

The First Epistle of Paul to Timothy
1st Timothy 5:19-25
Reading: 1 Timothy 5:17-25
Elders and the Church

Sermon #17
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Protecting Elders – (v. 19)

People will line up to tear someone else down. Just look at our political process. This whole election is about tearing down others instead of what one can do to make things better. The same is true with the relationship between the world and the church. The world likes nothing better than to see Christians fall, especially Christian leaders. It makes the unsaved feel better about themselves because they can say, “You see, Christians are no better than we are.” Many people think they can elevate themselves by tearing down others. But, in truth this brings them down.

Unfortunately, we can find this same behavior within the church. Why? There are many reasons. A man wants to be in leadership, but does not qualify. A woman is jealous of another because her marriage is more solid. Some just do not want to submit to the authority structure Christ has placed in the church. The list of reasons goes on and on. The bottom line is some people do not find their purpose and peace in Christ and in His calling for their life – they want something different.

When someone works at tearing down the church from within and falsely attacking others, in truth, they are not worshipping Christ but working for the evil one who is always desiring to destroy God’s church. Peter warned, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.” (1 Peter 5:8–9)

I remember early in my ministry, when I had so much to learn, I did not yet understand that those who call themselves Christian could, in truth, be adversaries

of the church. I did not understand people within the church could behave in a way that hurts the church. While serving overseas I met people who worked to destroy what missionaries were doing in the name of Christ. The missionaries had a name for these people; they called them “Christian Witches.” They looked and acted Christian, but their purpose was to cause chaos and destruction from within. These types of people have been active since the beginning of Christ’s church. The Bible has many examples of all types of people in a variety of positions that are false – false to God, to His Word, to Christ and to those within the church. False accusation is one of Satan’s strongest weapons. We find examples in the Bible of false accusations used against Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Nehemiah and of course against our Lord Jesus Christ. So too, Paul had been falsely accused and this is the background for his writing this passage to Timothy. “[Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.](#)” (1 Timothy 5:19) When Christ calls a man to eldership he is placed into a position of sacred trust to shepherd and preach God’s Word to a church. Paul understood better than anyone that those in leadership must live with integrity, credibility and purity. If an elder can be successfully attacked and discredited his ministry is destroyed. If a leader’s ministry is destroyed it hurts the entire church. Therefore, it is critical, absolutely critical, that the people be able to distinguish between gossip and lies, as opposed to truth and reality.

Paul gives Timothy instruction on how to deal with accusations. Allegations are not to be ignored. The leadership of the church should determine those accusations that have merit and those that are designed to cause trouble. Church leadership needs to quickly investigate to determine if charges have merit. First, it is wrong to accuse an elder publicly until leadership has determined its validity. Second, accusations against an elder are to be brought directly to leadership in order that they can investigate and act upon for both the good of the elder and the church.

Third, accusations are to be brought to the leadership by at least two or three witnesses. Moses wrote, “[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.](#)” (Deuteronomy 19:15) This prevents someone with a vendetta from making a personal attack against an elder. Even with two witnesses the accusation may be proven false, thus the need for investigation. This does not place an elder beyond being accused of wrongdoing, but works to insure an elder is not accused without true cause or by someone with an axe to grind.

To bring an accusation against an elder is a grave responsibility and should be considered seriously. Remember in 1st Samuel after David cut off the corner of Saul’s robe he was troubled by his conscience for his action because Saul was king. Later in 2nd Samuel the Amalekite thought he could gain favor with David by taking responsibility for having killed Saul. David’s response was to have the man executed for killing God’s anointed king. As it is written, “[Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!](#)” (Psalm 105:15) The psalmist was writing of God’ anointed and prophets and Saul had been anointed by God as king. Even though Saul certainly turned from God he was not to be dealt with in an ordinary manner. Those God has placed into leadership are to be dealt with in a manner that honors God. All people should be dealt with in a manner that is right before the Lord. Sins of leaders have consequences that ripple out beyond the immediate and extra care is to be given.

A problem that at times is encountered is that men instead of God place a man into leadership and then the shame falls on their heads. For the church is called to know who is qualified to lead. If God places a man into leadership and then he turns from God, as King Saul, the church is called to act justly as the scriptures teach.

Rebuking Elders – (v.20-21)

Elders are to be protected from false accusations, but this does not mean they receive immunity from true charges. Paul continues, “*As for those (speaking of elders) who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.*”²¹ In 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.” (1 Timothy 5:20-21) Elders who sin bear the consequences of their sin. Even though Paul does not define what specific sins, the passage implies any sin that would disqualify an elder by the standards listed in chapter three. These sins are grounds for “rebuke … in the presence of all.” The steps are simple; an accusation is made by two or more witnesses, brought to the leadership and investigated. If found true, the elder is publicly rebuked, for a sinning elder should have no place to hide before the church. The sins of a leader carry greater weight because of his position. As James wrote, “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*” (James 3:1) When an elder is found in sin it would be hoped that he would repent, but this does not negate the fact that his creditability is forfeited and his actions have disqualified him from ministry. He must be publicly rebuked so that the people understand why he is no longer serving in ministry. When a church works to hush up the problem and allows an elder to quietly leave it creates a number problems. First, there is confusion within the church as to what is going on and this creates division. Second, the elder may often end up at another church and create the same problems there. Thirdly, it allows an elder to continue without facing his sin and the healing that comes from repentance and reconciliation. Serving in ministry is a two-edged sword. Those who serve faithfully are to be protected and honored. But, those who fall into sin are to be publicly rebuked and removed. Paul listed another reason a sinning elder is to be publicly rebuked – “*so that the rest may stand in fear.*” In the

Greek the word “**rest**” means others of the same type or other elders. When the church takes proper action towards a sinning elder it places a healthy fear into the hearts of the other elders. It reminds them of the standards God has set for eldership. It should also place a healthy fear into the hearts of the people for they see the church has the wear-with-all to follow the steps of discipline as laid out in Matthew 18. It is written, “**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.**” (Proverbs 9:10) Such fear is not a terrifying fear of God but rather a fear of the reality of how God hates sin. The path before the church is clear. Will the church protect a man’s honor or God’s? God’s honor must always be first and foremost before the church. How can the church be God’s witness to the world if it does not strive to remain holy and set standards consistent with God’s holy Word. This standard for elders does not mean an elder who repents cannot be forgiven and accepted as part of the congregation, but it does mean they are not to serve in leadership, at least for a period of time as they go through restoration outside of ministry.

To publicly rebuke a sinning elder takes courage by the other leaders and it takes courage of the whole church. To make sure the leaders and church do not turn from this responsibility Paul commands Timothy in verse 21, “**In 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.**” Paul is reminding Timothy and by this writing reminding every true church today that God the Father, Christ Jesus and the elect angels are watching. It is these that the church should fear, not men. It is clear that all of heaven is concerned with the purity of the Christ’s Church. If a church tolerates or hides sin – the sin of elders - in an attempt to protect its reputation on earth it will certainly lose its reputation in heaven. Jesus said, “**Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**” (Matthew 18:18) No one should

receive preferential treatment when it comes to sin. Rebuking sin must be done with kindness, but done also with honesty, integrity and for the honor of God. A man being considered for eldership is required to answer 51 questions on doctrine and qualifications to serve as an elder. Question 20 of the Elder Questionnaire asks, "*If after being appointed as an elder you enter or are found to be in sin, are you willing to have your sin exposed before the entire congregation and will you willingly forfeit your position as elder?*" Rebuking sin is not easy, but God requires it because the holiness of the church must be upheld if the church is to show God's holiness to the fallen world.

It reminds me of an interim pastor, from Australia who after several weeks of preaching, gave a very strong sermon on the subject of sin in a church in America. After the service, one of the church leaders came to him. "Dr. Howard," he said, "we don't want you to talk as openly as you do about man's guilt and corruption, because if our boys and girls hear you discussing that subject they will more easily become sinners. Call it a mistake if you will, but do not speak so plainly about sin." The pastor took down a small bottle from a cabinet in the church office and showing it to the church leader said, "You see that label? It says strychnine, it is used to kill mice -- and underneath in bold, red letters is the word 'Poison!' Do you know, man, what you are asking me to do? You are suggesting that I change the label. Suppose I do, and paste over it the words, 'Essence of Peppermint' don't you see what might happen? Someone would use it not knowing the danger involved and would certainly die. So it is, too, with the matter of sin. The milder you make your label, the more dangerous you make your poison!" Not dealing with sin not only poisons the individual, but the church as a whole.

Selecting Elders – (v.22-25)

Paul says the best way to prevent unqualified men from serving as elders is “[Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.](#)” To lay on hands is to affirm a man to be suitable to be ordained as an elder and serve in the ministry of Christ. This practice in the New Testament had its origins in the Old. “[When you bring the Levites before the LORD, the people of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites,](#)”¹¹ and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the people of Israel, that they may do the service of the LORD.” (Numbers 8:10–11) This was the practice used when Moses passed his leadership to “[Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him.](#)” (Deuteronomy 34:9) There are many examples in the New Testament of the laying on hands to place a man into leadership. You may remember in Acts chapter 9, when Ananias was commanded by Jesus Christ to lay hands upon Paul. Instantly, scales fell from Paul’s eyes and he was made ready to serve Jesus.

In the New Testament three groups performed ordination of elders. First the apostles ordained men to plant new churches and serve as elders and overseers. “[When they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.](#)” (Acts 14:23) Second, those appointed by the apostles; like Timothy and Titus also ordained elders as found in Titus 1:5, where Paul instructs Titus, “[This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.](#)” Third, existing church elders ordained new elders to lead in their churches. Paul instructed, “[Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.](#)” (1 Timothy 4:14) Today the first two groups no longer exist, so the responsibility of ordaining new elders is found in the existing elders. Here at Canyon Bible a man

goes through a process to determine if he meets the qualifications of eldership found in the Bible. He then works through doctrinal questions to demonstrate his ability to understand the doctrinal precepts of the Bible. Question 37 asks, “*Do you hold steadfast to the Word of God, being sound in doctrine, and able to encourage others in the same and to refute those who contradict?*” Once this has been accomplished there is a period of testing where the church speaks concerning the man’s gifting and abilities. With this process completed and passed, the man is brought before the church and ordained as an elder by the laying on of hands. This process was designed to comply with biblical instruction, “**Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.**” We are to take care with who will shepherd Christ’s church.

If we rushed into ordaining a man as elder just because the church has a need for elders, we very well could “**take part in the sins of others**” as verse 22 continues and if that would happen one would not “**keep yourself pure.**” Paul knew Timothy had a big job of establishing churches and that these churches would need elders to guide and shepherd them. He is instructing Timothy to take time and do what is right. Paul says take the time to choose the right men and not raise up unqualified leaders. Raising up unqualified men means you participate in their sin. Following Paul’s instruction insured that Timothy remained pure, that the churches would have right leaders who were pure, and this insured the church remained pure.

Now Paul interjects in the middle of these instructions a personal side note. In Paul’s call for Timothy to remain pure he is not calling him abstain from all things that may have a negative influence. Wine can be both good and bad. Too much wine clouds ones thinking. “**Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.**” (Ephesians 5:18) But wine also served a good purpose so 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.**” This implies Timothy may have abstained from wine because of its possible abuse and wanting to set an example of

purity. Timothy might have been thinking of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, "Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother." (Romans 14:13) Timothy would not want to live in a manner that would cause anyone to stumble. However, Paul does not want Timothy's commitment to purity to cause him health problems. At the time of Paul's writing, unless one drank from a clean deep well, most other sources of water were polluted. Wine was not polluted and thus avoided stomach problems. The Talmud and many other ancient writings speak of the value of wine in countering stomach ailments caused by impure water. Paul is not advocating Timothy give up his standards, but to also have common sense concerning his stomach ailment. Having taken a side moment to deal with Timothy's stomach needs Paul now returns to the subject at hand – the principals of selecting proper elders.

Paul continues in verse 24, "The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later." Some men's sins are obvious or "conspicuous" and these men can be rejected for leadership by their own behavior. However, the sins of others are more hidden and are not so easily apparent. But, by getting to know a person over time it will reveal their true heart. Paul wrote earlier one of the standards for eldership, "He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil." (1 Timothy 3:6) Whether a man is a new convert or new to a specific church means time must be taken to reveal the man's true heart. Just as the sins of some men are not readily apparent, so too, the good works of some men are also not obvious.

Paul ends this passage with, "So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden." These men may be doing good works behind the scenes. These men may have read the Gospel Account According to Matthew

where Jesus said, “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

(Matthew 6:2–4) Doing good works for the recognition one receives is the wrong motive and this would be seen in the process of selection over time. Also, those who are doing good works for the right motives will become apparent during this selection process.

Today, as at the time of Timothy the church is in need of qualified men to serve as elder pastors. They must meet the qualifications Paul laid out in 1 Timothy chapter 3. Their ministries must meet the standards Paul outlines in chapter 4 beginning in verse 6. Each man that meets scriptural standards and who has been called into the ministry as an elder, is to be honored and protected by the church. The church is also to rebuke any who fall into sin. If the eldership is right before God and church, and the church is living as the Word of God instructs both elder and church will be a strong influence in the lives of the brethren and beyond the church in the fallen world.

This is the desire and goal of Canyon Bible Church. May we through the power of the Holy Spirit live in such a manner and glorify our Lord with our lives. Amen!