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1 Timothy 5:17-25

Eleventh Message

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# KEEPING LEADERS IN THEIR PLACE

*SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH*

Next month will mark the 20th anniversary of the beginning of my formal studies at this church. I attended Stanford University, hoping to become a stockbroker, but I discovered that my appetite for the Scriptures was keener than my appetite for economics. After I graduated, I decided I wanted to intern at Peninsula Bible Church for two years. Emily and I loaded up a truck in Los Angeles, and with all our possessions (and little money), moved to the Bay Area. 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 a credential; what I wanted was to be around godly men.

As a college student, I was invited to become an advisor to the Board of Elders of PBC. Sitting in that circle was an unforgettable experience for me. At the age of 19, I was interacting with men like Bob Roe, Bob Smith, Ray Stedman, Dave Roper, Dale Lazier, John Edrington and others. I was awestruck by these men. On the night of the first meeting I attended, I was particularly impressed afterwards as I watched one of the brothers 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, and I began to discover the true definition of the church. The church is not a organization; it is a family where purity is more important than activity.

If you were to ask me today, twenty years later, what has been the greatest asset of my spiritual education, I would say that it has not been learning Greek or Hebrew, or indeed anything I've attained in the classroom, or my travels; it is the wisdom I have gained being around this godly circle of men all those years. I still find it difficult to describe my feelings as I attend a meeting of elders. These men are truly servants. No one has an agenda, no one is in a hurry. Our sole task is to find the mind Christ for the lives of a few people. As a church, we have failed in many areas, but in this regard, God in his grace has kept us on track.

We will be looking at this theme of eldership this morning in our studies in the apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy. In this text, the apostle directs Timothy on how as a leader he should care for the elders of the church in Ephesus. Elders are like the fathers of families: they have certain needs, four of which Paul details here. If Timothy responds to them, he will keep leaders in their proper place.

We find the first of these needs in 5:17-18.

## I. Honoring Elders (5:17-18)

**Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who word hard at preaching [lit. "in word"] and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." (NASB)**

### (a) The definition of "double honor"

Elders are to honored like fathers. In the home, children should grant honor to their fathers by obeying their teaching and by providing for them in their old age. Parents share social weight in the community when their children are seen to be obeying their godly teaching. In the same way, elders are honored in the church as the congregation responds and obeys their teaching of the great doctrines of Christ. Furthermore, says Paul, elders who meet certain qualifications are worthy

of "double honor," of being set aside to be supported financially so that they have the freedom to carry out their divinely appointed tasks.

### (b) Who is worthy of double honor?

Paul gives three qualifications for elders (whom we would call full-time pastors) who are deemed to be worthy of double honor. These are: "excellent oversight, especially those working hard at preaching ("in word") and teaching."

First, elders must give excellent oversight: they must be diligent and faithful in caring for the flock; and they must have a deep love for the flock. This protects the body from someone who is a mere spiritual recluse. Shepherds must care for and keep in close touch with people. And the best shepherds, like Jesus, weep over their flock.

Secondly, elders must labor hard at preaching (lit. "in word"). 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. Feeding the flock, of course, is the primary task of elders. Good shepherds work hard "in word." They become students of the scriptures, working hard in the process. They develop disciplined study habits, knowing if they are to be effective shepherds they can't depend solely on spontaneous insights to feed the flock. Teaching demands careful preparation. The elder is not a short order cook; he is master chef.

If working hard at studying the Scriptures was a requirement in first century, how much more important is hard work for Bible teachers today, twenty centuries removed from that first century world. Believers back then were well aware of the philosophical presuppositions of the Scriptures. We do not have the Hebrew frame of reference that governed the thinking of the Old Testament and informed the New Testament, as they had. Thus it is our task to recover the meaning that the text had to its original hearers, taking care to not impose our own presuppositions and prejudices. This is hard work! So a pastor cannot be a mere enthusiast; he must be a hard-working student of the Scriptures.

Studying does not come naturally to me. I find I am easily distracted. While reading a book might do great things for me spiritually, reading is not my natural bent. I would much rather talk on the phone, do yard work, play with the children, whatever. It requires all my strength and effort to study, although reading and studying have blessed me tremendously through the years. I have had to develop study methods, using external helps in order to grow spiritually. All of our preaching pastors use this method of studying texts to be preached a year ahead of time. Then we work through the material with small groups of people, sharing, praying, gathering insights, and working out the problems with the text before we ever preach from the platform.

Thirdly, Paul says an elder must be able to teach. If his goal is preparing food for his flock, he can't afford to spend all his time in the kitchen looking at recipes. He must prepare and serve meals. And he can't be a distant academic, living in his ivory tower all week long. I like John Stott's definition of the overly academic pastor: "six days of the week invisible, and one day of the week incomprehensible!" A pastor must draw his mind and heart together in diligent labor, with the goal of feeding the sheep a meal. But it has to be a nourishing meal. It can't be

something that flies above their heads. On this point, Spurgeon commented, “Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep,’ not my giraffes.” Yoking his heart and his mind together, it is the job of the teacher to take the stuff of the ancient world and make it understandable and relevant to his modern world.

John Wesley and George Whitefield came from vastly different backgrounds. Wesley grew up in the academic world, while Whitefield grew up fatherless, living in a tavern. Both, however, had the same deep hunger for the Word of God, and both were excellent students. Wesley, the academic, returned to England in a state of dejection following his ministry in Georgia, his work a failure. As his boat was entering the harbor, another boat with Whitefield on board, was setting sail for America. Whitefield’s ministry in this country, as we know, began the Great Awakening. Having been brought up in a tavern, he saw the real world first hand. This, together with his experience in the theatre, enabled him to present the Scriptures with relevance and clarity, with the result that thousands came to Christ during his preaching ministry in this country.

### (c) The rationale for honor

“You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” says Paul. The oxen which 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. Commenting on Paul’s use of this same phrase in 1 Cor 9:9, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.” God is not concerned about oxen, is He? Or is He speaking altogether for our sakes?”, Martin Luther responded in his typical no-nonsense, earthy way, “Well, it obvious he is talking about us, for oxen can’t read.” The point the apostle is making is that the laborer has a right to share in what he produces.

“The laborer is worthy of his wages,” says Paul. This is common sense, isn’t it? 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 to care for it?

Thus the early church should choose their full-time pastors from among those leaders who were already doing the work of elders. And they should not be mere enthusiasts, or irrelevant academics. Elders set aside “full-time” should be caring, passionate men with minds and hearts on fire for the Word of Christ and the people of Christ. Elders should be held in honor, says Paul, so the flock should honor them.

Secondly, elders need protection.

## II. The protection of Elders (5:19)

**Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.**

Anyone who operates in the public sphere and is committed to the Word of God and the people of God will be subject to satanic attack. Satan’s greatest weapon against an elder is slander. In our nation, it seems he has thousands on his full-time payroll, serving this single objective.

A friend who works in Canada tells me that in that country it takes a very long time for someone to be placed on a pedestal, but once he has been elevated to a position of honor, he is kept there. In America, on the other hand, we are quick to raise people up on a pedestal, but then 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. On the one hand, we Americans

avoid character investigation, but at the other we relish character assassination.

It must not be so in the church. Once a man is honored as an elder he must be protected. Protect your brother; he has a right to his reputation. Assume he is innocent until he is proven guilty. 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 treat life as a continual law court, we would eliminate half of our conversations. Don’t receive anyone’s testimony unless it is a first-hand witness; more than one witness is required, and the person who is being charged must be present to defend himself.

Jonathan Edwards, this country’s greatest theologian, fell victim to this kind of slander. He became convicted that it was wrong to partake of communion unless one was a Christian. To bring spiritual discipline in his congregation, he barred non-Christians, especially some young people who were living dissolute lives, from participating in communion. The traditionalists in the congregation made a great controversy about his position, and Edwards wrote a book in defense of his stand. But, for all his labors during 23 years of ministry in the church, Edwards was dismissed from his ministry. For months he had no income whatsoever. He was victimized by brutal character assassination. But he went out and began preaching to the Indians, those other outcasts, and he published the diary of that great preacher to the Indians, David Brainerd. In his farewell sermon to his congregation, Edwards said the following:

It was three and twenty years, the 15th day of last February, since I have laboured in the work of the ministry in the relation of a pastor to this church and congregation...I have spent the prime of my life and strength in labours for your eternal welfare. You are my witnesses that what strength I have had I have not neglected in idleness, nor laid out in prosecuting worldly schemes, and managing temporal affairs, for the advancement of my outward estate and aggrandizing myself and family; but have given myself to the work of the ministry, labouring in it night and day, rising early and applying myself to this great business to which Christ appointed me...

After I read that, I felt that what Jonathan Edwards needed was a board of elders to protect him. If elders are to be honored and given a platform to serve, they also need protection to keep them in their rightful place.

## III. The discipline of Elders (5:19-21)

### (a) The basis for discipline (5:19-20)

**Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful (of sinning).**

If the evidence against an elder is slight, protect him, says Paul, but if the evidence is weighty, then act publicly and decisively. The elders should act a) on the basis of ongoing sin; b) on the evidence of two or three witnesses; and c) in order that the rest may fear God. Just because a man holds an office in the church does not mean he ceases to be a brother. He is vulnerable to sin just like anyone else; he may need to have his feet washed on occasion. This, of course, assumes that the Matthew 18 process has already been carried out. Discipline is something that goes on all the time, for all the members of the church family. Leaders are not immune from sin, nor must they be regarded as being immune from the need for correction.

The apostle goes on to say that there is a threat to this process, however.

**(b) The threat to discipline: Partiality (5:21)**

**I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a (spirit of) partiality.**

Partiality is the great threat to discipline. We get our word “prejudice” (pre-judge) from the word “bias” here. Don’t discriminate, Paul warns Timothy, on the basis of prejudging the situation. He should hear both sides, and be methodical. And do not be “partial.” This is the word for “natural inclinations,” taking the easy way out. (The noun is the word for “easy chair.”) Don’t let initial suspicions or slanderous reports rule you, and don’t let your natural inclinations or friendship bias your investigation. If Timothy was fearful of men, he should remember that he was standing for God as Judge, and his Son, in the presence of angels.

Years ago, I was shocked to hear an elder investigating on the telephone another brother. I was a friend of this individual, and I was biased. But, following the investigation, discipline was carried out, without fear or partiality. Healing was effected, and the rest of the congregation were made fearful of sinning. I am happy to say that today this brother is fully restored.

There is a danger in the church that when people are honored with an office, that may perhaps tempt them to become removed from the rest of the congregation. The office becomes institutionalized, leaders become caught up in the pomp and circumstance, and they begin to think too highly of themselves and their authority; they become unapproachable, and their pride opens them up all kinds of evil. Remember the difference between King David and King Solomon. David, the messianic king, reigned from a cave in the wilderness, surrounded by a group of recluses. Solomon, by contrast, built up a royal class during his reign and the monarchy became institutionalized. The result was that the gap between the poor and downtrodden and the rich and famous became greater and greater. Before long, the poor began to be oppressed to pay for the homes and estates of the rich. Idolatry, licentiousness and child sacrifice soon followed because the ruling classes abused their power and saw themselves as lording it over the common people. This was the situation in Israel for 500 years, all because of this separation between the people and their leaders.

Leaders, by virtue of their office, must never regard themselves as anything more than mere brothers. They must always be subject and accountable to one another. This is why we evaluate someone on our staff or board of elders each month—his marriage, his spiritual life, and his ministry. We admit that we are all weak, and we all need the help of our brothers in order to remain pure.

Leaders, therefore, need to be honored with a place to rule; they must be protected in that place; but not idolized in their office.

**III. The selection of new Elders (5:22-25)**

**Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share (in) the sins of others; keep yourself pure from sin. No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. The sins of some men are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their sins follow after. Likewise also, deed that are good are quite evident, and those which are otherwise cannot be concealed.**

**(a) The command: “Don’t be in a hurry!”**

If Timothy were to submit to these priorities, to the Word of God and to the building up of the family of God, the work in Ephesus would grow, and there would be increasing demands upon his leadership. Then the pressure would come to appoint new elders to meet the pressing needs of the congregation. Furthermore, the church in Ephesus faced increasing pressure due to the situation with the false teachers

who were playing on the weaker women within the flock. Paul’s counsel to Timothy, however, is utterly un-American: “Wait!” says the apostle. The popular song a few years ago said, “Don’t worry. Be happy.” Here the apostle’s advice is, “Don’t hurry. Be happy.” Despite all the problems inherent in a burgeoning congregation, the best counsel was, “Wait.”

Why did Paul respond this way?

**(b) Because of the implication of “Laying on of hands”**

Laying on of hands is more than dispensing warm bodies to cover the bases; it is tantamount to full identification. When elders lay hands on someone, they are saying, “This one is my brother, my fellow elder. You can trust him: his integrity, his home, his work, his teaching, his oversight.” A few months ago, Dave Roper advised us to not push in this regard. If you do so, he said, you may end up giving birth to an Ishmael, and then you will have to live with him. Isn’t it better to wait a little longer?

**(c) Purity is more important than size**

A pure family is better than a large family. For three or four years, this church had only four elders. You will never know all that went on during that time, but they refused to rush to appoint new elders. They quietly worked through some critical issues and put things in order. Now the four have become eight. It’s still not enough, but a pure family is much more important than a large family.

And spiritual purity is more weighty than physical purity. This is why Paul includes these words, “No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.” It may have been because of the heavy responsibility of his office and his desire to be zealous for purity (especially in lieu of the impure culture of Ephesus), that Timothy gave up the custom of drinking wine with meals. But he was paying a high physical price for this, due to the impurity in the water supply in Ephesus. Paul responds by recommending the freedom of moderation, saying that spiritual purity (i.e. whom he lays hands on) is far more important with elders than what they eat or drink. Being too rigid in his asceticism could be dangerous to his health.

**(d) The benefits of waiting**

Paul concludes, “The sins of some men are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their sins follow after. Likewise deeds that are good are quite evident, and those which are otherwise cannot be concealed.” A man’s life is like a garden. Every thought he sows, he sows in secret. No one but himself has access to it, and no interviewing process is guaranteed to reveal it. But in time the thought will become visible. It is sown as a thought, but it gives birth to an action. And even if the action is kept secret, when it is sown, it gives birth to a habit. And it is hard to hide or disguise a habit. Then, when habits are sown, they come up as character. And when character is sown, what comes up is a destiny. Thus Timothy should use time to his advantage. If the man was a sinner, and it had been kept secret, in time, when the seeds had germinated, that would become known. What harm had been done meanwhile in waiting? But if such a man was appointed as an elder, he would destroy the congregation. On the other hand, if a man was truly good, with good habits, yet his deeds had been largely unrecognized by the congregation (perhaps from lack of appreciation), what harm would waiting do? If you keep a good man hidden in secret, it won’t do him any harm. He can keep performing secret disciplines and good deeds; everyone benefits, and it will eventually become known.

I’m sure the apostle Paul regarded himself in this light. Saul, the first king of Israel, after whom he had been named, was a very charismatic and successful man, but he had no faith, no purity of spirit, no obedience. He ended his life as a maniac, trying to destroy the true Messiah. Paul, as Saul, began life as a maniac, killing and persecuting Christians. Following his conversion, no one would accept his testimony, and God

sent him home for 14 years. There, in secret, in the wilderness, God prepared him for ministry. Finally, in Antioch, Paul was recognized, and his great work in the church began at last.

So in this text we discover that elders need four things: the freedom that honor brings; the love that protection brings; the humility that discipline brings; and the patience that waiting brings. All of these work together so that when an elder takes office, he does so without pride. This is how leaders are kept in their place.

Of all the texts we have studied so far in this letter, this one, I feel, brings the strongest indictment against the modern church.

#### IV. An indictment on the modern church

##### (a) We have set aside the priority of the Word

The OT prophets foretold a day when everyone would prophesy by means of the Spirit, and the Word of God would cover the earth. What the church needs today is not more programs, not more marketing strategies, but the Word of God, taught by leaders who are impeccable in character and seasoned in life.

##### (b) We have compromised purity for growth

Growth seems to be the chief concern of the church in America. The greater the number of full-time workers, the greater the advance of the Kingdom, we are told. So we spend more and more money training full-time workers, with church growth as the object. But Paul says it is purity, not activity, that should be the measuring rod. Don't be in a hurry! Need should not determine ordination. Setting someone aside too early can be hazardous to his own spiritual health, and the spiritual health of the congregation.

##### (c) We have short-circuited God's school for leaders

If a man wants to be a pastor today, 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 here 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 leadership in the church. The beauty of this scheme of things is that it takes no artificial props or programs to keep it running. When such a man's record has been established, and he has gained a reputation in the community as a godly man, at a certain point the transition to his entering the full-time ministry becomes easy. It is much better to grant him academic training after his gift and character have already been demonstrated.

Twenty years ago, my father asked me, "If you want to be a pastor, why don't you go to seminary?" As I look back now on those years, I would have to say that even in my fondest dreams I never realized the full extent of the gifts that the elders of PBC would share with me. I have been granted honor—more honor, in fact, than this text dictates. When I finished my internship I wanted to go to seminary, but the elders asked me to remain on as a pastor and they would pay for my seminary education. I wanted to learn languages, so they brought a tutor to me. I wanted to learn about missions, so we went overseas as a staff—to Nigeria, Australia, Indonesia, and Romania, traveling with men like Ray Stedman and David Roper. I have found a place of protection, where leaders have guarded my reputation from false attack. They assume the best about people and do their best to promote them. I have found a place of discipline, and my feet have been washed on many occasions. And I am learning patience. I tend to be impulsive, and I want to put people forward too quickly, but my elders smile and say, wait, reminding me once more that a pure church is better than a large church.

I would like to close with a poem of appreciation to these elders who have been so faithful to me over these past twenty years.

Could I have an education, O Lord?  
Yes, it was mine, but this was no lecture,  
It was men! the finest in the land,  
Who wanted but one thing, You!

Driven by one quest,  
They labored among themselves,  
Finding the One mind of the One Lord,  
By the One Spirit.  
But how is it possible? No two pots are alike!  
Ah, but there is but one treasure.  
As He broke each pot,  
The light was the same, pure and radiant.

No program was sacred,  
They wanted the lead sail,  
Where the winds track in unknown waters,  
Longing for life, not fame.

So they went everywhere,  
Journeying along the Appian highways,  
Into the back roads of foreign lands,  
Discovering those precious gems,  
The eunuchs of Ethiopia.

With these simple men,  
I would carry my pack,  
Traveling in the joy of harmony,  
Depositing your trust.

And what do You ask in return?  
Is there any contribution I can make?  
I am so weak, so flawed,  
So stained with selfishness.

You ask me to teach, a joy not a burden;  
Shepherd the 70, but the 12 are better than I;  
Train the 12, but what is that?  
To be melted together in their love.

I am not like the saints of past,  
Calvin, MacDonald, Whitefield,  
and your amazing Edwards.  
They labored at great cost,  
And with less produced much more.

For such grace and so little task,  
I feel I will stand alone in heaven.  
In heaven, yes, by your blood,  
But alone—so far behind.

Those you gave no privilege  
no gifts,  
no money,  
no friends,  
no glory.

Like those simple ones in Romania  
Who stood unflinching under your cross,  
Their bodies buried under flames of ridicule,  
Crying, "Yahweh Echad!" (The Lord is One!)  
To you be the glory,  
Don't waste my life, O Lord.

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