

October 6, 2024

APPOINTING, HONORING, AND DISCIPLINING ELDERS

1 Timothy 5:17-25

*(13 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)*

One of the things that studying 1 Timothy has revealed over these past few months is simply how practically helpful the book is for instructing us as we walk and minister together as a church. Studying this letter has helped us understand how to address false teachers that may arise in the congregation, how the roles of men and women can differ in the church, what should characterize us as we gather for worship, what the qualifications for elders and deacons are, what these men should be doing, how to relate to others who are older or younger than you, and how to care for the needy in the church, just to name a few. How greatly beneficial this letter is to us!

And yet, some topics Paul has addressed have no doubt served to raise additional questions for us. For example, back in chapter 3, Paul went over the qualifications that a man must meet in order to serve as an overseer (which is another name for elder or pastor). That was extremely helpful to know. But it does raise questions like, “What do we do as a church if we need some elders to give more time, and even their full time, to shepherding the church and teaching us the Scripture?” “Is that a worthwhile request to make of a man?” “Are we obligated to take care of him financially?” “What do we do if one of these elders is accused of wrongdoing?” “Is he treated differently than others?” and “How do we know when we’re ready to appoint a man to serve as an elder?” But Paul knows we need answers to all these questions, and we find these answers in our text this morning: 1 Timothy 5:17-25.

So I simply want to work through our text and uncover what Paul says about elders—which are the focus of this section. For the sake of ease, you can work through Paul’s teaching about elders under the three headings of honoring, disciplining, and appointing elders, which is how we’ll (generally) walk through the text. And as we do so, we’ll be able to see that this is particularly helpful for us as we face situations where we need these answers. But it’ll also be an opportunity, I hope, for us to see that you’ve done well as a church in this area, and so you should be encouraged. And I’ll simply add to that encouragement, the exhortation to not grow weary in the good that you’re doing. So let me begin working through our text by noting that it is good for us to honor (in multiple ways) those who labor over us as pastors.

**It is good for us to honor (in multiple ways) those who labor over us as pastors**

As Paul turns his focus from the care for widows in the church, he zeroes in on the need for the church to honor those who labor as pastors (or elders/overseers). He writes in verse 17, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” Now, when Paul identifies these “elders who rule well,” I don’t think he’s encouraging a church to appoint some elders who do their job of leading and teaching the church well and others who don’t. Then, as you do that, honor those who are doing well.

Rather, I think Paul is recognizing that he's sent Timothy into a church where some of the men who are serving as elders are not walking in according with Scripture and teaching God's Word. As we've noted, Paul has sent Timothy into a difficult situation when he sent him to the church at Ephesus. So Paul is not encouraging Timothy to lead the church in honoring those men. But for those elders who are ruling well, especially those laboring in preaching and teaching, Paul says that these man should be seen as worthy of double honor.

Now, what does that mean? It seems that by double honor, Paul, first, has in mind what we think of when we think of honor. That is, these men are worthy of respect and being looked up to and esteemed. But by "double honor," Paul likely means that they're worthy of two-fold honor. That is, first, the honor of being respected and esteemed. But also, they're worthy of being honored with financial support. I say that because Paul supports his claim that elders who rule well and especially those who labor in preaching and teaching are worthy of double honor by citing two Scripture texts, and both of them having to do with meeting financial and material needs.

First, he cites Deuteronomy 25:4, which says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." The idea here is that if an ox is treading out the grain, enabling you to be able to eat that grain at harvest, then you should not keep him from eating it as well by muzzling him. Rather, take off the muzzle, and as he treads out the grain, he can feed himself, even as he labors so that you might be fed. He can receive benefit from the work he's doing.

Interestingly, this isn't the only time Paul has referenced this OT text to argue for pastors being financially supported by the church. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul is telling the Corinthians that the one who sows spiritual things among the congregation stands the right to reap material things from the congregation (v. 11), and in support of this, he sites Deuteronomy 25:4. And so this is something of a go-to text for Paul to argue that those who labor over us in spiritual matters are worthy of receiving material (financial) blessings from us.

The second text he cites in support of this claim, interestingly, is a quotation from Jesus recorded in Luke 10:7 when Jesus sent out his disciples, telling them that as they come into a town and someone wants to take them into their home and provide for them not only shelter but food and drink, they should receive it because the laborer is worthy of his wages.

This helps us see that already what would become the NT Scriptures were already beginning to be recognized as they were relayed orally already in Paul's day. But these quotations also clearly show us that Paul has financial provision in mind when he says that the elders who rule well and labor in preaching and teaching are worthy of the honor of respect and being esteemed but also worthy of receiving financial blessings from the congregation.

But this raises a question, doesn't it? We've seen throughout the pages of the NT that each local church should have multiple elders or pastors who help shepherd the flock, so does this mean that all the elders should be employed by the church and receive a salary? It doesn't seem that this is what Paul intends because he adds the qualifier, "especially [or maybe, "in particular"] those who labor in preaching and teaching" (v. 17). In other words, it seems that though Paul

knows that the church would have a number of elders potentially, they'd probably only have the means to ask one of them typically to give their full time to give in serving the church, laboring in preaching and teaching. And Paul wanted them to know that as they asked a man (or men) to do that and paid him (or them), they were doing a good thing. They were showing fitting honor for a fitting task.

And so, let me apply this to Cornerstone. At this point in our history, you've asked three of our elders to give their full time in service to the church. This shows that you value pastoral ministry and oversight, and I think that's a good thing for which you are to be commended. Additionally, you show us honor both in respect but also in pay, for which we are grateful. We are grateful for your generosity in that.

However, you've not stopped there but have consistently throughout the years set aside a time to honor all five of the elders, even giving a gift to each in order to demonstrate honor to them. This is a good and right act. It's not demanded, so I don't want you to think it's required to obey Scripture. But it is so gracious to all of us and, I believe, is honoring to the Lord. It is good to honor your pastors in these multiple ways. Make sure those whom you ask to give their full time to the ministry of the church are cared for, but also seek ways to honor each of them. Again, you do that so well, and in that you're fulfilling this text. That's the first note Paul sounds here. Elders who rule well should receive honor from the congregation.

But Paul started this text by telling us what to do for elders who rule well. So, what about those who don't? Or, better, what do you do when an elder is potentially walking in sin? This brings us to our second note. Charges against elders should be handled according to the standards established in Scripture.

### **Charges against elders should be handled according to the standards established in Scripture**

One of the risks of being a pastor is that you put yourself in a place where accusations and attacks can come frequently. You can avoid this risk if you refuse to involve yourself in the lives of those under your care. But once you get involved in trying to help messy marriages or confront members in their sin, you make yourself an easy object of attack. And, frankly, this has only gotten worse with the advent of social media. Perhaps never before in history has it been so easy to lob an attack against someone so easily for so many to read.

Therefore, you can see the flow of Paul's thought. He's encouraging honor for elders who rule well, but he also notes that elders who rule well (again, involving themselves in the lives of those under their care) put themselves at particular risk of being attacked. And so Paul addresses that in verses 19 saying, "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses."

Now, it may be that our first reaction to this is to think, "Man, that's a high standard. Why are elders so protected?" But the reality is that this is simply the biblical standard that must be applied to anyone in the church. Remember how Jesus gave instructions for confronting

someone in sin in Matthew 18:15-20? Jesus says to confront the individual one-on-one, and if the issue is resolved at that point, it's done. No one needs to know about the issue. All is well. But then Jesus adds, "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" (Matt 18:16).

You see, it's not the case that someone can say, "He's being verbally abusive," and that attack automatically comes before the whole congregation. The next step is to bring one or two witnesses so that the charge can be established. It may well be that the other witness shows up, hears what happened, and says, "There's actually nothing wrong that's happened here. This person wasn't abusive. He simply exhorted you to obey the commands of Christ in this area of your life." And so, by not admitting a charge before the church against someone without first having two or three witnesses, all of us are protected from the potential vengeance of one person who has something against us. Therefore, when Paul tells us not to admit a charge against an elder without two or three witnesses bearing testimony that the charge seems legit, he's simply saying, "Afford the elder the same protections that everyone in the church should receive."

Moreover, Paul tells us that if the issue continues, the steps laid out in Matthew 18 should equally apply to the elder. Remember, Jesus said that if he does not listen to the two or three present to establish evidence that sin is present, the next step is to "Tell it to the church" (Matt 18:17). That is, his sin should be addressed publicly. So also here Paul says, "As for those [elders] who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" (vv. 20). Again, treat the elder by the same biblical standards by which you treat other members.

Finally, in case we've missed it, Paul makes clear that what he's been saying is that the elder shouldn't receive special favor nor harsher attack. Rather, he should be dealt with as justly as anyone. He makes that clear, writing in verse 21, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels [by which I think Paul means simply those angels who did not fall with Satan] I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality."

You see, there can be a temptation to treat a pastor differently than everyone else. We could do so favorably. In that case, we might say when we hear of a charge against him, "C'mon, we know he'd never do something like he's being accused of." But that's prejudging. Paul tells us to simply follow the steps of Matthew 18. Similarly, we could handle him unfairly in a negative way. Someone might throw a baseless charge, and we think, "It's so crucial that our pastor walks in holiness that we need to take up this charge, even though there are no other witnesses to it." But that would be treating the pastor unfairly in making him deal with a matter that is baseless—and when the pastor is in a position to receive more attacks anyway (simply because of the nature of his job) this could become quite a burden for the pastor to bear as he constantly has to publicly defend himself against baseless attacks. And, finally, we could be tempted, if the pastor has been identified as walking in sin to want to sweep it under the rug, telling ourselves that the consequences would be too great to the church. But, again, Paul notes that it should be dealt with publicly if there is really an issue of sin to be addressed. Again, the pastor should be dealt

with along the standards that are given in the Bible. He should not be treated favorably nor unfairly simply because he's stepped into a role as pastor.

Now, let me bring up one side point here where a pastor will be dealt with differently. A pastor could sin and genuinely repent when confronted with his sin one-on-one. While dealing with any other member, that would be the end of the matter. After all, the brother repented, and there's no need to spread the news or do any more. Again, remember Matthew 18:15-20. A repentant brother should be protected from public humiliation. However, if a pastor's sin is such that it disqualifies him in light of the qualifications that he must meet according to 1 Timothy 3:1-7, then he should be removed from his position, even if he's repentant. And the reason why is because he's now failed to measure up to the qualifications required for one to fill the office of pastor. And this obviously will need to be made public. You can't remove a pastor and say nothing to the congregation about the matter. So there is one exception here, but in other ways, Paul makes clear that the elder should be dealt with according to the standards established in the Bible.

Now, if you're thinking, "Okay, that sounds reasonable, but it's terrible to think of disciplining a pastor. It would indeed serve to be ammunition for those in our community to disparage the gospel," you're right. In fact, I think that is exactly what leads Paul to make his next point. After all, what's the best way to ensure that we're not having to publicly discipline a pastor? One key way is by being careful about whom we appoint as a pastor. That's why Paul's third point in this text is that we should only appoint elders whose lives reveal consistently godly character.

### **Only appoint elders whose lives reveal consistently godly character**

Paul writes in verse 22, "Do not be hasty in laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others, keep yourself pure." When Paul writes "laying on of hands," he's referring to what would be done when a church appointed a man as an elder, something like our practice of ordination. Therefore, when Paul says not to be hasty in doing this, he's telling us that we shouldn't be quick to appoint someone as a pastor.

Then Paul gives the reason why. If this man goes on to walk in sinful ways, then it's as if we're taking part in his sins. We're incurring guilt from his actions because we were the ones who hastily put him into an office that we shouldn't have. Rather, Paul tells us to keep ourselves pure, and one way to do this is to be patient and discerning before we appoint someone as a pastor.

Now, Paul's argument continues in verses 24-25, but he seems to interrupt his argument with a comment in verse 23, and so I too will interrupt the argument to note this statement. Paul writes in verse 23, "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." Okay, so what's going on here? Well, here's my best guess. When Paul wrote to Timothy, "Keep yourself pure," this probably jarred into Paul's mind a reminder that Timothy had committed himself to drink only water. Now, we're not sure why, but (again) my guess is that it was a matter of purity. Maybe he'd taken a Nazarite vow like Samson, wherein you pledge not to drink wine. Or maybe with the false teachers making claims that we should

abstain from certain food and drink items, Timothy thought he'd also show that he was disciplined, and so began drinking only water. Again, we're just not sure.

But Paul takes the opportunity to tell Timothy to come off of his position and to begin drinking a little wine. For one, it's not sinful. There's nothing that makes one more holy if he only drinks water. But also, it could serve beneficial to Timothy's health, as he was apparently prone to stomach issues and frequent ailments, which Paul thought a little wine could help. Perhaps Paul knew of some health benefits in grapes. I don't know. But either way, Paul gives takes an aside to show his care for Timothy and instruct him.

But now let's get back to Paul's argument. If we're only to lay hands on someone whom we're confident will be a faithful pastor, how do we know that? Is there something we're looking for? Yes. Paul answers in verses 24-25. First, he notes that the sins of some people are conspicuous, that is, obvious and known. Obviously don't lay hands on those men. Other sins, he notes, aren't immediately obvious, but they'll appear over time. This is why Paul has told us not to appoint a man as an elder hastily. Give time for his true character to show itself. In time, even if he's doing a good job at hiding his sin, it'll appear eventually for others to see.

Similarly, Paul notes, that good works can also be easily seen, and in cases where someone is doing a good job of keeping secret their good works, they'll eventually surface as well. So, again, there's a great advantage in not appointing a man to the pastorate quickly. Give time to let his character be known, and then only appoint a man who demonstrates consistently godly character.

Godly pastors are a rich blessing for any church. I'm grateful for the men who oversee my soul. And they are to be honored. As a church, you do this well. Keep it up. Elders are also to be dealt with according to biblical standards, so let's make sure not to treat them favorably or unfairly in compassion to other members, but simply apply biblical standards. And, finally, we should only add to their number those who have demonstrated clear and consistent godly character. After all, they are to imitate the chief shepherd who loves us, lives for us, died for us, and is coming to save us. So let's give thanks for and pray for our pastors now as we come to the table. Amen.