

Elders Revisited

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[0 : 0 0] Great words to consider as we turn to Scripture to 1 Timothy chapter 5, and that small section that we read together, it's a brilliant passage, tremendous passage, and it's a very practical message from God that I think we need to hear.

Every part of Scripture we need to hear, of course. But I think this is a very relevant passage from verse 17, that small section to the end of the chapter, because we're living today in a society, and we find ourselves in a society which is increasingly divided.

It's polarized, and it's toxic. In many sections of society, we find that toxicity, we find that division and that polarization, and social media sometimes makes that worse.

We see it in our political leaders at the highest level. We see an abusive power and a disregard for the truth, and the truth treated cheaply by people who hold very high positions.

We read constantly and hear constantly of huge injustice. Unless we become judgmental or proud, we needn't look any further than the church itself.

[1 : 2 4] The church of Christ plunged into many scandals and many embarrassing and disastrous situations, because primarily and often because of leaders, leaders who have abused their position, leaders who are abusing their power, who deny the truth, who encourage toxicity within their congregations, who engage in lies and live lives of double standards and immorality.

And we've seen the name of Jesus being scandalized because of that, and the cause of Christ being brought into dispute. We've seen congregations split. We've seen people leaving the church, leaving the faith, and saying we want nothing more to do with it.

And so we find that a passage like this really speaks powerfully into our own lives and situation. Remember that Paul and Cori and myself have been reiterating that we can and we can.

Paul is speaking to Timothy into a real church situation. The church in Ephesus had many positive things happening in it, but also had many trials and troubles and difficulties, primarily from false leaders, from false teachers.

And we find that God gives Paul a message. Paul gives Paul to give Timothy a message that is specific to the situation, but from which we draw principles as well that we recognize.

[2 : 5 7] There were abusive leaders and there was toxicity within the church in Ephesus. There was gossiping and slander and bad things happening.

And so Paul gives Timothy God's advice. The reminder to us is that there's nothing new under the sun. Very important to remember that for us.

And it's also as we begin, it's a reminder to be humble ourselves, to be humble as St. Columbus, to be humble as members, to be humble as leaders, as preachers, and to remember because this is what comes out again and again in this letter, that Godly character is everything.

It's everything that you send a cue, it's everything for us as leaders to have Godly characters because we remember as we sit in church, as we sit and we seek to have a public demeanor, a public face, a public persona that was ultimately significant.

That public persona must come from a Godly character that is unseen, that's invisible. No point in coming to church and thinking, I can hide who I am and I'll just come to church and that'll cover a lot of things.

[4 : 10] That's not what it's about, is it? Because we're in God's presence, not just in church, but wherever we are, it's the daftest hypocrisy ever, isn't it? To think that we can have a different public reality from what we are privately at a very core level.

Godly character is everything, and Godly character is everything in leadership. It's very important, and good leadership is very important, and that's not just a biblical reality, that's a reality that you all recognize and face and experience positively or negative every day.

It sets the tone, doesn't it, for the whole organization, whether it's the workplace, whether it's the classroom, whether it's the home, or whether it's the church.

You know and you can tell a lot about a place by its leadership, and often the leadership will set the tone for the whole organization, and Paul and God, Paul through God, or God teaching Paul and Timothy, reminds us of that today.

So this letter is very much about the governing principles that God is giving to the whole church for all of time through this specific situation. And we're to be a community, always a community being transformed by the principles of grace, by God's grace transforming our hearts inside and transforming our church community as we interact with one another.

[5 : 41] It's so important because we see that that is what reflects the kingdom of God and what is powerful in the society in which we live. So there's a couple of things that I want to recognize today.

Well, it's actually, there's one thing, and then look at the application. The one thing I really want to do is look at leadership and apply it to us all and how we interact with that because there's important principles here.

What we'll see here are some governing principles for leadership and for how to deal with issues when they go wrong. So God recognizes and Paul recognizes and we must recognize the importance of good leadership.

Okay? Verse 17, let the elders rule well, who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. And this is an affirmation of what has been said previously and what God gives us in the New Testament of the good principles of leadership, the good character that he wants to see in the leaders.

We've seen the list of characteristics, moral characteristics that he looks for in leadership. And it's an appreciation of how important good leadership is to the church family.

[7 : 04] And within that, that paid ministry, which we call paid eldership, which we call ministry, is both foundational and biblical as we see in verse 18, which we'll come back to in a minute.

So there's this, in verse 17, we have this respectful consideration of good leadership. You know, there's a recognition of double honor, of worthiness, of affirmation and appreciation being made to those who lead well, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Double honor does, sadly doesn't mean double pay. It'd be great if it did. I'll need to get on to the free church trade union and see if we can do something about that. It's not really referring to that.

It's referring to double honor, double affirmation, significantly recognizing, not individuals, but the principles and the characteristics of good leadership.

It means that God recognizes that good teaching and good preaching is valuable and is important and should be prayerfully supported and considered within the church life.

[8 : 17] It's not just a kind of secondary thing. It's important and it's valuable. And so we should always be careful in choosing people for that position who reflect the importance of character, the centrality of Christ and of the truth and the doctrine of God's Word and obedience to that.

So often we make decisions, don't we, on popularity, on personality, even on gifting. And now gifting is not insignificant. But it's all about Christ primarily and about character and what is important that stems from that character, good teaching and preaching based on the authority and the foundation of God's Word, respectful consideration.

And within that, there's this recognition that there will be those elders like myself and Corey who are full time given to preaching and teaching. And the full time ministers, as we call them ministers, servants are bovine servants.

That's what they're called here. They're servant cows, servant oxes. That's what we're told here as reflects the teaching from Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Scripture.

For Scripture says, you know, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads on the grain or the laborer deserves his wages. And speaking about the right which Paul denied for himself, but the right of a payment and salary of full time work for those whose work is preaching and teaching.

[9 : 58] And it's not a particularly flattering image that we have there of their work, but I think it's an accurate one because the work is not... It shouldn't be glamorous.

It shouldn't be glamorous in God's economy, but it is glorious. Okay, so we're likened to oxen that are treading the grain that they're able to feed on the grain that they're treading and also to hardworking servants or slaves.

That's the image of the full time worker. It's not glamorous. It's not flashing about. It's not having a big salary. It's not having the white suit and the gleaming teeth. It's not that. It is recognizing and knowing that the work is not glamorous.

It's hard work, but it is glorious. It's an honor and a privilege to serve Jesus Christ. I think there's a little bit of an atmosphere sometimes around ministers who say, mourning about how hard it is and how tough and how difficult is the work.

Now, it is, I'm not denying that, but we're loved and we're supported and we're empowered to do this work, and it is a glorious privilege. It can become unhelpfully tough if we expect honor or if we expect privilege and position or if we become self-reliant or relying on our gifts or our natural abilities, or sometimes if we face unhealthy expectations and abuse from within the congregation.

[11 : 28] And tensions and difficulties, these can often make it tough, but the ministry, while it's tough, it's not glamorous.

It is glorious because of who we serve. So we see that Paul is going on to set out some important truths here. And he sets out in verse 18, a defined grievance procedure, verse 19, do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

And again, the context here is of public leadership, publicly making a mess of things, publicly teaching false doctrine and leading to division and maybe implied moral failings as well.

And what God is reminding us here is that serious public failings in the church context among its leadership must be dealt with, and it must be dealt with in the proper way, with proper evidence, and must be seen to be dealt with.

The sin must be dealt with publicly through rebuke and warning. This is not about humiliation and it's not about exposing private failings. This is about something that is known within the church, some kind of teaching or lifestyle that is clearly against God and against God's teaching being dealt with.

[12 : 49] And that for us is very important today because God's family, God's church needs to be protected from abusive leadership. It's a massive issue today.

You can go to any website and find out about the abusive behavior of church leaders throughout the world. It's far too long, it's been a personality kill or about power or about gifts before character and it's been allowed to be a cancer in the church, ministers and elders abusing their position and not recognizing their servanthood and accountability before God.

And so it needs to be addressed, but also not only does God say here that the church needs to be protected from abuse, but also Godly ministers and elders need to be protected from slander and from gossip and from being easy targets because we're in a spiritual war and Satan will often want to bring down unjustifiably those who lead families, those who lead the church.

And in chapter five, earlier verses, it talks about those who learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, not only idlers, but gossip and busybodies saying what they should not.

And it may well have been in that situation that they were slandering those leaders in the church who were godly. Then we see that this is about protecting the public work of the church.

[14 : 21] I don't think it's dealing at all really with the private sins or the quirks or the character weaknesses that we find in elders and leaders of the church.

You know, it can be very easy for us to talk about leaders, to gossip behind their backs to dislodge ministers or elders because maybe we just don't like the way they do things or they're not meeting our impossible standards to be spiritual super people.

Or we like believing the worst about them and spreading slander and gossip. So we find a double protection here, both for the church against abusive leadership and also for godly leaders to be protected from slander against those who don't have evidence and who are simply seeking to cause division.

But within all of that, underlying it all, is this reality that we are a grace community, that we see the importance of protecting God's gospel and its truth.

But the encouragement is to deal honestly and openly together. Don't gossip about people. This is wider than just the leadership. Don't judge unfairly.

[15 : 32] Don't ignore people's failings. Don't talk about people, but rather talk to them well in love, holding each other accountable. It's so counterintuitive to the world and the standards of much of what we see, sometimes in our own hearts and sometimes in the world around us.

So there's this defining grievance procedure. There's also the importance of impartiality, verse 21, in the presence of God and Christ Jesus and of the elect elders.

I charge you, keep the rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. Great advice, practical advice from God.

So as we enact the governing principles of God in the church regarding leadership, but also more generally, let's not be people who prejudge the outcome of anything.

Isn't it easy for us to decide when people are guilty without knowing the truth with scant evidence? Isn't it often that we make people guilty by association or we take pleasure in their downfall or hearing bad news?

[16 : 41] We're to do so with impartiality in our interactions with one another, without favoritism. And we've seen that so often in the church, nepotistic behavior, where families or people who are favored are protected and people in the pew are damaged and destroyed because the leadership is protected in an ungodly and in a favoritistic way.

And we don't show impartiality or favoritism. Why? Because in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, Timothy is charged to keep these rules without prejudging, because we're in God's presence, because we all stand before the one judge, all of us, because he knows us and he knows our hearts.

And the very core of our Christianity is that we've opened our hearts to Him and said, I'm guilty, I need you, I'm forgiven, I'm being transformed.

And that should mark this community as those that are grace filled. And through it, we need the vitality of godly wisdom.

The last couple of verses, do not be hasty in the laying on the hands or take part in the sins of others, keep yourself pure, don't drink just water, but a little wine. Even if some peoples are conspicuous, going before them, others come up here later.

[18 : 17] And there's just a kind of, it's like snowballing of pieces of advice here that all could be umbrellaed under wisdom, God's wisdom.

So as God's people, we need caution, particularly as we appoint leaders, appointing leaders and ministers as a serious business. And God is saying here through to Paul, to Timothy, you know, don't do it just for the sake of it, don't do it hastily, lay hands on someone in terms of ordination without due thought and prayer.

Take it seriously, don't do someone as young in the faith as we're told elsewhere. And look after our own hearts as we do so. He encourages Timothy to keep himself pure.

We all need to do that. We need to be pure through depending on the forgiveness and grace and transforming power of the Spirit. And the little bit there about wine is interesting.

I wonder whether Timothy was maybe prone to listen to the aesthetics among him, aesthetics who said, you know, you have to be outwardly, you have to be, you know, really self-denying and not allow yourself any of these pleasures and that will reflect the purity that's inside you.

[19 : 34] I wonder if Paul is an older Christian, he's saying, look, you've got a dodgy stomach. Take a little bit of wine. Not only is it good medicinally, but wine gladdens the heart of man.

And I wonder if he's just shaking Timothy a little bit away from the, maybe the temptation of some of the false teachers who were denying God's good gifts to enjoy.

Of course, drunkenness, of course, is to be avoided at all costs and those who follow Christ. So there's caution there, but there's also discernment, isn't there, for recognizing that some people's sins go before them in judgment.

Other people's sins maybe just appear later. So we need to know what people are like. We need to take, to patiently wait and find out more about, don't be hasty in making judgments or in making appointments, it's all about the heart.

It's all about seeing the fruit of the heart coming out in our lives as Christians, a fantastic section that applies to all of us. So in conclusion, for some of the challenges for you and me, for us in St. Columbus, and as, you know, we come to church, we come under God's word, we come for God to change us every time we are under God's word, whether we read it ourselves or we come to church, you'll go out differently from the way you came in.

[21 : 03] And it's important that we just alert ourselves, remind ourselves and alert ourselves to that great truth, that God is changing us through His word.

I think the local church, as God's family live together, we live from the heart out. It's not about appearances. It's not about how good we look.

It's about our heart. And we reflect. In so doing, we reflect Christ. And we're not aiming to take ungodly principles from the world and from society and from our hearts in.

We're seeking to reflect God from the heart out. And that means your heart matters. And the way you live matters, not just me. I'm going on to speak a little bit about that, but your part matters.

That means that as we seek to develop relationships of gospel accountability in love, the whole interaction between leaders and people here reflects that kind of gospel love and accountability.

[22 : 07] Talk to people again. I say, not about them. Don't talk about people behind their backs. It takes courage and humility sometimes to deal with an issue that's difficult.

Often it might just love covers a multitude of sins. And if love covers a multitude of sins, don't talk about it. Don't gossip about it. Don't badmouth people. If it's good enough to be forgiven, just let it go.

But if it's big enough to deal with, deal with it face to face with people so that there's honesty and accountability in a gentle, loving, gracious way. Don't take the huff, don't use people's failings as an excuse to criticise or judge them.

Don't nitpick. These are some of the things that come out of a passage like this. Give thanks. Can I ask you to give thanks for all its insides, for all as you look around you?

Give thanks for the children, give thanks for the teachers and helpers, the singers, give thanks for every single person in the pew. Pray for them. Pray for each other.

[23 : 12] Help us overcome our own weaknesses. Give thanks for the unity that we do have and for the biblical preaching and teaching that you do receive that seeks to be faithful to God's Word, even when we struggle to know how to preach it.

And even when we find it difficult and we don't fully understand it. Remember together that we are all sinners saved by grace. Corey, me, the elders, the deacons, the members, everyone who's part of the church, we're all the same.

We are sinners saved by grace. Please remember that. We're all battling. We don't come to church on surfboards. We don't come all breezing through life easily.

We're all struggling. We're all finding difficulties. We can all be rejoicing as well. But remember that and remember to look at one another in that light.

Can I speak specifically to the elders who are here today? And I'll close myself. Don't be paralysed by guilt. You see, when an elder reads a passage like this, he's paralysed by guilt.

[24 : 21] Can I ask you to recognize your calling? Recognize the power that you have under God and the significance of your example, good or bad.

And may it always, when you struggle with paralysis, come back to Jesus Christ for energy and life and movement again. I've been a minister for 32 years.

You have no idea the number of times I feel paralyzed by expectations, by a sense of failure and inadequacy, by the accusations of the evil one.

The first 10 years of my ministry were what we would uneffectually call the 10-year conflict in the free church, where I saw things and did things as a leader that were toxic and miserable that led to a great split in our church.

I've sensed being under the mercy of other people's opinions driven to the pulpit sometimes by guilt. And the only answer to these challenges and paralysis is to be reminded that God loves me because He does.

[25 : 37] And I keep going back to Him for His forgiveness and for transformation. If I could have one word that would summarize 32 years of ministry, it's kept.

I've been kept for that time and to Him be the glory. Now, when I say that, I'm not saying that as a dose of the poor me, poor me. I don't want you to come up and rub my back at the end of the service.

Not interested in anything like that by any means because I love what I do and I'm blessed beyond measure. But sometimes I think you need to know that the battles you face in your life ministers and elders face as well.

Maybe different, different. May come at different angles, may come in different ways. I know that Satan, spiritually Satan sometimes will attack ministers in particular in different ways because they're up the front and because they're dealing with God's word and they're teaching God's word.

And it may be a more insidious spiritual attack that's not as evident to people in the pew. But your battles and your struggles in your workplaces and in your environments are just as real.

[26 : 46] They're just different. So let's remember that together and let's remember the importance of that in our lives together so that we might see our place in God's family here, every single one of us, each of us equal before God, serving the Lord Jesus Christ, each of us playing our part in this gospel community which seeks to glorify and reflect Jesus Christ with all our failings.

And with all our mistakes. And I know the leaders have an important role to set the tone, but each of us, you all set the tone for what this congregation is like as it reflects Jesus Christ.

We're never here to pat ourselves in the back and say, what is like us? Because it's a battle. Because there's always an ongoing need for transformation and change and joy even in the midst of suffering and difficulties.

And I close with this relentless, repetitive, frustrating maybe for you plea that we need to be a praying people.

We need to be praying together. We need to recognize that we need Christ. Yes, we can ask for Christ's grace and help and strength on our own, but it's good to encourage one another in prayer.

[28 : 22] And if you can, over the next three weeks or so, Friday morning, 7 a.m., you can do it in your pajamas because it's online.

Come and join us as we plead before the throne in all the imperfectness of being online and not together.

But we're doing 1271 until the end of June and we're taking a break, not from prayer, but from 1271. And then we'll come back to it again. But it's just this declaration that we need Jesus and we need His power.

And it reflects, I hope, a daily need that we have for Jesus in our lives to be this kind of radical church. We don't want to be the church that is in the news, that speaks about another abuse, abusive leadership, a failed ministry, publicly failed, and all that goes with that.

And we need God's protection. And if you don't know Jesus, if you don't know Him as your Lord and Savior, can I just remind you it's the heart that He comes in and He changes and needs to change your heart so it's alive and forgiven and in relationship with Him.

[29 : 46] Let's pray. Father God, we ask that You would help us to know You better. Thank You for the practical advice of a chapter like this, speaking into a context, but also giving us principles that are so good, they would be so good, not just in church, but anywhere.

Principles about impartiality and about not showing favoritism and about not judging someone unfairly or without evidence in a public forum.

Lord, if only our nation, if only our leaders, if only our politicians and world leaders are these great basic principles, then the humility of servant leadership would be so much more effective.

We pray for each of us that in our own lives, in our own families, in our own homes, in our own hearts, in our workplaces, in our environment, in our neighborhoods, that we'd live out grace, live out this transforming walk, what is so different from what we are naturally like in our selfishness, our pride, and our love of gossip, and our positioning for authority and power and abusing that, which we fight against in our hearts.

So Lord, help us, we pray. And may You have the praise and the glory, and may You have the honor, and may we see many people coming to know Jesus in this church and through our connections because we live honestly and are blessed by You in weakness, depending on Your strength.

[31 : 28] Amen.