That seems to be what Paul is addressing here.

He wants Timothy – and the church – to understand that this generosity is not simply a good idea; it is God’s idea! He begins his argument with a reference to Deuteronomy 25:4 where the Israelites were taught not to muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain. The ox was working hard, and it was only fair that the ox should have the opportunity to stoop down and to eat some of the fruit of its labour. If that’s true for the ox – if God is concerned that the beast receives some reward for his labour – then surely this principle should be applied in the church to the elders who labour to teach you God’s Word!

He further bolsters his argument by quoting Jesus himself. In Luke 10:7, Jesus sent his disciples out on mission, and he told them:

And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, **for the laborer deserves his wages.** (Luke 10:7 ESV)

“Don’t feel guilty receiving support as you go out and share the gospel. You’re working hard, and you deserve to eat.” That’s what Jesus taught his disciples, and Paul was careful to pass on this instruction to the churches that he planted. In 1 Corinthians 9¹ he gives this same instruction to the church in Corinth. This is a clear, Biblical principle.

I had someone ask me this week if I wished that I had asked someone else to preach this passage, and I told them that it hadn’t even crossed my mind. I probably should feel awkward, but you have always done this well. You have been generous in providing for me and my family for as long as I have labored here. We’ve never once felt taken advantage of. We feel honored. We feel loved. I am so thankful to be able to labour in preaching here at Redeemer City Church.

I’ve spoken thus far about the financial aspect of honor, but the relational aspect is also here in view. The author to the Hebrews gave the same instruction in Hebrews 13:17.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. **Let them do this with joy and not with groaning**, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17 ESV)

This is an area where we really need to ensure that we don’t take our cues from the culture. The amount of disrespect and vitriol that Canadians have grown accustomed to throwing at our politicians is horrifying. We may not always love the leaders who are over us, but if we continue to normalize these patterns of disrespect, the leaders are going to get worse and worse until there’s no one left to volunteer. It’s hard to find wise leaders when you’re asking them to spend four years standing in front of a firing squad!

That’s true out there, and we need to ensure that the culture of disrespect doesn’t make its way in here. Some churches abused their elders over the last two years, and those churches are going to have a hard time finding qualified, godly men to lead them in the future.

¹ 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? ¹⁰ 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 crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? (1 Corinthians 9:9-11 ESV)

Is there anything commendable in your elders? Has God given you men that love you, and that love the Lord, and that want to lead the church according to God's word? Then, Paul says, honor them! Allow me to suggest some applications for this in our context. How can you honor your elder in such a way that they can care for you with joy and not with groaning? Some ideas:

- Consider putting a reminder in your phone to pray for your elder and his marriage once a week.
- If you have a pressing concern in your life, rather than waiting for him to call, reach out to him and let him know how he can be praying for you.
- If you think he's doing a good job, let him know from time to time, and give him some specific encouragement.

I'd love to hear the report from elders as they step out of their role that they felt loved and appreciated as they poured themselves out for the church. I pray that godly men will see this as a place where they can serve the church without being disrespected and taken advantage of. Paul is calling the church to honor the men who willingly accept the heavy burden of leadership. Let's continue to take that call seriously.

That's the first principle we find in this passage. Second, we are instructed to:

2. Protect the elders from malicious attacks

We find this instruction in verse 19 where Paul writes:

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. (1 Timothy 5:19 ESV)

Before Timothy even *admits* a charge against an elder, there must be two or three witnesses. If this requirement sounds familiar to you, it's because you are a whole-Bible reader. Paul is simply reiterating the discipline process that Jesus outlined in Matthew 18 where Jesus taught us:

“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. 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 18:15-16 ESV)

According to Jesus and Paul, if a person has an accusation, then before they post it on social media or gossip about it with their friends, they should go to the person who wronged them. If that doesn't work, then they should invite some witnesses into the process. Paul teaches us in this passage that we shouldn't even entertain an accusation unless the accuser has followed that process. The elders should see that the church deals with them fairly and that they will be protected from the slander that all-too-often accompanies leadership. That is the *rule* that Paul is laying out for us here.

Let's stop here and address the elephant in the room. We live in an awful, fallen world, and I suspect that most of our minds have already wandered to this question: "What about a charge of sexual abuse?"

I don't want you to misunderstand me, so I'm going to be crystal clear: Allegations of sexual abuse are *an exception* to the rule. Here's why: If you accuse me or an elder of sexual abuse, then you are accusing us of breaking the law. At that point, there are other Biblical principles that need to factor in. Romans 13, for example, teaches us to be subject to the governing authorities who are over us. Therefore, we are *Scripture bound* to report accusations of illegal activity. If there is ever such an allegation here at Redeemer, we will call the police and report it immediately.

But – and this is a big but – that is the *exception* to the rule. Not the *norm*. Any accusation that is *not illegal* needs to be handled in the way that Paul describes for us here. We need to reacquaint ourselves with this passage because we are at risk of losing this wisdom in the church!

Paul is reminding us here that the devil is no fool. He will use any tool at his disposal to bring down the church and, perhaps now more than ever, the tool of accusation is a dangerous weapon!

In our culture, a person is guilty until proven innocent. But, Paul says, that is *not* how we are to operate in the church! We need to be fair. Matthew 18 teaches us to be fair with one another, and Paul now explicitly applies that principle of fairness to the way that we protect our leaders.

Too many times, elders have been gossiped out of a church based on unfounded rumors or unsubstantiated claims. Paul is teaching us here that – if such a climate is allowed to develop in the church – if leaders see a pattern of their brothers being unfairly hung out to dry – then you won't have any leaders left! Who would sign up for that?!

Moving forward, our leaders should know that we are resolved to protect them from malicious, unfounded accusations.

So, let's apply this practically: If you feel that an elder has sinned – perhaps you feel that he has established a pattern of speaking disrespectfully to others – then, before you write a letter to the pastor calling for his dismissal, and before you tell all your friends in the church how awful he is, you should go to that elder and express your concern. Maybe he'll repent! Maybe he didn't realize how he was coming across! Maybe that hard talk will lead to a more effective leader!

If, however, he refuses to repent and simply brushes you off, then you should bring two or three others into the discussion as witnesses. At this point, the leadership needs to be made aware of the charge, and they need to take it seriously. That's the process that Paul is laying out here and it leads to the next principle that we find in the text. What happens when you have a legitimate accusation, and an unrepentant elder? Here, Paul teaches us to:

3. Rebuke the elders who persist in sin

Look again to verse 19, but this time let's read to the end of verse 21:

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ **As for those who persist in sin**, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. ²¹ 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. (1 Timothy 5:19-21 ESV)

In these verses, Paul addresses the sad reality that, from time to time, the church will appoint the wrong men. From time to time, the church will find itself with sinful men in positions of authority.

Now, of course, every elder is a sinner. The only perfect leader who ever lived is Jesus! This passage, however, is not about an elder who *happened to* sin. It is about those elders who *persist in their sin*. This is about the elder who has been confronted by his accuser, then by two or three witnesses, and who still refuses to repent. What do you do with men like that?

You do the same thing that you would with *any* unrepentant member! You exercise church discipline. In the final step of the process that Jesus describes in Matthew 18, Jesus teaches us:

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 18:17 ESV)

That step is *exactly* what we find described in our passage this morning. Paul is reminding us that leaders don't get a pass on the process. The elder who is in sin should be rebuked publicly. And, in fact, Paul tells us that this public rebuke will have a significant impact on the other elders. He writes:

As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, **so that the rest may stand in fear**. (1 Timothy 5:20 ESV)

The whole process is a sobering reminder for the rest of the elders that they are not above accountability. They need to know that. *All* of us possess hearts that are prone to wander. *All* of us need to live faithfully and to wage war with the sin in our lives. Because *all* of us – as members of Christ's church – will be held accountable if we persist in sin. That includes leaders.

In verse 21, Paul leans in with a sobering warning for young Timothy:

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. (1 Timothy 5:21 ESV)

Paul leans in and reminds Timothy that there is a divine audience that will bear witness to this instruction. Therefore, no matter the cost, Timothy must deal fairly and honestly with sin in the church. He must not prejudge. He must not be partial. John Stott says here:

In the area of discipline he must be scrupulously fair, cautious in accusing and bold in rebuking, as the situation demands.²

That means, Timothy can't let a brother off the hook just because of his years of faithful service. He can't allow someone to slip away quietly for fear of tarnishing their reputation. Even if Timothy's *best friend* were caught in sin, he would still need to follow the process outlined here.

Let's pause for a minute.

How many people through the centuries could have been protected if the church would have simply taken this passage seriously? How much pain could have been avoided? Time after time, we hear about allegations that were swept under the rug because the person implicated was above accountability. "We can't be transparent about *this!* It would sink our movement! We can't put *him* under discipline! His family built this church! Here's a severance package. Here's a new parish. Here's a settlement offering for the accusers. It will all blow over."

Commentator Donald Guthrie writes:

When faced with sinning elders a spineless attitude is deplorable.³

That it is. Deplorable. And destructive. And, I would go so far as to say, demonic. Is there anything more antithetical to the gospel than turning a blind eye to the weak and the vulnerable in order to protect the powerful and the privileged?

So, Paul leans in and warns young Timothy, "With God as my witness, and Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, don't you dare give into the temptation to show partiality. Do what is right. Always. Be fair. Every time. No matter what the fallout might be."

² John Stott, *Guard the Truth – The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 139.

³ Donald Guthrie as quoted by William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – World Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 322.

But of course, ultimately, we don't ever want there to be fallout. And the best way to protect the vulnerable and to preserve the witness of the church is to appoint godly men who will lead in a Christ-like manner. Therefore, Paul gives one final instruction:

4. Do not appoint an elder hastily

Look with me at verse 22:

Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. (1 Timothy 5:22 ESV)

Timothy is not to be “hasty in the laying on of hands.” This expression refers to the appointing and commissioning of a man for his office. We know this because it is the same expression that Paul used in chapter 4 verse 14 when he described Timothy's commissioning. Paul is calling upon Timothy and the Ephesian church to take seriously the responsibility of setting a man apart for the eldership.

If Timothy appoints the wrong man in haste, then Timothy would – in a sense – *partake* in the sins of that man. Because, in appointing him as an elder, Timothy and the church essentially lifted him up as an example worth following. Needless to say, if you lift someone up as an example and then that person goes on to lead the church into sin and ruin, then you share some of the blame.

So don't be hasty. Take the time that you need to get this one right. In verses 24-25 Paul explains:

The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. ²⁵ So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden. (1 Timothy 5:24-25 ESV)

Don't judge a book by its cover. Some people look impressive at first glance, but you come to discover that it's all a show. Others look unimpressive at first glance when, in reality, they possess a deep spiritual maturity. Give yourself enough time to see who a brother really is. Observe his marriage. Observe his service. Watch how he interacts with others in the church. Watch how he uses his gifts. Watch how he responds when things don't go his way.

Watch.

Sometimes, a person might possess a particularly impressive gift that tempts you to ignore the rest of what they bring to the table. How many times has the church turned a blind eye to a brother's unhealthy marriage because they valued his leadership skills? How many times has a church made excuses for a pastor's pride and arrogance because they valued his preaching ability?

Be slow. Be watchful. Pray. Wait. The great puritan pastor Martin Bucer wrote of the eldership:

the greatest fear of God and the most earnest diligence are to be employed in the choice and installation of such men.⁴

In a little over a month, we will appoint Efren Bantatua and Ron Aitken to serve as elders here at Redeemer. In our service, we will lay hands on those brothers and set them apart for the office. We began praying and considering which men the Lord might set apart in November of last year. Since then, there have been numerous elder meetings, nominating committee meetings, candidate interviews, wife questionnaires, in-house meetings, and prayer meetings to determine whether these men are called to step into this role. You've heard their testimonies and you've been given months to meet with them and to ask them any questions you might have.

The process was slow. The process was intentional. The process was watchful. And, that slow, intentional, watchful process needs to be the norm for us in the years to come.

Conclusion

Admittedly, this isn't a text that lends itself to an immediate altar call conclusion. This is a "long game" passage.

If we take these instructions seriously and put them into practice, then I truly believe that we will see great things.

⁴ Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 41.

We will see godly men brought up in this church who are eager to step into the responsibility to lead because they know that they will be honoured and treated with fairness.

We will see a strong witness in the city as the church sets an example in what it looks like to deal honestly with sin – even the sin of its leaders.

We will enjoy the blessing of stability and unity in a culture that has a revolving door of leaders and that often feels like it is at war with itself.

And hopefully, by God's grace, we will see fewer and fewer people who are hardened to the gospel because of the hypocrisy of the church.

That's the kind of future that I want for our kids. It will require us to unhitch from the culture's approach to leadership. It will require us to resolve to move forward God's way.

To that end, let's pray.