

Study Notes for [1 Timothy 5:17-25](#)

KEEPING LEADERS IN THEIR PLACE

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Introduction:

In this passage, Paul continues his personal instruction to Timothy. Here he highlights the good and bad activity of elders as well as good and bad deeds; some which are immediately observable and others which are only revealed later. As such, it is important that Timothy is very careful about who he commissions as an elder. He also gives Timothy some personal advice concerning his weak physical health.

It seems slightly odd that Paul would return to the topic of elders. It would appear to be more fitting if this passage was right after the earlier passage on elders (3:1-7). However, the answer may lie in that Paul is addressing two main problems in the church: young widows (5:3-16) and the false elders that are leading them astray (our passage 5:17-25). Given the overall structure of the passage this seems most plausible (Fee, 127).

Annotated Outline of Passage

1. Instructions concerning Elders (vv. 17-20)
 - i. Elders who do a great job, especially those who teach and preach, are worthy of additional honor because this is a scriptural mandate. (vv. 17-18)
 - ii. Accusations against elders should be taken seriously but must be corroborated. Elders who continue to sin must be reprimanded before the entire church (vv. 19-20)
2. Paul's personal charge to Timothy (vv. 21-23)
 - i. Paul very solemnly commands Timothy to do all Paul says without bias (v. 21)
 - ii. Paul also tells Timothy to be wary about commissioning elders for ministry. The sins of such ministers will also be his sins (v. 22)
 - iii. Paul instructs Timothy to be more proactive concerning his weak physical health. (v. 23)
3. Observable effects of bad and good deeds (vv. 24-25)

Some sins are easily observed while others are not; the same is true for good deeds. However, in both cases the unobserved deeds – whether good or bad – will eventually be revealed.

Notes

5:17-18 Paul mentions three things about elders: first they “rule” (NASB, ESV) or “direct the affairs” (NIV) of the church. This is the same term used in 3:4 and 3:12; second, some elders teach and preach and some do not; and third, those elders that “work hard” (NASB) in the word and teach are worthy of double honor.

“double honor” does not mean twice the pay but two-fold honor: respect and monetary remuneration.

The “for” that begins verse 18 indicates an explanation of what was said in v. 17. “Scripture” here means the Old Testament¹. The first citation is from Deuteronomy 25:4. The second citation is an exact saying of Jesus (Luke 10:7²) but also comes from the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:15).

- 5:19-20 These two verses have to do with elder discipline. Because of the problems with certain elders, Paul gives two instructions: first, no unsupported charges against an elder will be considered; and second, if the charges are found to be true the elder must be *publicly* rebuked.

Concerning the first instruction: this is the same for all members of the church (2 Corinthians 13:1; John 8:17; Hebrews 10:28 and Deuteronomy 19:15). The intent of this instruction is to protect the elders from malicious accusations. On the other hand, there were problems with certain elders and there was a need to deal with them. And this is the reason for the second instruction and also the verse following to the end of the passage.

This second charge makes it clear that if there is improper behavior by an elder it must be dealt with publicly for all church members to hear and cannot be simply kept secret within the church leadership. As Fee states, “This may seem a bit harsh and unloving, but as the next clause indicates, it is for the sake of the whole community: **so that others may take warning**” (Fee, 130). The word “others” means the other elders but can also include all members of the church.

See Galatians 2:11-14 for an example of Paul putting this directive into practice.

- 5:21 This instruction given in the previous two verses are to be carried out by Timothy with all care and solemnity. In fact, when he does deal with errant elders he must do so realizing he is before God, Christ Jesus and his elect angels. (See also 2 Timothy 4:1). In particular, Timothy is not to show any favoritism towards any elder and so watering down the previous instructions. On the other hand, Timothy is not to show any antagonism towards other elders particularly those who he may have personal problems with and so use these instructions for his own benefit.

“elect angels” is an unusual phrase (only here) and likely means not “fallen” angels.

- 5:22 “laying on of hands” most likely refers to the commissioning of new (replacement) elders. The laying on of hands is an old practice going back to Moses (Numbers 27:23). For the NT practice see Luke 4:40; Acts 6:6; 8:18; 2 Timothy 1:6 and Hebrews 6:1-2.

It seems obvious that after being given these directives concerning errant elders that Timothy should be extra careful in whom he now appoints as replacement elders for those who have been removed. Later in the passage Paul points out to Timothy that he must be wise when looking at a potential elder because not all sin is obvious (v. 24).

¹ The term “Scripture” meant the Old Testament to the early Christian until the end of the second century (Fee, 134). However this does not mean that portions of the NT as they were being written were not considered Scripture. From the earliest times, Christians viewed the NT writings as Scripture.

² The reference is Luke 10:7 although it is uncertain if the gospel of Luke has been written at the time Paul wrote this letter to Timothy.

Paul then adds a warning to Timothy. He tells him not to be hasty in selecting a new elder because Timothy himself will be considered a partner in the sin of the new elder if the new elder turns out to be a sinner.

- 5:23 The personal note in this verse at first seems a bit out of place, but it follows directly from Paul's warning to Timothy not to be hasty in selecting elders³.

Paul tells Timothy to keep himself pure (last clause of verse 22) by not getting involved with the sin of insisting on abstinence. Drinking only water was a form of asceticism (Towner, 376). And such insistence is "part of the hypocrisy of the false teachers" (Fee, 132). From Paul's instruction it also seems that Timothy had decided to abstain from wine. There is no reason given for why he might have abstained: it may be because of the false elder's teaching (4:3) or more likely because of drunkenness of some member (3:3,8; Titus 1:7) or there may be other reasons which we are not aware of. In any case, Paul instructs Timothy to drink wine for the sake of his own health. Paul does not have any particular insight in the medical use of wine but is simply reflecting the common belief – both among Jews and Greeks – of the medical value of wine (Fee, 135).

- 5:24-25 Paul now returns to the topic of selecting new elders. Here he gives Timothy the reasons why he should not be hasty in laying on of hands. It is clear that Paul has been disappointed by the behavior of some leaders whose true colors were only evident later. These hidden sins included pride, being argumentative, jealousy, undermining others through malicious speech, and an unhealthy desire for money (6:4-10).

Paul also realizes the opposite is true. Sometimes the goodness of a person is not obvious and so again it is important for Timothy not to be too hasty and put too much emphasis on outward appearances. Eventually the good deeds of people will be evident. This is all a very practical example of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 12:34-35.

References

- George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.
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- Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.

³ Translators and biblical scholars have puzzled over the reason why this verse is here at this point in the passage. NASB and NIV have both make the verse a separate paragraph underscoring an uncertainty to which section (before or after) the verse belongs to; ESV and NET has put it into parenthesis. The explanation given in the notes seems a reasonable one.