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1 Timothy 5:17-25

Thirteenth Message

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KEEPING LEADERS IN THEIR PLACE

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

This week marks my thirty-sixth wedding anniversary. After our honeymoon, Emily and I loaded up a truck in Los Angeles with all our possessions (and little money), and moved to the Bay Area to intern at PBC. As we were leaving, my father said to me, "If you want to become a pastor, why don't you go to an accredited seminary?" I was unable to put my answer into words then. But my heart was saying, I didn't want an academic credential; what I wanted was to have my life shaped by godly men.

As a college student I had the privilege of being an advisor to the Board of Elders of PBC. Sitting in that circle was an unforgettable experience. At the age of 19 I was interacting with men like Bob Roe, Bob Smith, Ray Stedman, Dave Roper, and others. I was awestruck by these men. On the night of my first meeting, I was particularly impressed afterwards as I watched one of the elders approach another brother and ask, "Is there something between us in our relationship? If there is, I want to set it right." That had quite an impact on me. I began to discover the true definition of the church. The church is not an organization; it is a family whose leaders are to foster healthy relationships.

If you were to ask me today, thirty-six years later, what has been the greatest asset of my spiritual education, I would insist that it was not learning Greek or Hebrew, or indeed anything I received in the classroom; it has been the wisdom I have received being around a godly circle of men all these years.

We will look at this theme of eldership from 1 Timothy this morning. Just like other members in a family, leaders need care. In this text, the apostle Paul directs Timothy on how elders are to be compensated, corrected, and selected.

I. Honoring Elders (1 Tim 5:17-18)

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For Scripture says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," and "Workers deserve their wages." (1 Tim 5:17-18 TNIV)

A. The definition of "double honor"

Elders should be honored in the church as fathers are in the home. There, children give honor to their fathers by obeying their teaching and providing for them in their old age. This is what gives parents social esteem in the community. In the same way, elders are honored in the church as the congregation responds to and obeys their teaching of the great doctrines of Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews affirms,

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you. (Heb 13:17)

Furthermore, says Paul, elders who exercise leadership with distinction are worthy of "double honor." He means they should be financially compensated so they have greater freedom to carry out their divinely Hezekiah appointed tasks, just as the Old Testament priests were set apart to God's word:

He [Hezekiah] ordered the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion due the priests and Levites so they could devote themselves to the Law of the LORD. (2 Chron 31:4)

John Stott elaborates on the need for every community to cultivate appreciation for its leaders:

We sometimes say or think that Christian workers need the appreciation only of the Chief Shepherd, and not of human leaders. But Paul was of a different opinion. For human beings are prone to discouragement and need to be affirmed. So elders who do well in their work are worthy of double honor...Conscientious elders should receive both respect and remuneration, both honor and an honorarium.¹

B. Who is worthy of double honor?

Those whom Paul considers worthy of double honor (we would call them full time pastors) exercise exceptional leadership ("rule well" NRSV), especially those who expend great effort in preaching and teaching. The verb "to rule" (*proistemi* - "to stand before, manage, lead") combines the qualities of initiative with concern. It implies that elders should not only be capable of leading and directing the congregation, but that their leadership should be motivated by love and concern for the flock. Unlike the CEO business model of leadership, elders are to combine tenderness with authority, and compassion with initiative, just as Isaiah described the character of the coming Messiah:

**See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and his arm rules for him.**

**See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.**

He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms

and carries them close to his heart;

he gently leads those that have young. (Isa 40:10-11)

Jesus did not take a front office in downtown Jerusalem and delegate the care of his flock from a distance. He lived among the common people of the land and became intimately involved with them. He forced his disciples to break out of their safe religious zones and venture forth into the interpersonal world of tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, and the marginalized. Should leaders become emotionally involved with the sheep? Jesus wept on more than one occasion. Paul also was a supreme example of one who combined the bold initiative of a warrior with the tender compassion of a nursing mother:

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. (1 Thess 2:7-8)

Even when Paul was forced to write a severe letter of correction to the Corinthians, he confessed that it originated out of the bowels of his compassion for them:

For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you. (2 Cor 2:4)

Among those elders who are leading well, Paul places particular emphasis on those who are working hard (*kopiaio* - "work hard, toil, strive,

struggle”) at preaching (lit. “in word”) and teaching. Feeding the flock, the primary task of elders, requires vigorous effort. Those who are set aside full-time must have more than a heart to care for people; they must have something to feed them with, for without truth, affection has no substance. All elders are required to have speaking gifts that make them “able to teach,” but it is those who have developed their gifts through years of diligent study and continual teaching that the body is to consider worthy of support.

A pastor cannot be a mere enthusiast, relying on spontaneous insights to feed the flock. He is not a short order cook but a master chef, dispensing healthy meals that will satisfy and sustain God’s people. The dual phrase “preaching and teaching” combines the proclamation of the doctrines of the faith with relevant exhortation and application in the real world. A chef cannot afford to spend all his time in the kitchen cross-referencing hundreds of recipes from world famous chefs. When the guests arrive, they’re hungry. He can’t just throw ingredients at them in four different languages and expect them to be able to digest it. No, it’s a meal they’ve come for. Likewise, a pastor cannot be an isolated academic or an impersonal theologian living in his ivory tower all week. John Stott aptly describes such a pastor: “He is six days of the week invisible, and one day of the week incomprehensible.” Along with the Scripture, pastors must also know the flock and the pressures of the world they live with. It takes rigorous work to bridge the ancient and modern worlds, to know not just what the Scripture says but also what it means today, and how to communicate it with clarity and relevancy.

Our church is unusual in that we have no full time preachers. There are several reasons for this, the main one being that the congregation hears different voices. But just as important is that all of us who preach are full time pastors who have been assigned to oversee, teach, and disciple smaller flocks within the congregation. This keeps us intimately involved in relationships in the body, and hopefully gives credibility to our teaching.

C. The rationale for honor

To establish the rationale for financially supporting elders, Paul brings together two texts of Scripture. The first is from Deuteronomy 25:4: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” The oxen that labor on the threshing floor, providing flour for food, themselves need to be fed and cared for. We would not think much of a master who took the fruits of his oxen’s labor and returned thanks by starving them.

The second quotation, which comes from a saying of Jesus in Luke 10:7, “the laborer is worthy of his wages (NASB),” makes the application of the first saying to elders, who deserve to be remunerated for their labors. (It’s interesting to note that even in those early decades of the church there was already a divine sense that the words of Jesus were equal in authority to the Old Testament.) Neither quotation is particularly flattering to presbyters, since in the first they are likened to threshing oxen, and in the second to farm laborers. But Paul’s purpose in employing these models is not to depreciate the pastoral ministry, but rather to emphasize that it is hard work, and that hard work performed conscientiously deserves to be rewarded.²

Whenever we receive a service or product in the community we ought to pay for it. It is wrong to expect something for free. Yet this is common in Christian circles—proving that we don’t really value the service we have been provided. How much do you value your soul? To God, it was worth the life of his only Son. He paid it all. What value do you place on it, and what expense will you go to care for it? Paul states the value we place on our souls can be measured by how we invest in those set aside to teach God’s word. When this is a priority, we reap eternal dividends:

Nevertheless, those who receive instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. People reap what they sow. Those who sow to please their sinful

nature, from that nature will reap destruction; those who sow to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. (Gal 6:6-8)

Having spoken on the necessity of appreciation, Paul turns his attention to giving correction to elders.

II. The Correction of Elders (1 Tim 5:19-21)

As anyone who operates in the public sphere knows, leaders are subject to scrutiny, thoughtless criticism, and vile rumors. In the church, a leader who is dedicated to the faithful proclamation of God’s word will also be subject to satanic attack. Satan’s greatest weapon against those in leadership is slander. As centuries of history prove, to thwart the kingdom of God, dirt is far more effective than death. In America it seems we have entire industries in the media that operate with no restraint to that end.

Bruce Waltke, who teaches Old Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., was illustrating the point by the contrasting attitudes of the American and Canadian press. He observed that in Canada it takes a long time for a public figure to be placed on a pedestal, but once leaders have been elevated to a position of honor, they are kept there. In America, on the other hand, we are all too quick to put people on pedestals, but once they are there, we immediately chop them off at the knees. You can make the cover of Time magazine one week and the following week you may very well be the lead story in the tabloids. As a culture, we are shamefully lax in character investigation, but we relish character assassination.

A. Elders need protection

Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. (5:19)

It must not be so in the church. Once a man is set in the office as an elder he deserves protection. Paul’s language moves us into the legal sphere, where matters are judged with the utmost care and due process. “The present tense imperative... ‘*stop accepting accusations*,’... may suggest that Timothy (or others before his arrival) had already done so.”³ A leader’s reputation is the capital by which he serves the flock; therefore Timothy is to assume that an elder is innocent until he is proven guilty. In the Old Testament, two or three witnesses were required to render a verdict, especially in regard to capital offenses. In the church, a leader’s reputation and ministry can be destroyed by the slander of one, suggesting that gossip is one of the most deadly sins. As the sage affirms in his numerical proverb, six things the Lord hates, but the seventh brings his anger to the boiling point because it has the potential to destroy entire communities:

**There are six [abominations] the LORD hates,
yea, [they are] seven abominations to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that plans malevolent schemes,
feet that hasten to run to evil,
a lying witness, a perjurer,
and one who unleashes conflicts among relatives.**

(Prov 6:16-19, Bruce Waltke’s translation⁴)

Because slander has the potential for tearing apart the most intimate bonds of loyalty, Timothy is to protect the elders’ reputation by refusing to even *entertain* an accusation that comes from either a *single* source or a *second hand* source. The church should be a safe place where reputations are considered sacred. The commandment, “You shall not bear false witness,” is to be rigorously applied. If we were to consider that our casual comments about one another were being recorded word for word in God’s highest court, we would likely eliminate half of our conversations.

B. Elders need correction

But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning. (5:20)

Though elders need protection, they are not immune from sin. Like everyone else in the body, they will need a corrective word at times. We can't walk in the world without getting dust on our feet, thus we are in constant need of cleansing. Jesus demonstrated this in the act of washing the disciples' feet: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). In this regard an elder is to be treated like everyone else.

If after proper investigation accusations are confirmed and proved true, then Timothy is to act under the guidelines that Jesus outlined in Matthew 18:15-20. If after being admonished privately by the elders he refuses to repent and continues to persist in his sin, then the matter must become public. Jesus said, "Tell it to the church" (Matt 18:17). That step, though painful for all involved, has three redemptive aspects. First, an elder who is resistant to correction must be publicly censured to protect the flock from his misguided leadership. Second, it enlists the whole community to come together in prayer for the individual, and to be of one mind in the matter, so that the elder has no escape from the truth within the body. And third, as Paul mentions, it heightens an awareness of God's uncompromising holiness in the congregation. When it comes to sin, God will not be mocked. As the discipline is carried out the entire congregation experiences firsthand what Jesus meant when he said, "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18).

C. Elders deserve impartiality

I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. (5:21)

In carrying out this process, Timothy is to be keenly aware that the greatest threat to discipline is "partiality" (*prokrima* – "prejudice" = prejudice), which means "prejudging" the situation. He must listen objectively and methodically to both sides, putting aside all previous knowledge which might prejudice him. And he must not act with "favoritism." This is the word for our natural inclinations, which indicates how prone we are to taking the easy way out by allowing our friendships to color our opinions.

If Timothy is tempted to give in to his natural inclinations and biases, Paul warns him that he is operating in the "sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels." This threefold combination is rare in the New Testament, heightening the solemnity of the apostle's charge. To conduct oneself "in the sight of God," who gives us life and who will be the supreme Judge of all we do, is a terrifying thought by itself. But to bring our actions before the entire heavenly counsel is mind-boggling, as Towner describes:

The gravity of the situation cannot be missed...in the strongest terms, the warning intends to place Timothy and his faithfulness in the matter concerning elders in the presence of divine witnesses. The solemnity thus created suggests that this task was among the most important Timothy was to attend to.⁶

Early in my pastoral career I overheard a phone conversation of one of our pastors who was conducting an investigation regarding a fellow elder. As a close friend of the individual, I was shocked that anyone would challenge his integrity. But, following the investigation, the fact surfaced that he had been living a double life. He admitted his guilt, but secretly persisted and then fled. The elders methodically and faithfully carried out discipline with no impartiality. I remember like it was yesterday the Sunday it was announced and the sense of holy fear that filled the air. As we listened we were all reminded of the serious and shameful

consequences of sin, and how vulnerable we all are. The congregation prayed for this man's restoration, and after several years, he returned home to be forgiven. Upon his return, he went to each individual he had wronged and made appropriate restitution. All whom he had taken advantage of embraced him with complete forgiveness and grace, and he was fully restored.

From correcting erring elders, Paul turns to the process of selecting new elders to replace those who had been dismissed.

III. The Selection of New Elders (1 Tim 5:22-25)

A. The need for patience

Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure. (5:22)

When there is a sudden vacuum in leadership, there is tremendous pressure to fill the gap and act quickly to care for the needs of the congregation. But Paul's wise word is "Wait," or in the rhyme of the once popular tune, "Don't worry, be happy." The reason for caution is that selecting a new elder to help direct the affairs of the church is as serious as asking someone to take on the role of a father to care for a family. And the ordination of an elder by "the laying on of hands" signified more than dispensing a warm body to cover the bases. "Laying on of hands" was a public act of complete identification and confirmation of covenant loyalty and divine gift, with the accompanying authorization to use that gift.

But as time passes and pressures continue to mount, it is excruciatingly difficult to continue waiting. So like Abraham, we adopt a human solution and take life into our own hands. But when we do that we give birth to an Ishmael – and once you birth an Ishmael you have to live with him. Paul says it is better to have too few elders who may feel overwhelmed but are godly and faithful than to have one rotten apple in a large barrel and having to deal with all the damage that creates. So Paul exhorts Timothy, "Keep yourself pure."

For the first three or four years of our history we had only four elders. You will never know all that went on during that time, but they refused to rush to appoint new elders. Instead, they quietly worked through some critical issues and put things in order. In the process they created a solid foundation that has served us well for two decades.

B. Discern the weightier matters of purity

Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses. (5:23)

Paul then gives Timothy a personal word about his drinking habits. At first glance, it appears out of context, but on closer examination it fits quite well as a counterbalance to what the apostle has just said regarding purity. Due to the responsibility of his office, and his desire to be an example of purity (in lieu of the immoral pressures in Ephesus), Timothy perhaps gave up the custom of drinking wine with meals. Given the impurity of the water supply, however, he was paying a high price physically for his decision. Paul responds by recommending the freedom of moderation, saying that spiritual purity (i.e. whom he lays hands on) is far more important than what he eats or drinks. In the selection of elders, Timothy needs to be discerning about the weightier matters of purity. What is it that really counts?

Paul concludes with a final word that allows Timothy to see the big picture concerning these matters.

C. The ultimate responsibility is God's, not ours

The sins of some are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not obvious cannot remain hidden forever. (5:24-25)

This final word has two possible interpretations, depending on whether the “judgment” mentioned is divine or human. If the latter, Paul is simply restating the obvious benefit of allowing enough time to pass so that what is hidden, whether sins or good deeds, may in fact come to light for all to see. The principle is certainly true, but I suspect Paul may be saying something more.

Earlier, he reminded Timothy that his work of discipline was taking place in the divine courtroom, which heightened his responsibility. As he brings indisputable sins into the light of judgment, he becomes co-laborer with God’s justice. But because the sins of some “trail behind them,” and will not be evident until the final judgment, Timothy is faced with an almost impossible task. How can he protect himself from ordaining the wrong individual, or passing over the godly saint whose secret goodness may not come to light until he has gone? I find Towner’s reasoning compelling:

He [*Timothy*] works in cooperation with the intention of God ultimately to judge human sin. But, secondly, in the process, since Timothy cannot see into the hearts of people and is bound to err, Paul explains, by way of consolation or to provide some relief, the reality that God’s judgment will eventually pull together all the loose threads that elude human administration... While surely human error is to be avoided (and perhaps much of it can be) by careful administration (according to the rule laid down above), the messy reality is covered by God’s own eschatological purposes.⁷

This suggests we can never operate with “full” and “complete” knowledge, but eventually we need to make a decision, and we can make that decision by faith, knowing we won’t always get it right. Yes, give it time, follow the guidelines, seek the mind of the Lord in prayer, confer with one another, but in the end, there will always be some mistakes. But we can confidently march ahead, knowing it is not up to us to sort it all out. Only God can make sense of it all, and he will.

IV. One Pastor’s Appreciation

Today, if a man wants to be a pastor, we set him aside to study in an academic institution; then, when he graduates, to gain experience he practices his gift on the congregation that hired him. But in this letter we see that the process of a man living a normal life in the world of work and home, and exercising his gifts at his own expense, in the context of a local church family, is the proper way to set aside leadership in the church. The beauty of this scheme is that it takes no artificial props or programs to keep it running. When a man’s record has been established, and he has gained a reputation in the community as a gifted and godly man, the transition to his entering the full-time ministry becomes easy. Rather than getting his academic training prior to discovering his gifts, it seems wiser to grant him academic training after his gift and character have already been demonstrated.

Thirty-six years ago, my father asked me, “If you want to be a pastor, why don’t you go to seminary?” After I finished my internship at PBC I did apply to seminary, but the elders invited me to stay on, promising me that somehow they would give me all the education I wanted while I was a pastor. They hired an outstanding student of Biblical languages to join the staff, and for several years we were rigorously tutored in Greek and Hebrew. To enlarge our worldview as young pastors, we were privileged to travel with Ray Stedman as he led pastors’ conferences in Nigeria, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. As a leading figure in Christendom, Ray also exposed us to some of the finest scholars in the nation, men like John Stott, J.I. Packer, Bruce Waltke, Michael Green, and Gordon Fee, just to name a few. These men not only taught us, they

gave us their lives as well, modeling not just faithfulness to the text but also a godly humility and an incredible generosity. To this day I am still reaping the rewards of these long-standing friendships.

Along with my “education,” I am extremely thankful for how the elders have protected their leaders and guarded our reputations from false attack. But when correction has been needed, I have found my feet washed on several occasions. And perhaps the greatest strength of our elders has been their deliberate patience in appointing new leaders, knowing that purity in leadership is more important than its size.

As I look back now on all these years, I would have to say that even in my fondest dreams I could never have imagined the full extent of the gifts that I would receive from the elders at PBC. I have been granted honor—more honor, in fact, than this text dictates. On this Father’s Day, I would like to express my appreciation to Dave Roper, the one who brought me into this circle when I was but a youth. I wrote this tribute to him on his seventieth birthday.

David, at seventy never more true,
the table set we a generation of two
grateful to you,
who pressed the best wine through,
Gethsemane’s stony press.

David, at seventy never more true,
with little hair left
why, I’m almost like you,
though without the gentleness of age,
nor its halo brightness.

David, at seventy never more true,
the shepherd’s *shophar* about to resound
will spring so many soiled sons
loose from the stony ground
to claim this contrite father for their own.

David, at seventy never more true
that I feel most like a son
sitting beside you.

1 John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 136-137.

2 Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 137-138.

3 Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 367.

4 This is Waltke’s translation of Proverbs 6:16-19 in Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 327-328.

5 Knight lists five other occurrences: Matt 16:27; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26, 2 Thess 1:6, 7; Heb 12:22-24. George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles, A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992),

6 Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 372-373.

7 Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 377-378.