

The Subject of Elders or Overseers

1 Timothy 5:17-25

1 Timothy 5:17-25: *“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” ¹⁹ Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. ²⁰ Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. ²¹ 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. ²² Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people’s sins; keep yourself pure. ²³ No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities. ²⁴ Some men’s sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later. ²⁵ Likewise, the good works of some are clearly evident, and those that are otherwise cannot be hidden.”*

Background Notes

The main theme of 1 Timothy is “Church Order.” 1 Timothy is the book of Scripture that should be studied thoroughly when believers are starting a new church - but it never hurts to study it even when you’re involved in an established church!

In chapter 3, we learn that the elders (or overseers) are the spiritual leaders and spiritual authority in the church. They are the shepherds of the sheep. There are good shepherds - and then there are shepherds who are not so good. How should the sheep treat or react to the good shepherds and the not-so-good shepherds? That’s what 1 Timothy 5:17-25 is all about.

Verse 23 needs some explanation: *“No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities.”* What is this verse doing here in the middle of a context about dealing with elders? Suddenly Paul decided to give Timothy some medical advice? What’s the connection? Most likely, as Paul was writing this personal letter to Timothy, something reminded him of Timothy’s health problems, especially in view of the responsibilities and heavy workload that Timothy faced in Ephesus. Apparently Timothy was not in robust health, so Paul gave him some good medical advice.

Because 1 Timothy 5:23 is part of the Word of God, this medical advice is just as good today as it was in the 1st century. Medical knowledge and technology has come a long way since then, but God did not let any of the medical errors of the 1st century creep into His Word. There’s no way that Paul would ever tell Timothy to let a little blood out to treat his frequent infirmities - and yet blood-letting for curing illnesses was a medical practice right up until modern times!

One of the miracles about the Bible is that **God preserved it from all error**. He preserved it from **historical error**. He preserved it from **scientific error**. He preserved it from **medical error**. And in verse 23 the inspired writer was discussing the use of wine for medicinal purposes. Drinking a little wine is still good medical advice today, especially in places where the water is not safe to drink.

Verse 23 does not condone excessive drinking. It's not discussing the right or wrong of social drinking, because Paul was not writing about the question of Christian liberty here. It's medical advice to Timothy, who evidently had stomach problems and frequent sickness. In the 1st century – even in an advanced city like Ephesus – the water was not pure, so wine was a safer beverage. And notice – Paul advised Timothy to drink **a little** wine - not a lot of wine!

Notice also that Paul expected Timothy to do his job, in spite of his stomach problems and frequent illnesses. How many Christians do you know who cop out of their responsibilities or excuse themselves from Christian service for health reasons? Read this Scripture - and take notice of what Paul expected from Timothy!

Doctrinal Points

1. Elders who rule well should receive double honor.

Verses 17-18: *“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.”* Notice that elders are to “rule” – or be in charge of what's going on in the church and the congregation. They're not to rule like dictators. They're not to be like drill sergeants. But they are to rule.

The elders are to rule like shepherds. Shepherds rule the sheep by leading them, guarding them, caring for their needs, and occasionally disciplining them. The sheep don't make the decisions for the shepherd - the shepherd makes the decision for the sheep!

Elders who rule well should receive “double honor.” What does this mean? The first honor is respect. Elders should be respected. Not worshiped, and not put on a pedestal, but honored and respected. What's the second honor? In view of verse 18, it's financial honor. That's why we use the term “honorarium” in this connection.

Notice that verse 18 contains two quotations from other Scriptures. From the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 25:4: *“You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain...”* From the New Testament, Luke 10:7: *“The laborer is worthy of his wages.”*

By the way, it's significant that Paul quoted from **Luke's** Gospel. Luke, who was not an apostle, had written the Gospel of Luke only a couple of years before 1 Timothy was written, and yet there was no question in the apostle Paul's mind that Luke's writing was inspired Scripture - just as much as the Old Testament Scriptures!

The point of verses 17 and 18 is *not* that elders *must* be paid, but that they *can* be paid. And an elder who is working *full-time* in the ministry of teaching and preaching God's Word *should* be paid appropriately. Preparing good ministry from the Word takes time. Some Christians have the idea that full-time elders or full-time servants of the Lord sit around all day. Not so! (I think you get the point here!)

Elders who rule well should receive double honor.

2. Elders who do not rule well should be rebuked publicly.

Unfortunately, elders or church leaders are not perfect. They're not immune to temptation to sin. And you may be sure that Satan especially targets spiritual leaders. What should the church do if an elder or church leader is involved in sin?

First of all, you don't gossip and badmouth the elder. Second, you don't ignore the sin or sweep it under the rug. These verses give us the guidelines:

a. Make sure the elder is really guilty of the accusation.

Verse 19: "*Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses.*" In my travels to various places around the country, people are constantly unloading on me about the faults they see in their church leaders. Analyzing it, so often the problem is really a personality clash or a minor imperfection. What we're dealing with in 1 Timothy 5 is involvement in serious sin that is affecting the testimony of the local church. So make sure the elder is really guilty of the accusation.

b. Discipline publicly if the sin continues.

The other elders are responsible to carry out the discipline. That's one very important reason why the Bible teaches that the local church should have a **plurality** of elders.

Verse 20 says, "*Those who are sinning, rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.*" Obviously, the nature and seriousness of the sin is important. If the sin is serious and continuous, then the leader must be disciplined - and it should be done publicly. Why? So that rumors don't start, and also "*that the rest [of the congregation] may fear*" (v20). This is serious business. When I was young, an elder in my church was publicly disciplined and asked to step down from his office as a church leader. It was a very solemn occasion, and it had an enormous effect on me. It literally put "the fear of God" in me. We were not playing church. This was the **house of the living God**.

It's possible that a church leader and elder could be excommunicated and put out of fellowship if there's no repentance, and if there's a continuation of the sinful practice.

c. Do not show favoritism.

Verse 19 said that we are not to prejudge the situation, and verse 21 says that we are not to play favorites. When it comes to sin, you don't play favorites. Regardless of friendship, regardless of position, regardless of wealth - you don't play favorites.

You might think you would never do that. Well, suppose your spiritual leader you like best, and the spiritual leader you like least committed the same sin, a sin that was affecting the testimony of your church. Would you play favorites? Think it through. No wonder this serious charge is made in verse 21: *"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."*

That's one reason why it's very important not to recognize elders or spiritual overseers too quickly: *"Do not lay hands on anyone hastily."*(v22). Notice also in verse 22 that we share in the responsibility for the sins of the elders whom we have recognized! *"Nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure"*(v22). So although it's not a pleasant task, elders who do not rule well should be rebuked publicly.

Practical Application

Don't judge a book by its cover!

You've heard that expression before. Look at verses 24-26, *"Some men's sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later. Likewise, the good works of some are clearly evident, and those that are otherwise cannot be hidden."* Verses 24 -26 were written in the context of recognizing elders, and they stress the importance of taking time for a man to prove himself over time before he's recognized as a church leader. Doing this consistently would certainly save the church the trouble and heartache that goes along with disciplining men who were made elders too quickly.

That's the *interpretation* of these verses in their context - but they can certainly be *applied* to many situations. We all tend to judge people too quickly. Some people's character (both good and bad) is pretty obvious right from the start, but the character of others (both good and bad) only becomes known with time. Don't be taken in by a good-looking, smooth-talking person, who knows the "lingo" and talks a good line. It happens all the time in politics. Unfortunately, it happens all too often in the church as well.

By the same token, don't write off a person who doesn't make a good first impression. There are "sleepers" out there! At Emmaus Bible College, some students emerge after a couple of years as rock-solid, responsible, productive Christians - but they didn't look like much to begin with! It took time for their solid character to develop and emerge.

So - don't judge a book by its cover!