

“Godly Elders and Spiritual Authority”

I Timothy

Downtown & Lexington

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Happy Father’s Day! To all the Kidtown dad’s out there, I hope you got your special delivery. To anyone whose father’s day is a day of mourning instead of celebration due to painful broken relationships or loss, I know you’re out there. I’ve been praying for you.

It’s interesting that Paul describes himself as a spiritual father in 1 Corinthians 4 and he definitely had a father/son type relationship with Timothy. There is much of pastoring that feels like being a father, the warmth and love, the desire to protect and shepherd and see you grow. The hurt and frustration when our people hurt. It’s appropriate then that this sermon is today because last week we started 1 Timothy 5 and saw Paul dig in on how the church should take care of widows and those in need. Today in 5:17, Paul pivots and starts talking about how the church should take care of its pastors. We’ll go through this passage in chapter five and give some context as we do so.

1 Timothy 5:17-25

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, (we’re going to focus today on the question what does it mean that “elders who rule well are worthy of double honor?” I know it could feel a little weird for me as a pastor to teach you about how the church should care for me... as one of your pastors, but God’s Word gives us some helpful guidelines for your health and mine. And for the good of our whole church family.) especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. 18 For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” (So in part honor is about pastors being paid. There are those who don’t think pastors should be paid, but according to the Bible it’s good for a church family, when possible, to pay their pastors. It allows them to focus their attention on the job and everyone wins. It’s not always possible, but when possible, it’s good. 19:) 19 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 20 As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. (We’re going to come back and unpack these verses. They set up a really healthy framework for accountability for the church and church leaders. And Paul says this is a huge deal. Look at 21:) 21 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels (in case God and Jesus weren’t enough, with the angels watching too!) I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. (So there’s something about partiality and prejudging that can mess up the framework established in v. 19-20.) 22 Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. 23 (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) (We’ll actually start by unpacking these last two verses first:) 24 The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. 25 So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

So Paul lays out some categories: he says both sin and good works can be **conspicuous** - visible, obvious, external and recognized or **inconspicuous** - more hidden, unknown, unseen, ignored. **Conspicuous sins** - There are rapists and murderers and addicts and deadbeat abusive fathers where their sin is seen and

almost everyone goes - That's not good... and then there are more **Inconspicuous sins** - hidden by the sinner, or less socially noticed. I'll give you some examples:

Our culture is awakening right now in regard to some sins toward African-Americans that for many years have been more inconspicuous. Some people noticed but by and large society was blind... And now more and more they are getting called into the light and judged correctly. There are definitely some exaggerated examples in our cancel culture, but overall, this is a good, necessary move in the direction of Godly impartiality and justice.

Another example that we hit on last week: Someone could live their whole life with external morality, committing no crimes, going to church every week... but when it comes to helping the weak and vulnerable, nothing. That would be an inconspicuous sin pattern, easily unnoticed, because it's a sin of omission. They aren't doing anything overtly bad and visible.

The Scripture points out to us both conspicuous and inconspicuous sin patterns, which is really important because every culture is bent to see some clearly and be more blind to others. This passage deals with some issues that can be particularly inconspicuous in our culture. Let me show you what I mean:

1 Timothy 5:17-25

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor.

Honor. Same root word we looked at last week in vs. 3 - "*honor widows.*" Interesting because some of us have a harder time honoring someone weak and vulnerable like a widow. And others of us have a harder time honoring someone in authority like a pastor. The Bible says we should honor both in the church family, which is beautiful.

But by and large in our culture, the call to honor someone in authority tends to be tougher.

Part of the difficulty here is **historical**: our country was established 244 years ago by revolting against tyrannical authority. So we're ingrained as Americans with good desires for liberty and justice and freedom from evil dictators... but those good desires can become sinfully twisted into a distrust of all authority in general.

Add on to that history that now, 244 years later, one of the highest ideals in our society is the individual autonomous self. Absolute negative freedom. I'm free to do whatever I want whenever I want and anyone in a position of authority telling me no is evil.

So culturally, we lean toward suspicion of authority. We tend to assume the worst and think our role is to protect others from authority. One of the easiest ways to see it is when we hear a rumor about something wrong a CEO or politician did, our default is, "Yeah, that's probably true." CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, they all rely on these stories for their living. And these consistent stories have a cumulative effect on our subconscious. We're always kind of waiting expectantly for the next scandal to drop. And an **inconspicuous sinful** distrust of authority soaks into us. We end up with a sinful partiality and tendency to prejudge authority figures.

Which to be fair, there are tons of historical and current examples of sinful people abusing their authority. So let's not miss that Paul in v. 17 - says "*the elders who rule well... are worthy of honor*" He's aware that there are authorities who do not rule well.

But being suspicious of all authority is a miss for us as Christians. We know this in large part **because of God**. In the entire universe, God is authority: Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, and Judge. If we're infected with conscious or subconscious trust issues toward authority, we're going to have some hard times with God. We might like Jesus as our inspirational bud, but we'll struggle to submit to Him as King. And then from His position of unlimited authority, God lends that authority to humans. In Genesis 1, He gives humans dominion over creation. And then He establishes judges, kings, prophets, and priests to lead and rule God's people. All intended to rule well under His ultimate reign. Peter echoes this idea in 1 Peter 5 when he encourages elders to "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you*", and 2 verses later calls Jesus the "*Chief Shepherd*". God is the ultimate authority and He calls some to lead His people as undershepherds.

So with that in mind, Paul lays out how we honor spiritual authorities well while also having protections in place against abuses of said authority:

1 Timothy 5:17-25

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. 18 For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

So first dealing with finances, Paul quotes from two places - the first from Deuteronomy 25:4 - an agricultural picture that muzzling an ox while it's treading out grain - i.e. keeping it from eating some of the grain it's smashing... is counterproductive because the ox loses its strength and your grain and the ox both suffer. "Let the ox eat." We don't have pastor nicknames but if ya'll wanted to lowkey start calling me the Ox, I'm fine with it. The second quote is from Jesus in multiple places referring back to Deuteronomy 24:15 and Leviticus 19. My favorite version is Mathew 10:10 in the KJV where Jesus says "the workman is worthy of his meat." Yes and Amen. The point in both quotes is that pastors who lead well shouldn't be desperately trying to figure out how to make ends meet, because they would lose strength and that'd be a net negative for the whole church.

I think **the concern here** is obvious. There are absolutely pastors out there who are in it for the money. They use the gospel and abuse the church for their own personal financial gain and wealth. This is sick and sinful. They bring shame to the name of Jesus. They cause nonbelievers to look at the church and go "what mindless sheep to follow those swindlers."

I'll tell you 3 reasons I'm not particularly concerned about this and you don't need to be either:

- 1.) Most pastors in the world are underpaid.** We just know the names of the ridiculous ones. The vast majority are doing their job, getting paid some, and not on the news.
- 2.) Every one of our pastors did their job for free** long before they were ever paid a cent.
- 3.) Healthy checks and balances** - a Financial Advisory Team, fair compensation metrics - to make sure our pastors are paid well but not exorbitantly so they can care for their families, but nobody's out here buying private jets. We expect our pastors to model for our church how to steward finances well with wisdom and generosity.

I don't have a lot of time here but let me just say, to those of you who give consistently: Thank you. This is something we've had to address over the years but have seen a lot of growth. And during the last budget meeting, we were able to lock in salaries for our staff that are all at least close to the regional salary average for their role in a church our size. Until now we've been paying some people below average and we're happy we don't have to do that anymore!

Now his second application of how to honor elders is where I want to sit for a bit:

I Timothy 5:19-20

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 20 As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

In these two verses, he sets up two really helpful guardrails for how we walk together as pastors and church family: The first is to protect the church from unhealthy pastors and abuses of power. He says *“as for those [pastors] who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all.”* In light of the abuses of power we all know to plague our world, I love that Scripture has a category for holding those in charge accountable. The Bible doesn't promote the blind following of anyone who calls themselves a leader. The Old Testament had systems by which prophets were scrutinized and punished if they were lying on behalf of God. In the end, all sins conspicuous or inconspicuous will come to light, and authority figures who abuse their roles will give an account to the ultimate authority. It's not going to go well for many of them.

And Paul gives this reason to rebuke sinful pastors publicly: *“so that the rest may stand in fear.”* Other translations say “stand in fear of sinning.” Paul's saying, so that the church doesn't think, “meh, sin is no big deal, and I know it because I know Pastor Bill over there is out getting drunk at the bars picking up random women every weekend.” Paul says if that's going on, deal with it. Directly. Without partiality. We're not protecting pastors living in sin to avoid awkwardness or protect our church from embarrassment.

So here are systems we have in place to protect our church from abuses of pastoral authority:

- **Plurality of elders.** We lead as a team. We don't have one guy in charge model built on a cult of personality where it's so easy for that guy to get it twisted and think he's the chief shepherd instead of an undershepherd. We operate as a team, praying for each other, making decisions together, and confronting each other when needed.
- **Accountability teams.** Our finances are looked over by a Financial Advising Team of pastors and members in our church for accountability and review. Our building plans are worked on by a Building Committee primarily members. Our sermons are reviewed in teaching team every week. When we have difficult meetings we always involve witnesses in those meetings. We want everything possible to be in the light, visible, transparent.
- On top of all that, all our **Pastors are in LifeGroups.** That's normal here but fairly rare in other churches. So many pastors end up really lonely. But we want our pastors to have deep friendships with each other and with others. Our pastors regularly confess sin.
- **Pastor in Training process.** Down in v. 22 Paul says, *“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands”* So there's another protection. Before we ordain anyone as a pastor we've walked with them for years so we get to know their character as they follow Jesus and lead others.
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So there's lots of guardrails and protection against pastoral abuses on that side of the road, and on the other side of the road there's a guardrail to protect pastors in v. 19.

19 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Along with paying pastors, Paul says that part of how we honor pastors is in how we speak to and about them. Not admitting a charge except on the evidence of two or three witnesses, is not saying literally 'go find some witnesses,' as that would mean if a pastor did something terrible to you in private you would

have no recourse. This is the biblical language for making sure the charge is valid. Making sure it holds water. Making sure this is a valid complaint and not just an individual with a personal vendetta. Let me give you some examples, positive and negative:

Example 1: About a year and a half ago, some women in our church came to our Vision Team elders, Adam and Allen, with concerns about the lack of up-front visible female leadership in our church. They had a valid concern and went about it in a healthy way and it has led to marked change for our church practice. We needed to course correct and this became an all staff directive for 2019. That's so good. Our church is worse off if they don't bring that concern to our pastors.

Example 2: Not so great. A member came to me and told me that another member we'll call Luke had accused our pastors of not caring about our people. Luke was in a church discipline situation and said quote "no one has even reached out to check on me." Now here's the thing. I was the point person in Luke's discipline situation. I cared about him deeply, prayed for him regularly. But now a different member is telling me Luke said I don't care about him. So I pulled my phone out and showed him the text messages. "Here's when I reached out to Luke and he didn't respond. Here's where I told him I had some personal issues going on, but I would followup soon. Here's where I reached out to him again and we scheduled to meet. Here's where he bailed on me 15 minutes before that meeting." So his accusation is a lie. And I've got receipts. But anyone who hears his accusation doesn't know that. What they hear is "Jon doesn't care about our people." And if you don't heed 1 Timothy 5:19 - if you listen to that charge, then your view of our pastors becomes skewed. Your view of me becomes skewed. And that harms our ability to be the church family God calls us to be.

Example 3: Let me give you an even more extreme example:

One of our pastors takes a member, we'll call him Jeff, out to lunch because Jeff had a relational issue with another member. He pays for Jeff's lunch and says "tell me what's going on?" After hearing Jeff out, he says, "Now you know that have to go talk to him, right?" And Jeff responds, "You can't just tell people to obey the Bible. People need time to process." And our pastor says "Ok, yeah sure, take a few days if you need to pray, but Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 and 18 to deal with sin that would tear apart relationships in the church family." Note that our pastor appeals to Jesus as the ultimate authority. And Jeff essentially says "I'm not going to do that."

Fast forward and turns out, Jeff starts telling people based on that interaction that our pastor is abusive. Because he took Jeff out to lunch, paid for his meal, and told him to obey Jesus.

So that's slander. It's a false accusation.

Long term, Jeff left our church, after slandering multiple pastors.

And here's the thing, I have no clue how many people Jeff spoke with, or if those people asked follow-up questions. No idea if any of them realized that what actually happened was he was lovingly told to obey the bible. I would bet some number heard him say "abuse" and just said whoa, that's probably true. And their perspective of us has been colored since.

But either way, gossip doesn't help. If there really is abuse, then for the sake of the church it needs to be addressed. If there really isn't abuse, then for the sake of the pastors they shouldn't be maligned. Gossip can't solve the potential problem and creates a totally different problem.

So when Paul says, "*don't admit that charge*", he's saying in part be the kind of person who won't let gossip and slander become a cancer that erodes the relationship between our church and our pastors. Be on guard for what Hebrews 12 calls a root of bitterness that grows up and defiles many. This is protection against the relatively inconspicuous sins of gossip and slander. Issues talked about in the scripture that often goes unnoticed in our culture.

So when you've got a concern there are at least three types of concerns you might be dealing with:

- 1.) **Is it a sin issue?** Is there a violation of scripture, personally or corporately. These need to be brought up. Now, it might be that more information or an explanation clears it up, or it might be a sin issue that needs to be corrected. Either way, it needs to be brought up.
- 2.) **Is it an unmet expectation?** Quite often, the criticism we receive is based on unspoken and unagreed upon expectations. "I am hurt because a pastor/the pastors did not do something that I expected... even though I never said anything." Just like in marriage, you've gotta ask yourself "Is this a reasonable expectation? Am I holding someone accountable for something I never asked for or they never agreed to?" Depending on the expectation, you may realize it's not worth bringing up at all. Or it may need to be talked through and clarified. But we need to have a category for this question and be sure not to elevate unmet expectations to the level of sin. We have to have a category for "I feel hurt but I realize no one actually did anything wrong."
- 3.) **Is it a possible misunderstanding?** A situation where I lack all the information, or am assuming a motive that may or may not actually be present. Try to think of a good motive and see if your concern goes away. If not, ask clarifying questions like, "Hey when you did this, what was your motive? Is it because you hate me?" Most often, the answer will be no.

Let me just chat with you for a second. I believe that most of you are wonderful, and I think that you would be pretty shocked to know how often our pastors are slandered and gossiped about. How much criticism we deal with. How much of our time is spent with disgruntled people because they assumed something or didn't like something? We are often surprised when someone brings a concern or an accusation and it's based on misinformation. And it has morphed into something wild as it was spread behind our backs. It hurts deeply. And it causes so much destruction to our church family that we love. If we were running a business then we could be emotionally distant and deal with customer complaints and it would be no big deal. But we're trying to form a family. We want to open our hearts up. We don't want to be distant, aloof leaders. You benefit when our hearts are in this. We don't want that to ever change.

Honestly, the hardest part isn't frequency but the kind of complaints we get. When preference issues get elevated and treated like sin issues. When our motives are assumed. When people who only know one angle of a situation demand that it be handled in a certain way...

And Paul says by contrast to that, we shouldn't even admit a charge against an elder without some serious weight and validity behind it.

So putting it all together, on the one side the Bible sets up a guardrail - a system to hold pastors accountable so we don't end up with a toxic church culture where pastors are abusing authority and embezzling and misteaching the Word. Because that's no good for anyone.

And on the other side, you've got a guardrail to prevent a toxic church culture for the pastors, where everyone is gossiping and slandering and critiquing everything to the point that such distrust exists between the pastors and people that the church can't be the Jesus-centered family on mission God intends for it to be. Because that's no good for anyone either!

So, practically how do we grow and walk in this kind of honor?

1.) Recognize our uphill battle with authority. We're culturally set up to dishonor and be suspicious of authority. Part of being a people who show honor is resisting that urge. Give your pastors the benefit of the doubt. I'm not saying ignore your concerns or just keep quiet... but try not to assume the worst. We've been laboring for this church family for almost 15 years and even you've gotta know the biggest thing

that drives us is our love for Jesus, our love for our church, and our love for you. We know we're not perfect. You know we're not perfect. But that's our heart.

2.) Deal with your concerns. If you hear this sermon and walk away thinking, "They don't want me to point out anything I'm concerned about", then you misheard me. When you've got concerns you have to deal with them or you will end up bitter and our church will suffer. Hebrews 12 promises it and our church experience confirms it. So if you've got a concern and you want to deal with it, here are some questions to ask yourself.

- **Is this a big deal or not a very big deal?**
- **Is this just a personal preference issue or a sin issue?**
- **Do I have personal hurt that is clouding my judgment?**
- **Do I have all the information to come to a conclusion?**
- **Am I giving the benefit of the doubt or am I assuming bad motives?** One of the hardest things for us as pastors is when someone without all the information comes to us with their mind already made up on a conclusion that assumes our motives in the worst way possible. Especially when it's that we don't care about our church or our people.
- **Are you taking on someone else's offense?** Are you hurt because you heard someone else talking about hurt they claim happened to them? In that case, pray for them to deal with their hurt and realize that the situation actually has nothing to do with you.

These should be questions we're asking all the time in all our relationships. If it's not a big deal, if it's just a personal preference issue, great, forgive us, or pray for us in the small stuff. **Grace is the grease that keeps the wheels of the church family turning.**

Now if it's a valid concern... then you gotta deal with it and that's number 3:

3.) Go to the right person. If you've worked through those diagnostic questions and you've got a valid concern then seek out the appropriate person and ask for clarification. You might have a misunderstanding or be unaware of something and we'd love to clarify. Or we might be wrong and need to rethink/repent. Either is possible ... but only if you approach the right person.

Going to the wrong person doesn't allow either good outcome. In fact, it only allows negative outcomes. Either we remain wrong. Or you remain uninformed. Or others begin to think less of their leaders because you become guilty of slander and gossip whether you meant to or not. All are unhelpful options.

4.) Don't listen to slander and gossip. I love that Proverbs in multiple places tells us gossip is like choice morsels of food. It's delicious. Especially in a culture like ours with a built-in suspicion of leaders. We're all gonna have to fight against this temptation. The best thing you can do if you think you're hearing gossip or slander is ask, "Why are you talking to me about this?" If they haven't talked to the right person then talking to you will likely only cause problems. Tell them to talk to the right person so the issue can actually be dealt with.

I want to end in Hebrews 13:

Hebrews 13:17-18

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.

We love you. And we want to keep loving you and leading our church for decades to come. I hate that any part of the job involves groaning, but we know what we signed up for. We're leading hundreds and hundreds of people to become a huge Jesus-centered family waging war on sin in ourselves and in our

city to see Jesus' kingdom advance. Of course, there's gonna be some pain along the way. Jesus was slandered and gossiped about by people He loved. He promised we would face hardships. And He's worth it.

And I want to ask for your help. For our pastors' health and for your good. And ultimately for Jesus' fame and renown. Let's deal with all the valid concerns we have and let's fight against slander and gossip that Jesus' enemies would be happy to see rip our church apart.