

What about the elders?

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[0:00] Okay, so we come then to 1 Timothy chapter 5, and we're continuing under the broad reflections that Paul has been considering over the last few weeks of our teaching on what it is for the church to be a family.

Similarly, if this letter provides us with a blueprint of church life, well, these verses in chapter 5 particularly are focused on the family aspects of that.

So the first few verses of the chapter set out that paradigm, and then Paul was diving into the specifics. He considers three specific groups, so we looked at widows in the church.

Today we consider elders in the church, and then there are a few verses in the beginning of chapter 6 that talk about slaves as another group within the church for whom he has particular instructions.

So today we consider elders in the church, those who are charged with a leadership responsibility in the context of this family. As verse 17 puts it, those who direct the affairs of the church.

[1:17] And Paul gives the church three instructions about this group. Firstly, that the elders are worthy of double honor, verse 17. Then secondly, he continues the situation, sorry, considers the situation where there are accusations against an elder, whether those are true or false.

And then finally, verses 22 to 25, that's concerned with the ordination of elders, specifically when should that happen and why.

So first up, the elders are worthy of double honor. The language here is reminiscent of that which was used to begin the section on widows.

Just as they were to be given recognition to be honored, so are the elders. Now, in the Free Church of Scotland, the denomination that we are part of here at Covenant Church, and indeed in many Scottish churches, we tend to refer to ministers on the one hand and elders on the other hand.

And we sometimes talk about ministers and elders as two separate groups of people. And in some churches, very sadly, we find elders who seem to think that it's their job to keep the minister in check.

[2:34] And sadly, sometimes we find ministers who seem to think that they don't need the elders, that the minister always knows best, and the elders should just get with the program. Now, that is not a healthy attitude.

And part of where that attitude comes from is a skewed idea of a distinction between elders and ministers. Because the New Testament doesn't really talk about two clearly distinguished classes in that sense.

So when verse 17 here refers to elders, verse 17 is talking both about those we tend to call elders and those who we call ministers. So you might remember, for instance, from when we were looking at chapter 3, that all overseers, that is to say all elders, are to be able to teach.

There isn't a fast distinction between elders who direct the affairs of the church and ministers who teach. No elders must be apt to teach. And that is because directing the affairs of the church well, verse 17, necessarily implies teaching.

Because the church is directed by what it believes. You cannot lead without teaching. You cannot lead without telling people what does God say.

[3:56] There are lots of different ways of doing that. Teaching doesn't always mean standing up at the front and talking for half an hour. It can just as much be the quiet word in the time of difficulty that helps you to find a new perspective on your struggles.

That is teaching on an individual level. There is teaching in leading small group discussions. There is teaching in all manner of ways. But it is the elders of the congregation who are collectively given responsibility.

It is the elders who will give an account before God, Hebrews 13, 17, will give an account for those who God has entrusted to their care. And on that basis, it is right and proper that the elders be honored.

They are worthy of your respect. So all elders are to be able to teach. All elders are worthy of your respect. It is true of all elders.

And yet, this verse does seem to make a distinction of some kind, doesn't it? There is a reference here to especially those whose work is in preaching and teaching.

[5 : 09] A recognition that there are different tasks. And particularly, that there are greater and lesser amounts of time given to different tasks. And therefore, there is a distinction on that kind of basis.

It is certainly the case now, and it would seem it was the case then too, that different elders were giving more or less of their time to the work of teaching specifically.

And hence, we have that kind of slightly separate category of minister. The word here in verse 17 that Paul uses for work, those whose work is preaching and teaching, that word work is often used to refer to physical labor, to manual, you know, hard work out in the fields and so on.

And Paul consistently uses that word to refer to the work of ministry, to refer to his own labors as an apostle and to charge others who will serve in a similar capacity.

Paul uses that word because he wants people to recognize the effort that is involved. He wants those God has called to his work to see what is expected of them.

[6 : 23] This verse, along with many others, shows us that there is no place for laziness in the life of those who labor to direct the affairs of the church, those who work in preaching and teaching.

Paul would certainly heartily rebuke a minister who filled that caricature of working only one day a week. Paul wants ministers to recognize the labor to which they are called.

And alongside that, Paul wants the church to recognize the labor of its elders. And the particular application at this point is that they therefore deserve to be paid.

If the church wants ministers who will labor to preach and to teach well, if we wish to have men who will devote themselves to long hours of extensive preparation in order to bring God's word, if we wish these men to teach often, then the reality is that their expenses will need to be met.

Because if their labors are to be to the extent that they do not have time to live, earn a living in another way, then they must be paid by the church. And Paul supports this principle that he's drawing out here with a verse from Deuteronomy that talks about an ox that's entitled to eat when it's laboring on the farm.

[7 : 38] And he supports it with a saying of Jesus that we're going to come to on a Sunday morning at some point when we get to it in Luke's gospel. Paul is kind of bolstering support and indicating that when he talks about double honor, he is particularly here thinking about money.

And this, I guess, is where we end up with a functional distinction between those we call ministers and those we call elders. Because leading well will necessarily involve teaching.

But that doesn't mean that that burden is equally shouldered by all of the elders. So if we are going to have men who have spent a few years studying God's word full time, who've spent that effort to learn Greek and Hebrew and who've taken that time out to learn things through deeply, then naturally they will take on the bulk of the teaching where they find themselves.

The church can be very well served by well-educated men and we tend to call those men ministers in the free church. But that distinction between ministers and elders is one of function and not of identity.

So we pay ministers and not other elders in order to give those ministers the free time to prepare and teach regularly, not because ministers are more inherently deserving than any other elder.

[9 : 05] Now the reality is that money was a big problem for the church in Ephesus. When Paul gives those requirements back in chapter 3 for overseers and deacons, both of them are expected not to love money.

But the false teachers in Ephesus have been preaching for financial gain. We'll find that in chapter 6. And Paul will say later on in chapter 6 that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

Some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. So money is a problem for the church. A desire for dishonest gain is a problem for the church.

But that does not stop Paul here indicating that teaching elders should be paid for their efforts. We have a tendency often, don't we, to see a problem and to run so far away from it that we end up in a kind of opposite problem.

It would be easy to look at those who are teaching for the sake of dishonest gain and think, well, we'll deal with that by not paying anybody to teach. Nobody's going to go and do it.

[10:20] If there's no money in it. But Paul says that to do that will impoverish the teaching that you do get because it will not be as well equipped.

Now, what difference then does that make for us here today in New Mills? Because the Free Church of Scotland pays its ministers from central funds and all ministers receive an equal stipend. So there's no good me standing here telling you to pay your minister more money because that's not how it works. So why talk about it at all? Well, we talk about it firstly because it's here in the passage, but also because that money does come from you.

Okay, it comes via the central offices, but it gets into the central offices from the congregations. There is no magic pot of money. It's all come from the people in the pews.

And the Free Church system, we give money into the central accounts out of our congregational accounts each month. We pay what's called the ministry levy and then the admin levy and then those contributions towards the mission board funds.

[11:34] And that ministry levy, that's designed to cover the cost of a congregation having a minister. So it pays the stipend and pension contributions and tax and all of those kind of associated costs.

And then the admin levy pays for us as a denomination to have staff in the offices and to have a seminary that equips ministers to go and be ready to teach and so on.

So a massive, massive proportion of the national budget for the Free Church of Scotland goes on personnel, goes on paying people to do things.

And that I think is a good thing, that that's where we're spending our money, is freeing people up to do the work of ministry. And that therefore means it is a good thing for us to pay money into central funds.

I haven't been in a congregational meeting yet here at Covenant Church, but I've sat in too many in other churches where the attitude on the ground is to complain about money kind of going into central funds.

[12:41] But my suggestion is that these verses say we should do that gladly. That you should be pleased to be paying for the cost of me being here. and that we should be happy to be paying for others who are also laboring on our behalf.

We don't see quite so obviously what a benefit it is to us here that there are people working in the finance office over in Edinburgh. But believe me, our lives would be more difficult if they were not there.

And hopefully the benefit of the staff in the seminary is fairly readily apparent to you. And if we are going to recognize that these people are laboring on our behalf, then these same principles apply. They are doing work that we are pleased to see done and so we gladly pay for it to happen. So when we do come to our annual accounts meeting at the end of August, let's not grumble about the amount of money that goes off to Edinburgh each month.

And a second application, I wonder if we might start to consider what other opportunities we as a congregation here could embrace if we have the funds to do so.

[13:58] Maybe we should be thinking about if the purpose of paying somebody is to free them up to do the work of gospel ministry, well maybe we should be starting to think could we be getting towards freeing somebody else up, whether somebody already in the congregation or somebody coming in from outside, to do more gospel ministry.

Don't worry, I'm not saying right now we need to find another 20,000. I don't have a particular plan right now but I want to put that seed in your minds that it is something that perhaps we should be starting to consider working towards in the longer term.

what more might we do for the work of the gospel here in New Mills and beyond with more time to do it in? Okay, let's move away from the money.

In verse 19, Paul moves on to consider an elder who is sinning or rather at least an elder who is accused of wrongdoing. There's a few important points packed into these three verses 19 to 21.

The first of these, it continues directly on from the principle of double honor that he put before us in verse 17. That was applied to financial support in verse 18 and now in verse 19, it kind of returns to the principle more broadly of the respect that the elders are due.

[15:25] Now this verse picks up Deuteronomy chapter 19 and applies it specifically to elders. Deuteronomy says, one witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed.

A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Now, this is not necessarily an easy thing because there are those who abuse their power, who abuse authority. We only have to look in the newspaper over the last couple of years and we see it time and time again. There are abuses.

There are abusers. But there are also those who make false accusations. There are people who out of vindictiveness from a sense of spite from a desire to see other people suffer, there are those who with wicked motivation will accuse people of terrible things.

Now, this is particularly common then for those in the public eye to whatever extent. There can be unfounded accusations against anyone, but it is more common the more people are on public view and that extends to whatever small degree to ministers and other elders.

[16:51] And so, Paul advises Timothy not to entertain a single accusation. Is this a perfect system? Does Paul think it's a perfect system?

I don't think so. But, on this earth, the best option we seem to have available is to operate with the principle of innocent until proven guilty.

It works as the law of the land and the principle here is that it happens in the church as well. And we operate with that principle partly because we don't have anything better, but also partly because we are able to trust that justice will ultimately be done.

Because we worship a God who is supremely just, who sees and who knows all things, and who is never going to lack the facts to be able to make a true judgment.

And we worship a God who will not acquit the guilty. guilty. So, if we're saying do not entertain an accusation unless it is brought by two or three witnesses, does that mean that if an elder does something wrong, well, you might as well not bother telling anyone because what's going to happen anyway?

[18:14] There's just the one of you. Well, no. It doesn't mean that because how will there ever be multiple witnesses if each possible witness keeps quiet out of fear of irrelevance?

This isn't saying for one particular thing there must be at least three people who saw that thing happen. No, if two different people bring accusations of similar things happening on different occasions, that readily fulfills the requirement for two or three witnesses.

We must be willing to speak up. And whilst there is this clear sense of caution here in verse 19 to not rush to judgment, to not judge on slender evidence, that is not the only thing that Paul has to say about the sin of elders, is it?

Have another look there at verse 20. But those elders who are sinning, you are to reprove before everyone so that the others may take warning.

Now, there is a place for private conversations in the church. There is a place for confronting one another quietly about sin and wrongdoing.

[19:31] In the case of a first single accusation, there would be nothing inappropriate if Timothy hears a rumor of something that might have happened or one person comes to him.

There's nothing inappropriate there in him going and having a quiet word with the elder in question. But there is also a place for the public where an accusation has been substantiated by two or three witnesses, where it is the judgment of those whose role it is to consider such things that sin has been ongoing, then the response must be public.

The matter in view here seems to be in some sense ongoing. The phrase who are sinning rightly brings through that ongoing sense that this is an elder who is living a life of sin.

So this isn't a call to publicly chastise an elder for every sin they ever commit, fortunately, but there is definitely here a place for public rebuke.

Why public? Well, so that others may take warning. This seems to particularly refer to the other elders who ought to take note of their supposed brother being chastised, but one would imagine that the impact on the congregation as a whole would be similar, that if this behavior, whatever it might be, is unacceptable for an elder, if it is worthy of condemnation, then too, the man in the pew

should equally watch out.

[21 : 14] It is a warning to all. And this sense of a public warning is not a new idea. Again, back in Deuteronomy we read, Deuteronomy 19, verse 18, the judges must make a thorough investigation and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party.

You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid and never again will such an evil thing be done among you.

The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid. The intention there is that the other Israelites are going to hear of the punishment that this wrongdoer has received and will therefore themselves turn away from evil.

the risk of public condemnation is intended to be one amongst many things that will guard others against sin.

And Jude verse 7 says a similar thing about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as an example to others. And whilst public rebuke is surely unpleasant really for everybody involved, we see here that it hopes for a positive result.

[22 : 38] That whilst it might be too late for the sinning elder, I think this does presuppose prior opportunities for repentance and even here that option is still open to him.

But more broadly it seeks a positive result in that it seeks to guard others against sin themselves. So that's two things that he has to say about the sinning elder.

The third comment on the discipline of elders comes in verse 21 where he instructs Timothy in really the strongest of terms to avoid partiality and favoritism.

Because Paul knows that those things can have a deeply corrosive effect. We really must guard against even the appearance of nepotism or of favoring one's friends.

There is great value for instance in having clearly established policies in advance of a situation arising so that there can never be an accusation of well of course you made that decision, he's your friend.

[23 : 45] Or for that matter of course you made that decision, you never liked him. There is value in the abstract decision making as it were.

because whilst character is essential for our appointment of elders and deacons for that matter, the elders are to be those with godly character not just the right CV, the fact that we focus on the individual in that sense doesn't mean that we get to only support our friends.

No, there is to be no partiality. So we make those decisions in advance in the abstract and it's also helpful to us there to be part of a wider denomination to inherit some kind of policies and decisions from the wisdom of a larger body and time for reflection and also so that we have somewhere to turn, so that we have somebody to go to when we find ourselves needing somebody who will find it easier to be dispassionate and impartial than we might in the thick of a decision.

Now to me, the strong words that Paul uses to commend impartiality, to guard against favoritism, it's quite striking that in the context of the serious problems in the church in Ephesus, in the context of elders who need to be rebuked publicly, in the context of false teaching that is rife, that in that context Paul is not advocating autocracy.

Paul is not telling Timothy to come in guns blazing and just do whatever needs to be done. No, there is a place for proper process in the most difficult of circumstances.

[25 : 40] The church's methods must always be based on what is right and proper, not on expediency, not on what will make life easy right now.

So then, three elements of disciplining elders. A caution in entertaining accusations, public rebuke where necessary, and impartiality in judgment.

If only it were always so. As one commentator notes, sadly the history of the church, both ancient and modern, has been plagued by a refusal to follow the admonitions of scripture in church discipline.

We do not like it, do we? But it is God's pattern for us. And finally, in these verses, Paul turns to the ordination of elders.

He's specified the necessary character back in chapter three. He's advised there that elders not be recent converts, lest they fall into conceit. And here he gives another reason to be cautious in laying on hands, that is in ordaining men as elders.

[26 : 50] Here, caution is advisable, lest Timothy share in the sins of others. To understand what he means by that in verse 22, it's helpful to look down to verse 24.

What Paul points out there is that you cannot always judge somebody's character quickly. Some people are very adept at hiding their sin.

Most of us are very good at the public facade, aren't we? But in the context of God's judgment on the last day, Paul recognizes that even the hidden sins will one day be found out, and that though they may trail behind, they will arrive eventually.

Nothing is hidden from God. But he also is saying that things that may be readily hidden from one another, at least for a time, is that famous saying of Abraham Lincoln, isn't there?

You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time. That is a wise word in the choosing of elders, perhaps, isn't it?

[28 : 03] It is wise to delay for a while in order that sin might become more readily apparent and the church be guarded against an unworthy elder having been appointed. Paul frames that guard in terms of Timothy becoming guilty by association, verse 22, that if Timothy has ordained a man who turns out to be unsuitable, that he himself shares in some of that disgrace of his sin.

And Timothy is to guard against that, is not to be guilty by association, but rather should keep himself pure, verse 22. However, that purity does not require abstention from all alcohol.

Whilst verse 23 might seem at first a bizarre non-sequitur, why are we suddenly talking about water and wine and Timothy's stomach problems? Well, it does fit in if we recognize that what seems to be going on here is that Timothy is unwilling to drink wine for the sake of his stomach because he's distancing himself from the false teachers.

These false teachers who seem to have been practicing kind of a strange mixture of excess on the one hand and requiring abstention on the other hand, Timothy wants to have nothing to do with that.

And so to avoid the possible appearance of impropriety, he's far away from the glass of wine that would otherwise do him good. Now, it is no bad thing to avoid giving offense.

[29 : 43] It is wise to wish to avoid being viewed as impure, whether or not the behavior in question would make you actually impure. So Paul doesn't rebuke Timothy for having made the decision.

It's reasonable to seek to avoid that appearance. And indeed, it's a similar decision to ones that Paul actively promotes in other situations and other contexts.

But he does not promote it to the extent of making yourself ill. If abstaining in order to appear pure is making you unwell, that is too high a price to pay.

So Timothy does need to be pure. He does need to avoid being tainted by the sins of others. And he is to avoid that appearance, but not in that particular way.

And there's also another reason to avoid haste that he turns to in verse 25. Verse 25 gives kind of the opposite of verse 24.

[30 : 44] If there's a danger of having not seen the sin of some, there's the opposite risk of having not seen the good deeds of others. In other words, Timothy might fail to appoint men who would have been great elders simply because he didn't wait long enough to notice them.

Now, in all honesty, I was a little bit worried when I stopped to consider these verses. As you know, we're hoping to appoint some deacons at the end of August.

Okay, Paul's talking specifically about ordaining elders, but as we've seen previously, the character requirements for deacons are similar. And so to have a deacon's sins become apparent after the fact wouldn't be that much better, would it?

And so I had a moment of wondering, do I really know these people? I've been here a little over a year. It doesn't really seem that long. Do I have enough confidence to commend these men?

Am I at risk of being tainted by association? Now, it is right to be cautious. It is right to take these verses seriously and to think about the impact that they do have, to recognize that they do apply to us today, ordaining deacons and elders.

[32 : 01] But here is my reassurance to myself, if you like. My reassurance is I'm not the one making this decision. Now, yes, I will commend them to you, but I will do so shoulder to shoulder with the other elders.

We as a session will advise, you as a congregation will vote, will make a decision. So whilst I may have only known these men for a year or so, the rest of the elders, the rest of you, have known them for much longer.

You are equipped, ladies and gentlemen, to see whether their good deeds are apparent, to see whether their sins are trailing behind them. I'm not quite ready to give you the names yet. I know that would be the natural thing to do at this point. But let me say that you might usefully be praying now that God will give you that wisdom to recognize godly character. And to pray that when we come to that vote, that that will be part of how you will make that decision as to whether these are the men who should be appointed in this church.

[33 : 08] Friends, this passage is reminding us once again of the vital importance of good and godly leadership in the church.

It is important for us to have good elders, and therefore they should be held in high esteem. The church depends on being taught well according to God's word, and so it is proper that we make financial provision for those who labor to that end.

Elders are to be held to a high standard, but we recognize that there are those who love to see good men fall, and so we are cautious of malicious accusations.

But we stand or fall on the godliness of our elders, and so sin must be publicly rebuked for the good of all. We need holy men who will direct the affairs of the church well, and so we take great care in who we appoint.

Friends, let us pray earnestly for those who God has appointed to lead and direct the affairs of his church, for those who will serve as elders and as deacons too.

[34 : 24] Firstly here in New Mills for ourselves, and further afield as well. It is of vital importance to the health of the church that she be well taught and well equipped.

Let's pray. Lord, would you guard your church?

We ask that you would keep her safe against false teaching. We ask that you will preserve us here against any error creeping in.

That you will preserve for us the purity of your word, that we will be able to recognize together what you are saying to us, what you are directing us in.

Lord, we thank you for providing gifts to your church in the form of good and godly men who will lead and direct with integrity and in purity.

[35 : 35] Lord, would you guard the hearts of those who hold that office now and those who may one day. Lord, would you be preserving them, equipping them, encouraging them, and indeed preparing and establishing and strengthening those who you know will one day serve in that way.

Lord, we ask that for the good of your church, you will give her good and godly leaders. In Jesus' name, amen.