

**The Rightly Ordered Church:
Caring for Your Elders (1 Timothy 5:17-25)**

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 27, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ If you stick with us long enough, you're more than likely to hear me extolling the benefits of preaching straight through whole books of the Bible. I've said this before, but 1 Timothy 2:12 wouldn't have been a text I'd choose if I were simply picking passages to preach on. Tackling a passage on the prohibition of women teaching or exercising authority over men in the church – that's asking for a lot of work and a lot of controversy. But if you keep working through books you'll eventually have to preach these kinds of passages.
 - This morning we have another one of those passages that I wouldn't have picked if I were randomly choosing passages. **This text is a bit awkward for me to preach because it's fairly self-referential.** This passage exhorts church members to give their elders (which I've argued includes those we call pastors) double honor.

- ❖ Part of me wonders if I should've scheduled a guest preacher for this. But then again, the whole premise of the passage assumes that churches have elders who work hard at preaching the Bible. It would've been easy to pass this passage on to someone else. It's going to take hard work to labor over a passage like this and to preach it well for the good of our church.
 - And in the end, I want to be an elder who works hard, and I'm sure that's what you want from your elders. You want them to work hard. **So that's why I'm going to unashamedly preach on a text where the main application is about how you ought to treat me and the fellow elders of our church.** Yes, it's self-referential but the aim, like in every sermon, is to be God-glorifying and Christ-centered.

- ❖ As we've been going through 1 Timothy, focusing on what it means to be a Rightly Ordered Church, the aim has always been on Christ. **I hope you've noticed the running theme about wanting to display Jesus.** This book has raised a lot of issues related to the church. We talked about the church's doctrine (ch. 1), the church's worship (ch. 2), the church's leadership (ch. 3), the church's godliness (ch. 4), and the church's widows (ch. 5a). Now we're going to talk about caring for the church's elders.
 - **But talking about all these things related to the church is ultimately about something bigger than the church. It's all about Jesus.** The church, we're told in chapter 3:15, is a pillar of the truth – the truth about Jesus. Think about when an artist puts a statue on top of a pillar, we know it's all about the statue and not the pillar. The whole point is to show off the statue, and to that end the pillar is important. To that end, it's important to make sure you have a good, sturdy, rightly constructed pillar.

- ❖ In the same way, we're all about showing off Jesus, making him look great and glorious as the Savior for all mankind. **And to that end, we want to have a good, healthy, rightly ordered church so we can be that pillar that displays Jesus for all the world to see.** And this morning I'm going to argue that one way to ensure we're fulfilling that purpose is to keep a close watch over our elders. The healthiest of churches are those characterized by a plurality of elders who are doubly honored, graciously protected, impartially disciplined, and carefully assessed. Let me show you in our text.

Honoring Elders

- ❖ In vv17-18 Paul starts off by exhorting church members to **doubly honor their elders**. He just finished telling church members to treat each other as family and to honor the widows among them by caring for them materially (5:3). And now Paul turns our attention to the elders. And by that term, he doesn't mean the elderly in the church. He's referring to the church leaders. Those he called overseers in chapter 3:1.
 - **I've discussed in length already how the NT uses three interchangeable terms to describe the same office of leadership in the church.** These men appointed to the highest level of leadership in a local church are called either *overseers* or *elders* or *pastors* (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1-4). They're synonymous terms. But in a colloquial sense, we often do make distinctions between pastors and elders. Here in our church, the common assumption is that pastors are seminary-trained, ordained, and employed by the church. They're on staff. While elders are *not* necessarily trained nor ordained, and they're not employed by the church. They're volunteers.

- ❖ **And those distinctions between pastors and elders are fine, as long as we maintain one key commonality between them.** And I would say that would be the shared responsibility to lead. If you notice, v17 also makes a distinction between the same men serving in the same office while maintaining one key commonality. Look at v17, "*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*"
 - Notice how Paul assumes all elders – all the men serving in the office of overseer – rule. Some rule *well* and deserve double honor (we'll look at that in a moment), but **the commonality is that all rule.** Now that word translated here as "rule" (*prohistemi*) was used earlier in chapter 3 when Paul spoke of elders and deacons who *manage* their households well.
 - In his other letters, Paul uses the term to describe overseeing. Like in **1 Thessalonians 5:12**, "respect those who labor among you and are *over* you in the Lord." Or it could just be translated as lead. Like in **Romans 12:8**, where it talks about the one who is spiritually gifted to *lead* should lead with zeal.

- ❖ So ruling is probably too strong of a term, especially if it carries the connotation of having final authority over the church. That idea is not necessitated by the Greek word. Leading is probably the better translation. **That's why for years now you've heard me advocate, from Scripture, the idea that churches should be congregationally-ruled (or governed) while elder-led.** That's where the church members have the final authority and responsibility to guard the gospel and carry out the church's mission, under the guidance of elders. **Now as to what particular structure you put into place to facilitate the leadership of your elders is a wisdom issue.** You'll have to factor in the context and who and how many are qualified elders are even available to serve. So there's flexibility in implementation.
 - But the fundamental idea that elders are the ones who ought to lead the church (or as the NIV puts it, the ones who should "direct the affairs of the church") – that idea is firmly rooted in verses like this one. And that's the commonality between them – they all exercise leadership in the church.

- ❖ But notice the distinction between them in v17. If they lead well, they should be “*considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*” **So all elders are expected to rule (to lead), but there some who labor (who work particularly hard) at preaching and teaching.** So there’s already a pattern in the early church of appointing elders to lead, but among them, some labor and give more time to preaching and teaching.
- ❖ Now that doesn’t mean some elders don’t have to be teachers. No, chapter 3:2 makes it clear that all are expected to be “*able to teach*”. **That means they should not only have sound doctrine but be able to explain sound doctrine and defend it from falsehood.** That’s the essence of teaching and the baseline qualification for elders as stated in **Titus 1:9**, “*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*”
 - **But I would argue that the category of being "able to teach" doesn’t imply that the man has the spiritual gift of preaching and teaching.** It’s the same way how all Christians are called to evangelize but not all of us are gifted by the Spirit. You can learn to become *able to evangelize* without having the gift of evangelism.
- ❖ **Any man who’s going to serve as an elder has to be able teach the Word, and that’s something he can learn to do.** He can become *able to teach*. But then there are those equally called to serve as elders but particularly gifted as preachers and teachers, and they should work hard at exercising those gifts for the good of the church.
 - We tend to call these spiritually-gifted elders the pastors. And I think it’s okay to make that distinction. **Pastors are typically viewed as seminary-trained and on staff, which makes sense.** Preaching God’s Word is hard and time-consuming. So if someone is going to do a good job, it typically requires further education and enough time in a week, which is why eldering becomes their primary form of employment.
- ❖ And that leads to this idea of **double honor**. “*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor*” (v17). That could also be translated as double the respect, double the regard, double the reverence. **But considering the context of what comes next in v18, it’s clear that honor is also being used to refer to financial provision or compensation.**
 - In v18, Paul quotes from **Deuteronomy 25:4**. “*For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,"*”. In those days, oxen were often led in circles on top of a threshing floor. They wanted these heavy beasts to trample on the wheat sheaves to help loosen the kernel from the husk. **The ethical principle here is that anyone who works hard (even a beast) deserves to be compensated.**
- ❖ Now that next verse Paul quotes is likely from Jesus. It’s probably from the same written source that Luke referenced in Luke 10. There he recounts how Jesus sent out the seventy-two to go from town to town preaching the gospel, and if you come across a person of peace, stay in their house and eat and drink whatever they provide. “*For the laborer deserves his wages*” (Lk. 10:7).

- ❖ So Paul was well aware of what Scripture teaches about honoring those who work hard to preach and teach the gospel. **Not only here but also in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul affirmed the right for preachers and teachers to receive material provision from those who benefit from their ministry.** After asserting that apostles like him have a right to receive financial support, he writes, *“⁸Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹For 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? ¹⁰Does 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. ¹¹If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? . . . ¹³Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? ¹⁴In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”* (vv8-14)
- ❖ Now Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 9 is to argue that he personally chose to *not* make use of this right for the sake of not laying a stumbling block for the Corinthians, who were all too familiar with hucksters and peddlers of false gospels. To avoid confusion, Paul chose not to make use of his rights and retained his profession as a literal tentmaker.
 - So there could be legitimate reasons for why a church might have no pastors on the payroll or only bi-vocational ones. But regardless, the point is that it would be cruel to refuse support to hardworking preachers and teachers of the Word. Just as it would be cruel to muzzle that ox while it was working so hard to help feed you.
 - **Elders who lead well are deserving of double honor– that is, *honor* in the sense of respect and an *honorarium* in the sense of financial support.** And this applies especially to those who work so hard at preaching and teaching to feed you God’s Word. Honor and an honorarium – that makes it double.
- ❖ Now exactly how much you pay a pastor is not spelled out in Scripture. That, as well, is a wisdom issue. But this is the biblical foundation for why most churches employ their pastors and provide them adequate financial support to meet their needs and their family’s.
 - Church members, consider this the next time you give an offering. **Not only is your offering an act of worship directed to God our Great Provider, your offering is an act of honor directed to your elders, especially to those who labor in preaching and teaching.** We’ve been working hard to change the way we look at giving. It’s not just an administrative duty. It’s not just about the bottom line. When you give, give as a means to honor your Chief Shepherd as the Giver of all good things and a means to honor his under-shepherds as givers of good biblical meals that nourish and strengthen your soul.
 - And besides financial support, ask yourself this: **How can I personally show honor to my elders who rule well, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching?** What is one thing you can do this week to honor your shepherds for leading and feeding you well?

Protecting Elders

- ❖ Paul goes on in our passage to explain one practical way to honor them, and that is to **graciously protect their elders**. When you're a leader, you're a magnet for criticism. Some of that criticism is likely well founded and something we need to hear to improve in our leadership. But there will always be criticism that's not rooted in truth but rather in malicious intent in order to slander or simply gossip.
 - **And let's face it, we love to hear gossip, especially when it has to do with leaders and other public figures.** Just imagine if tabloids no longer reported on the scandalous behavior of public figures and simply reported on what the average neighbor was doing in his private life. Would anyone really care? Would they sell any copies? Tabloids know that people love to hear about the flaws and failures of public figures (or at least rumors of the sort).
 - **Proverbs 18:8** says this, "*The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.*" Rumors like delicious morsels. Especially when it's about a public figure like a leader in the church.

- ❖ That's why Paul states in v19, "*Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.*" That's the biblical mechanism for bringing accusations against anyone. In **Deuteronomy 19:15**, we read, "*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.*"
 - Jesus reinforces this wisdom to rely on witnesses when he teaches in Matthew 18:16 on what to do when a brother or sister in Christ sins against you and refuses to listen to your correction. It could be that you're mistaken in your assessment of the situation. **We all have implicit biases, so we need more eyes on a situation.** We need more witnesses. We need more wisdom from others before we bring any charge against anyone, much less an elder of the church.

- ❖ **So that's one way church members can honor their elders – by graciously giving them the benefit of the doubt and not being hasty to react when criticism or charges of sin are laid against them.** We have to realize that there's truth in the saying that "*hurt people hurt people*". So you can expect that shepherds – who regularly minister to hurt sheep – will at times face the blowback of hurt people who lash out and try to hurt the very ones trying to help them. It comes with the territory if you're going to pastor people. So Church, take it upon yourself to protect your leaders from slander and gossip.
 - But having said all that – which is what v19 teaches – **I want to be very clear that churches need to be very careful not to create a protective ring around their leaders, making them impervious to any charges of sin or error.**

- ❖ **In the last two months alone, we've seen the resignations of high-profile pastors and church leaders due to charges of misconduct.** Some of these allegations have to do with sexual assault, or with inappropriate behavior towards women under their leadership or inappropriate comments that could reinforce patterns of spousal abuse or sexism.

- ❖ **The sad thing that has damaged the reputation of Christ and his Church is – not just the inappropriate behavior or comments – but the pattern of defensiveness by these churches or institutions that has spanned years.** They've been uncritically shielding their leader from criticism. Questioning the pastor is out of bounds. Any form of dissent is quickly shut down. A culture arises where people are intimidated to speak up even if they see or hear things that don't seem right.
 - Church, that's not the kind of response that v19 is instructing. That's definitely not what Paul had in mind when he tells the church to protect its elders.

Disciplining Elders

- ❖ That leads to our third point. Caring for your elders involves doubly honoring them, graciously protecting them, but also **impartially disciplining them**. Elders are not infallible. They are not immune to criticism. If a charge of sin is validated by the evidence of two or three witnesses, then a church must act to discipline the elder. That's a form of care.
 - It's the caring, loving parent who disciplines his children. The one who never disciplines, who never corrects, who ignores patterns of sin in his children and does nothing about it – is not loving them well. In the same way, elders and pastors are cared for by their congregations when they're disciplined for sin.
 - That's why Paul writes in vv20-21, "*20As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. 21In 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.*"
- ❖ **So if the charges made against an elder have been confirmed, and if he persists in sin, then he should be publicly rebuked.** "*In the presence of all*" most likely refers to all the members of the church, and the "*rest*" who are to stand in fear as a result is either referring to the other elders or the church as a whole.
 - Now that would be instruction similar to what's found in Matthew 18. If someone refuses to listen to correction and persists in sin, then you eventually "*tell it to the church*" (18:17). But if the individual repents before you get to that point, then there is no reason to address their sin publicly. **In the same way, if an elder caught in sin repents after being corrected, there's no need to rebuke him publicly.**
- ❖ But that doesn't mean, in those situations, that there's no more need to publicly address his sin. You don't have to rebuke him anymore, but **if you're dealing with a proven public accusation against a public figure like a pastor, then not addressing it publicly could make things worse.** Churches have a tendency to keep the sins of their leaders under wraps, justifying silence by saying that a private confession and private repentance has taken place.
 - **But if you're dealing with public accusations against church leaders, the wisest recourse is to address the sin publicly.** And if there has been genuine repentance then celebrate that repentance publicly! To keep things quiet may end up bringing greater disrepute to Christ and to his church.

- ❖ This is hard stuff. **It's so much easier to simply avoid disciplining powerful, influential church leaders.** That's why Paul says he's charging us to make these judgements in the presence of God, of Christ Jesus, and of all the heavenly host.
 - Paul is trying to strike some holy fear in us. What ought to guide our response should not be the fear of a multi-million dollar lawsuit (if we do nothing) or the fear of backlash from powerful factions in the church (if we do something). **No, what should animate us is the fear of God.** That's what will keep us from jumping to conclusions and prejudging or from showing partiality and giving certain people a pass.
- ❖ **I think one of the most important things we can do is to create, in our church, a culture of healthy critique.** Where we open our lives to fellow church members and invite them to speak hard truths into our lives. Let's create a culture where leaders are never set on pedestals where they become immune to criticism.
 - And leaders, let's not justify that tendency to withdraw from our people, assuming we can't share our struggles. That creates a dangerous situation where there's low accountability for us leaders and no easy avenue to bring correction when needed.

Assessing Elders

- ❖ But in the end, the best way to avoid all of this messiness is to be extremely careful with whom you appoint to the eldership in the first place. We need to pay more attention to **carefully assessing our elders.** That's our last point and the essence of Paul's advice at the end of the chapter. Look at v22, "*Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.*"
 - **The laying on of hands was likely a reference to the initial appointment or ordination of elders** (cf. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). He's saying don't rush a man into the office of elder. Time and relational knowledge are what's needed. If we don't really know a man and the state of his relationship with God or his family, then we must not be hasty to make him an elder.
- ❖ Paul warns that whoever appoints the unqualified elder – whether it's Timothy or us as a congregation – if the elder falls, we take part in his sin. **The church shares a degree of responsibility for the failure of its leaders.** That should sober us, but at the same time, it shouldn't cripple us from appointing elders. If you're careful, if you do all you humanly can to assess their life and doctrine, then if they prove faithless, your hands are clean. You won't take part in their sins.
 - Now in v23, Paul seems to go off topic. He tells Timothy to "*No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.*)" Commentators think Paul probably brought up the permissiveness of drinking a little wine because the sins of the particular elders (that Timothy didn't want to take part in) involved the misuse of wine. Timothy was trying to keep himself pure, but Paul reminds him that a little wine might benefit his health. But in the end, I don't think we should make too much of this brief excursus.

- ❖ In v24, Paul goes back to his focus on rightly assessing potential elders, and he says, "*The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later.*" **What he means is that, for some men, their sins are so apparent that it's obvious they're unfit to elder.** But for others, it's not as apparent until later, after careful examination. That's why we must not be hasty to lay hands.
 - But then Paul flips it around. He says in v25, "*So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.*" **Paul is saying that, for some men, it's very obvious they're fit to serve as elders.** But for others, they may not look the part, but with enough time and careful examination, they might prove to be well qualified elders. So it's important that we're not too quick to rule anyone out.

- ❖ **But in the end, the point is we've got to be patient and careful in our approach to assessing potential elders.** If we take the necessary time and care in the beginning stages, we'll save ourselves a load of trouble, and we're more likely to keep the name of Christ and his church from falling into disrepute.
 - So I ask you to please pray for your leaders. Pray for your Church Council as we're currently in the process of assessing potential elders. We need godly wisdom. We need your prayers.

- ❖ But Church, let me be clear: **The fact is we will never find a perfect elder.** But that's okay. **We don't need a perfect elder. We need a perfect Savior.** We don't need perfect pastors. We have, in Christ, a perfect Shepherd who never fails, who never falls into disrepute.
 - The fact is we have all fallen short. We've all failed and brought shame to our Lord, shame and disrepute to our Maker. We deserve death. We deserve wrath. We deserve punishment of an eternal nature. **But Jesus came and lived and died and rose again as our perfect Savior, our perfect Substitute.** He's all we need to be right with God.

- ❖ **That's why we don't need perfect pastors and elders. We need godly ones.** We need men who know their sin, who hate their sin and know what they deserve. But these are men who know Jesus intimately as their Lord and Savior, who have drunk deeply of his mercy and grace, who are committed to leading other sheep to drink from the same Fountain and follow the same Shepherd. That's what a good elder, what a good pastor looks like. That's what he does. May God grant us more for the praise of his name and the good of his church!