

"Taking Care of the Elders" - 1 Timothy 5:17-25

Last Sunday morning, we saw what Paul had to say about taking care of the members of our church family. He talked briefly about older men, younger men, older women and younger women and how we are to treat all of them with respect, grace and love. Then we saw how he wrote quite a bit about the care of widows – unmarried women with no other means of support. No question about it, we are our brothers' (and sisters') keepers. We are to love each other, hold one another accountable, and make sure everyone has the physical, emotional and spiritual support they need.

This week is (sort of) part 2 of last week's message because we are still talking about taking care of members of our church family. But this week, we turn from the general congregation to church elders and how we are to respond to them..

Now, the word translated "elders" is *presbuteros* (*πρεσβύτερος*). Literally, it means an old guy. But in the church, as was the case in Israel, it took on an additional meaning. Elders were the leaders in the church. They were given a particular ministry and they were to lead by example. They were to teach. They were to hold others responsible for appropriate Christian conduct. We know Paul is referring to the church office of elder, because of what he says in verse 17:

... especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. (1 Timothy 5:17b)

Paul is talking about the ministry of preaching and teaching. While every elder is supposed to engage in those ministries to some extent, Paul is thinking especially of those called to pastoral ministry. I want you to know that I almost called this sermon "The Care and Feeding of your new pastor, but I resisted the temptation, because we also need to take care of all our elders.

Let's read through the entire passage and then I'll back up to drill down on the main ideas.

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE AN OX WHILE IT TREADS OUT THE GRAIN," and, "THE LABORER IS WORTHY OF HIS WAGES." Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality. Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure. (1 Timothy 5:17-22)

This passage gives us three explicit things we need to do to support our elders. 1) We need to honor our elders. 2) We need to protect our elders. And 3) we need to hold our elders accountable. Then there is actually a fourth duty that Paul seems to mention almost as an afterthought. Perhaps it is because he has already gone into detail about the qualifications for eldership. But down in verse 22, he says that we shouldn't ordain anyone for ministry too quickly. Men who are being considered for eldership must be fully vetted before they can be nominated to that office. That process takes time.

Because there is a lack of male leadership in a lot of churches, the temptation is to grab any willing warm body and thrust him into a leadership position. Listen, if you put somebody who is not suitably gifted on your church board, and it's bad for everyone.

You put somebody who is spiritually immature in a position of leadership and you will set him up for a fall. And the result can be devastating for a church.

I've described for you the rigorous application process Village Missions uses to vet prospective missionaries. Depending on the couple, it can take six to eight months to be accepted and then several more months for them to raise support and prepare to be assigned to a field. With over 20 open fields, there is a temptation to speed up the process, but Village Missions will not lay hands on anybody quickly!

Getting back to this morning's text, we're going to look at these three obligations we have with regard to church elders. And we'll focus especially on that particular eldership role we usually call "the pastor", because the pastor is the one who is charged with laboring in word and doctrine.

So, the first admonition: **We are to honor elders.**

This is a verse that makes many pastors a little nervous. I know it makes me nervous because the word "honor" is *timē* (τιμή), which carries the idea of value or money paid. It's wages. And notice that Paul says that these elders who rule well are worthy of double honor. It's like he's saying, "If they do a good job, they're worth twice as much as you're paying them!" So, a little disclaimer here. I'm not trying to advocate for a raise, okay? I believe this church compensates us very well. We have been greatly blessed. My prayer, and frankly, my expectation is that you will take care of your next pastor just as well. Thank you in advance for your faithfulness!

This is a Biblical principle. As Paul writes to the Corinthians,

Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. (1 Corinthians 9:14)

And to the Galatians, he writes,

Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches. (Galatians 6:6)

And here in 1 Timothy, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 25:4. Don't muzzle the ox as he treads out the grain. This is not Paul's idea. This is God's idea.

Does this mean we should be paying all of our elders? No, not necessarily. But he says we should especially take care of those who labor in word and doctrine, that is, preaching and teaching. A larger church might have a number of teaching elders as paid staff, but most small churches have only one. And many can't afford to pay the one they have.

Paul didn't always assert his right to live by the gospel. We know that in Corinth, he made his own living, working as a tentmaker. And there are many, many pastors in small churches, in small communities who have to hold down part-time or even full-time jobs because their churches either can't or won't support them fully. That's where Village Missions comes along. Village Missions believes that every community needs a full-time, evangelical, Bible preaching, truth honoring pastor. And part of our Canyon Community Church offering goes to Village Missions so they can subsidize the salary and benefits of pastors in these forgotten places. Kris and I were passionate about the ministry of Village Missions long before we became Village Missionaries. And when we leave this community, we will still be passionate about the ministry of Village Missions. Our country needs the gospel! Our country needs missionaries! Our country desperately needs a spiritual awakening!

"The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. (Luke 10:2)

We need to honor our pastors, our teaching elders with an adequate salary so they can devote their time to preparing the saints for the work of ministry, but there are other ways you can honor your elders. Your pastor for sure, but also those who have been called to leadership among you. Honor their time. You have done that for me, and I thank you. You realize that this is a 24-7 job. People don't often get to schedule the crises that happen in their lives. So, I have an obligation to respond to those calls for spiritual help, even if they come on our day off, even if they come at 3:00 in the morning. As a younger pastor takes over, you need to encourage him to take the time he needs to stay spiritually, emotionally, and physically healthy. Because the job never gets done. The new fellow might have children at home. He will need time to minister to his wife and his family. He will need time for personal Bible study, prayer and reflection, because if his relationship with the Lord is shaky, how will he be able to minister to you? He will need time for lesson and sermon preparation.

And he will need time for himself. Make sure he's taking his day off. If a crisis intervenes, make sure he flexes his day off. Make sure he and his family are taking their vacations.

And for sure, honor your pastor and his family with your prayers. Being your pastor has been wonderful, but make no mistake, there are serious challenges. If Satan can bring down a pastor, he will do so in an attempt to seriously damage a church. So, the enemy is painting every pastor with a laser scope. There is a big old target painted on every one of our chests. Pray that God builds a hedge around him, around his family.

Finally, you can honor your pastor by being a friend. Be a friend to the pastor's wife. Being a pastor's wife can be excruciatingly lonely.

She's left family, friends, she's left it all

To be faithful to her husband's call.

It can be lonely to be the pastor, too. It can be emotionally exhausting. Reach out. Just be a friend. And in that same vein, you need to protect your pastor from spurious accusations.

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. (1 Timothy 5:19)

Sometimes, as a pastor, you have to tell people what they need to know when they really don't want to hear it. Sometimes it comes from the pulpit. I know from time to time, I've stomped on some of your toes. I know, because sometimes my sermons bloody up my feet too. But often, I have to give hard advice during a private conversation, maybe a counseling session. Marriage counselling is especially dicey! Sometimes folks can be offended because of something they think I should have done. Or maybe I did something I shouldn't have done.

Protect your pastor from unsubstantiated rumors and whispers. That's what Paul means. If somebody has a gripe, make sure it's legitimate. If it comes from two or three witnesses, you need to get to the bottom of it, but if it's just one guy with an agenda, don't receive the accusation. And for heaven's sake, don't pass it on!

The same thing goes for all our elders, all our board members. If you think we have failed, if you think we have sinned, then follow the procedure Jesus set out so explicitly.

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'BY

THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY WORD MAY BE ESTABLISHED.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17)

So, the third duty you have toward your elders and especially your pastor is to hold them accountable.

Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. (1 Timothy 5:20)

Accountability starts with the preaching and teaching of God's word. Hold your pastor accountable to the pristine truth of this Bible. Be like the Bereans, who ...

... were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

If you have a question about something your pastor teaches, if something doesn't sound quite right to you, call him up, take him aside and discuss it with him. But remember, the only standard of truth is this Bible. So, always support your position, your question, from the word of God.

A good model for this can be found in the book of Acts. There was a gifted preacher named Apollos who came to Ephesus, but he apparently didn't have a full understanding of the gospel. Here's what happened:

So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. (Acts 18:26)

Notice that they didn't call him out in front of everyone. They corrected him with humility and grace and they did so privately.

Accountability also extends to the lifestyle of every elder. Those qualities, those characteristics that Paul mentioned in chapter 3, verse 1-7 are important. If an elder falls short, he needs to be called on it and that goes for the pastor as well. But remember the steps of discipline that Jesus gave us.

Paul's command to Timothy in verse 20 refers to persistent, unrepentant sin. Yes, elders need to be held to a higher standard. Pastors need to be held to a higher standard. But we're still sinners saved by the grace of God. We will stumble. Don't be too quick to condemn. Don't be too quick to pile on.

Timothy had been given a ministry of oversight and Paul exhorts him to take his duties very seriously.

I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality. (1 Timothy 5:21)

That's a tough gig. And Village Missions, through the ministry of our district representative, Mark Canady, has a similar responsibility of oversight. That's one of the great advantages of being a Village Missions Church: There is always someone to turn to if a problem comes up between a pastor and his congregation.

In a few weeks, we will be going through a pastoral transition. I can tell you with absolute certainty, that Mark Canady, John Adams, Brian Welchsler and the rest of the District Representatives are praying for God's guidance in sending the best match

possible to this community. We don't know who they are yet, but Mark has told me that they have somebody in mind. We might have to wait a few weeks before they are ready to come. If that's the case, they will supply an associate missionary to fill the pulpit in the interim. But I want you to get excited. Whoever this couple, this family is, they are God's choice to lead this church forward. They are God's gift to you.

So, pray for them, will you? Count them worthy of double honor. Protect them. And yes, hold them accountable.

And may God continue to bless Canyon Community Church through their ministry.