

How The Church Should Treat Her Leaders

1 Timothy 5:17-25

The passage before us has an interesting convergence because it speaks on the one hand of how it is that we should treat our ministers, and on the other hand it addresses, interestingly, the area of church discipline, and those are two very important theological categories in the Bible. How should we treat, how should we respond to those God has called to the leadership assignment in the church and then secondly, how do we implement church discipline in particular as it relates to those in leadership? I want to walk you through a number of texts that address first of all, what the Bible says about how it is that we should respond and treat our leaders. Then secondly, what does the Bible say about this very important but much neglected issue called church discipline.

First of all, what does the Bible say about how we should treat our leaders? The first text I would direct you to is found in 1 Thess. 5:12-15. Paul writing to the church at Thessalonica says, “And we urge you brethren to recognize [it means to respect, to know well] those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. Be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you brethren, warn those who are unruly [which I think the context may imply those who are acting in an unruly manner toward those in leadership, those that we should be esteeming highly. Unfortunately, some at Thessalonica were acting toward them in an unruly fashion.], comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.” The key phrase is of course, verse 13. “Esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake.”

Look at Hebrews 13:7, 17. Hebrews 13:7, “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow concerning the outcome of their

conduct.” “Remember,” that is, “hold in high regard” those who rule over you. He is not talking about those in government because he is speaking about those who have spoken the word of God to you, and then he notes, we have followed them in faith considering, giving attention to, the outcome of their conduct. And then verse 17, perhaps the strongest text in all of the New Testament concerning how we should respond to those in the leadership position of church life: “Obey those who rule over you and be submissive, [Why?] for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account. Let them do so then with joy and not with grief for that would be unprofitable for you.” So the author of Hebrews is very clear, “Obey those who rule over you and be submissive.” And of course, we know that the Bible speaks of those in a leadership assignment as being our shepherds and by the very nature of that designation as shepherds they are guiding us, they are directing us, they are protecting us.

Now, a question: is the leadership that is to be exercised by the leaders; is that leadership without any qualification? In other words, are we to follow them, are we to obey them, and are we to submit to them no matter what? And the answer, of course, is no. The Bible would indicate, I believe, there are a number of occasions where we would actually be required not to follow the leadership and to submit to those that have authority over us by virtue of the position to which God has called them. And you might ask, when are those occasions when we would not be obligated to obey, in fact, we would be obligated not to obey? I would quickly say this: if our leadership, if our shepherds were to ask us to do something, or they were to lead us to do something that is unbiblical, that is unethical, that is illegal or immoral, then I believe we would be obligated to say no. We would be obligated to disobey. We would be obligated actually to follow what we are going to see in 1 Tim 5:20ff. We would be obligated to confront them and deal with them. Now, note again very carefully the four categories I mentioned. If it is unbiblical, if it is unethical, if it is illegal, if it is immoral. Now, there are occasions where those things tragically happen and a church must confront its leadership in love. However, I have been in too

many churches and have observed too many churches where they confronted the leadership and they disobeyed the shepherds and they opposed those who were over them, and it was not for those things. “Well I just don’t like the way he is leading. I just don’t like the direction the church is going. I don’t like the way that they are adjudicating the budget and spending the money.” Now, are they doing something illegal? “No.” Immoral? “No.” Unethical? “No.” Unbiblical? “No. I just don’t like it.” Well, you know what? You have a problem, and your problem is not with your shepherd. Your problem is with the Great Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, and at that point you have now stepped into a serious world of sin and potential judgment. Unfortunately, all across our Southern Baptist Convention and all across the evangelical world and all across churches of other denominations in America, God has written over the door “Ichabod,” the glory has departed, and in so many cases, in a lot of cases, it is because the church mistreated those that God had divinely, sovereignly called to a leadership assignment in that church. God has judged them and as it says in Revelation, he has removed their candlesticks, he has removed their effectiveness because of the way they treated the man of God that He had placed in their midst.

Now again, what are the texts in the Bible that deal with the issue with the church discipline? Let me give you the references. Of course, the first is found on the lips of Jesus. In Matthew 18:15-17, “Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you gained your brother, but if he will not hear, take with you one or two more that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. [And we’re going to see that same principle established in just a moment in 1 Timothy 5] And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church.” So you start with one. If he won’t hear one, go with two or three. If he will not hear the two or three, then you are to bring him before the church, and verse 17, “If he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” This means you are to cast him out and treat him like an unbeliever.

Note 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul has to deal, unfortunately, with the unseeingly situation of a man in an incestuous relationship with his step mother. He's having sex with his step mother, and so Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexually immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles [even the pagans don't do this, that is], that a man is with his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed." [So here is Paul's apostolic pronouncement of judgment on this man who is in a continuous, unrepentant, public state of sin with his step mother] In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together along with my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that his spirit may be saved at the day of our Lord Jesus." In other words, you turn him out of the church. He loses the privilege of church membership and loses the blessings of being cared for by the family of God. Verse 6, "Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" [You let this man continue in your midst like this and his sin will spread like gangrene. It will, like a little leaven in the lump, cause the whole thing to expand] Therefore, purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast not with old leaven [not with the old lifestyle] nor with the malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

Paul gets specific for us in v. 9-10: "I wrote to you in my epistle [so Paul actually wrote a letter before 1 Corinthians that was not preserved.] not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet, I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world." So Paul, are we to engage lost people? Yes. Fellowship with lost people? Yes. Eat with them? Yes.

Go to ball games with them? Yes. Hang out with them? Yes. How are you going to win them to Christ unless you spend time with them? Alright, that's what he's saying. However, verses 11-12: "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, [who says, "I'm a Christian," "I'm a sister," "I'm a follower of Christ"] who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner - not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? [The answer is, I don't judge people outside the church. That's not our domain. That's not our business. That's not our calling.] Do you not then judge those who are inside?" And the answer is yes. Just like a good, godly family will take care of one another, the family of God will also take care even to the point of exercising discipline. Verse 13: "But those who are outside God judges. Therefore, put away from yourselves this evil person."

Note also 2 Cor. 2:5-11. There Paul, I think, deals with this same situation and the man, who had been living in sin, repented and has asked to be restored to the church. Amazingly, in 1 Corinthians, they were just letting him sin and stay a part of the church. Then when Paul says, "Kick him out." They kicked him out. He comes back and says, "You're right. I'm wrong. I repent." And they say, "We aren't going to let you back in." And Paul, in essence, basically says, "What?!" You swing from one extreme to the other. If he's in habitual, unrepentant sin, he needs to be removed. If, however, he repents and demonstrates that he has repented, then let him back in, forgive him, and restore him." So I think Paul, is responding in 2 Corinthians to the same situation.

There is one other text where the Bible speaks about those who are divisive doctrinally. That is found in Titus 3:9-11. Now, with that as a broad overview of what the Bible has to say about how do we treat our leaders, what the Bible has to say about church discipline, Paul applies or addresses both of those issues here in this text. The first thing he says is this... We

should:

I. Reward Generously Those Who Serve. 5:17-18

He speaks very specifically to their remuneration. He says there in verse 17, “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the Word and doctrine.”

Paul begins by telling us to reward generously those who serve and he points out first of all that those who are in leadership assignment, the elders are called to teach.

1. Elders Are Called To Teach. 5:17

The Bible uses three different words for those who are called to the leadership assignment in the church. There is the word *presbuteros*. We got our word Presbyterian from it. That is the word translated “elder.” It speaks of an older man, and in the context of church leadership it speaks of older man who by his age demands, respect, who by his age and maturity is worthy of our following. There’s also the *episkopos*. We get our word Episcopalian from it. That is the word that 3:1 is translated “bishop” or “overseer.” It is very clear that Paul has talked about the same leadership assignment in both 1 Timothy 3 and 1 Timothy 5. In chapter 3 he calls them “bishops” and in chapter 5 he calls them “elders.” The third word that we’re most familiar with is the word *poimen*, which is translated “pastor.” Interestingly, that particular word when applied to the leadership assignment in the church only occurs one time in the New Testament. That is found in Eph. 4:11 where the Bible speaks of the pastor-teacher. So it’s interesting that we go primarily by the designation “pastor,” but that is the word least used in the New Testament. But my point is this: an elder is a bishop is a pastor. It is talking about the same position using interchangeable words to speak of different facets of their assignment and different facets of their character as they lead the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. So “let the

elders who rule well.” In 3:5 Paul speaks very clearly to the fact that one of the ways an elder demonstrates his qualifications to lead the church is by the way he leads or rules his home. 1 Tim 3:5 reads: “if a man does not know how to rule [same word] his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?” And so the Bible says that in the same way a godly husband, father leads his family, a godly elder, pastor, overseer is going to lead the local church.

So once more in 5:17, “let the elders who rule well be worthy of a double honor, especially those who labor in the Word and doctrine.” Again note 3:2 where the Bible makes it very clear that those called to the leadership assignment of the church must be “able to teach.” Now, what does Paul mean by the phrase “double honor?” Does Paul mean that we should pay those who do a good job twice as much? There are some who believe that is what the phrase means though I would disagree. Now don’t misunderstand me. Do I believe those who rule well, and those who especially among the elders labor in the Word and doctrine, do I believe they are worthy of double honor and part of that honor means that we take care of them financially and that we take care of them financially in a good way? Yes, I do. Our responsibility is to support them and love them. Our responsibility is to pray for them. Our responsibility is to follow them, and our responsibility is to provide for them. And the text says, if they are good leaders, then they are worthy of double honor. I think the phrase double honor means on the one hand, their compensation, and on the other hand, our submission. We are to honor them by taking care of them, and we are to honor them by following them. This is the double honor that I believe Paul is getting at when he addresses us here in v. 17. They are called to teach. They are called to instruct us in doctrine. They are caring, as Hebrews 13 says, for our souls. Therefore, we should honor them in a double kind of way: taking care of them financially and taking them in terms of following their leadership. They are called to teach and should be rewarded generously when they do it well.

2. Elders Are Directed To Work.

5:18

Paul says in v.18, “For the Scripture says, you should not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,” and “the laborer is worthy of his wages.” Now, this is a very valuable verse when it comes to the doctrine of biblical inspiration. “Why?” When he says, “For the Scripture says,” he quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” You say, “Paul is comparing my pastor to an ox!” No! What he’s doing is drawing upon a principle that is self-evident from the Old Testament: those who work are worthy of being compensated and an ox that is treading out the grain should have the muzzle removed so that he can get something to eat. If an ox in the field is taken care of when he works, how much more should those who labor in the Word and doctrine be taken care of for their work? So, he quotes a general principle found in Deut. 25:4. Now here’s what’s interesting. The next phrase, “and the laborer is worthy of his wages” you’ll not find in the OT, but you will find it in Luke 10:7 on the lips of Jesus. What you have Paul doing here is putting, already on an equal standing, the OT scriptures and the words of Jesus. We know how sacredly Jesus revered the law of Moses and the writings of the prophets, and yet Paul is saying “In the same way you revere the word of God in the OT, you revere the words of Jesus because Jesus himself said in Luke 10:7, ““The laborer is worthy of his wages.”” They are working for us. They are laborers for us. They especially do so in the Word and doctrine. Therefore, we should reward them generously.

3. Elders Are Entitled To A Salary. 5:18

The laborer is worthy of his wages. So those who teach the Word, those who are working on our behalf, they are entitled to be cared for by the church in a double kind of a way both in terms of their finances, their remuneration, and also in terms of respect. We trust them. We follow them. We submit to them.

II. Rebuke Publicly Those Who Sin. 5:19-21

We should thank God when a church has a good pastor, a good elder, a good overseer. Praise God when a man spends a lifetime with integrity, with respect, with holiness, and with

godliness. But tragically, tragically, sometimes ministers fall by the wayside and sin. I've actually heard, usually it's a minister, say, "Well, touch not God's anointed. Touch not God's anointed." If I remember correctly this comes out of the OT. It was a reference to the king of Israel not to the pastor or the overseer or the elder who leads the church. Rather, the Bible has a very specific word and a very specific plan of how it is we would deal with a leader in the church who tragically has gotten involved in sin. The four steps are there in verses 19-21.

First of all,

1. Get All The Facts. 5:19

Verse 19, "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except [same phrase you heard on the lips of Jesus back in Mt. 18] from two or three witnesses." This is a principle found in Deut. 17:6, again in Deut 19:15 and reiterated as we saw a moment ago by Jesus in Mt. 18:16. In other words, if you are going to bring an accusation against an elder there must be multiple witnesses. One is not enough. There must be two and preferably three who can validate and verify the truthfulness of the accusation that is being brought against a leader in the church, so get all the facts. Now if the facts are clear and this elder is indeed guilty of sin we must act. I believe the Bible is addressing the kind of sin that is public. It is sin that is serious. It is sin that is unrepented of. Public: in other words, we are not to be garbage can inspectors or spiritual peeping toms! God never calls us to do that. It is a sin that people know about, that they have become aware of. It is a sin that he is not repenting of and therefore, it is of the serious sort. So at that point, move to #2.

2. Confront Them To The Face. 5:20

Verse 20, "Those who are sinning [note the present tense] rebuke in the presence of all." So, they are sinning. They are not repentant. People know about it. It is of a serious nature. Paul says, and Paul is assuming, I believe, that you have already gone one on one and they refused your rebuke. You've now gone back with two or three, and again, there is no success. So after confronting him one on one, confronting him with multiple witnesses, if he does not hear you at

that point, as painful and as unpalatable and as distasteful as it can possibly be, you have to bring it before the church. You say, “Have you seen that done?” Not very often because most Christians don’t have the stomach for it, and they will excuse themselves by saying, “You know, the ‘loving’ thing...” The loving thing is to not wink at sin. The loving thing is not to sweep sin under the rug. That’s the cowardly way. That’s the chicken’s way out. The loving thing is to go to him, and go again and again and if you are not being heard, then tragically, unfortunately, you bring it before the church. You confront them to the face. That phrase “in the presence of all” some think only means the other elders. I personally believe the best understanding is bringing him before all. Your sinning elder comes before all, before the whole church.

3. Recognize The Value Of Fear. 5:20

“Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all [why?] that the rest also may fear.” In other words, if the church has the Christian courage to do that with one of their leaders, what will they do with you if you get into the same lifestyle of sin? If they will deal with those on the highest level of leadership, they will also be willing to deal with anyone else in the body as well. So, there is a positive value to fear when it comes to church discipline. Then #4,

4. Do Everything With Fairness. 5:21

I think Paul recognized that we have a tendency to be partial and to act with prejudice. And so he says in verse 21, “I solemnly charge you [this is a solemn word] 1) before God, 2) the Lord Jesus Christ, and 3) the elect angels [that is, saved angels in contrast to fallen angels and demons] that you observe these things [how Paul?] 1) without prejudice, 2) doing nothing with partiality.”

I know of a church in Dallas several years ago, and the pastor had been guilty of multiple, multiple, multiple acts of adultery with multiple women in the church and the deacons knew about it and they swept it under the rug. Why? Because the church was growing. The church had gone from a thousand to two thousand, from two thousand to three thousand, from three

thousand to four thousand. The money was flowing in. People were joining the church and so basically, they took him aside, “Tsk, Tsk, Tsk, Bad preacher, don’t do that anymore.” And of course what’s the preacher going to say? “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.” What do you think happened? He did it again and again and again and again. In fact, he finally was exposed because one of his mistresses found out he was cheating on her with another mistress. She exposed him. “What eventually happened to this man?” I think God took his life because he died suddenly in his early fifties. I think he committed sin unto death. I think God took him. The point is that the church brings no honor to God when it will not deal with sin in that kind of way and when they do it with prejudice or partiality. It does not matter who it is. It can be the most famous pastor in the town, the most famous evangelist; it doesn’t matter. The Bible says, we treat everyone without prejudice and everyone without partiality and we rebuke publically those who sin. Then finally,

III. Review Carefully Those You See.

5:21-25

Paul points out you might avoid some of this sorrow if you more carefully examine those you put in leadership assignment. He already told us back in chapter 3 that we should not put anyone who is a novice in the position of an overseer because they will be puffed up with pride and fall under the same condemnation as the devil. Here he says, “Do not lay hands on anyone hastily because if you do, you are going to share [at least potentially] in their sin.” He’s very practical. He says someone who’s a new believer: don’t move quickly. Paul says, do not lay hands on anyone hastily nor share in other peoples’ sins.

1. Make Sure You Walk In Wisdom.

5:21-23

Another word of admonition. It’s almost like a short, staccato statement here. “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and for your frequent infirmities.” There are a couple of observations we can make here. #1) It is very clear that Timothy was a total abstainer; he did not drink wine, but because he had stomach problems and because the

water in that world was impure and problematic, and it would cause all sorts of maladies including dysentery, Paul says, “Look, you need to drink a little wine for medicinal purposes. It will help your stomach.” And so, he is told there to engage in that kind of activity not in terms of getting drunk or getting a buzz, but in terms of helping him physically and medicinally. Verse 24, “Some men sins are clearly evident [you don’t have to take very much time to watch them. They’ll sin boldly and publically] preceding them to the judgment, but those of some men follow later.” He is again saying don’t lay hands on someone prematurely. Don’t do it hastily. Some people look good on the front end, but they’re not very pretty on the back side. And the fact of the matter is, we need to be cautious and careful in terms of putting anyone in positions of influence and leadership in the local church.

2. Make Sure You Watch Their Works.

5:24-25

Finally he says, “Likewise, the good works of some are clearly evident. Those that are otherwise: it can’t be hidden. The test of time will eventually bring everything to light and make everything clear.”

So, if you look on the chart you were given I can walk you thru how we deal with the sins of a leader. If you look at the middle of the page at the top of the page where it says, “An Act of Sin” we become aware of a believer’s sin based on Mt. 18:15 and 1 Cor. 5. So what do we do? First of all, we pray for the offender and we try to step in and bring about their correction. How do we do that? #1) with a private confrontation. Moving to the right: Position of the offender. He’s a leader. We become aware of their sin. We have prayed for them. We have moved to correct them. We do so first of all by a private confrontation. If they repent, then you drop all the way down on the right hand side and there’s a public acknowledgement of their repentance and their restoration. There’s a restoration of relationships. They’re restored to the fellowship. They’re forgiven. We comfort them. We reaffirm them with love and there will be the restoration of trust and reputation and possibly, restoration to their office of leadership though in some cases

I believe sin can be so grievous that they have disqualified themselves for life. You say, “Why do you say that?” Because the very first qualification for a leader in the church is that he must be above reproach. That is no one has any question about his character, his morality, or his reputation. So you’re guilty of adultery, but your wife stays with you. You come before the church and confess your sin and the church expresses forgiveness and they restore you to the fellowship. Question: how long does it take to get your reputation back when you’ve been guilty of adultery? Well, I know that it’s a long time, if ever, a long time if ever. So I’ll be the first to tell you that these men that have been guilty of immorality that are suddenly put back into a position of leadership in three months, six months, a year: personally, I think 1) it’s unbiblical and if it wasn’t unbiblical, I would tell you 2) it’s unwise and it is a foolish thing to do.

Otherwise, as you see in the text you confront them and if they don’t repent, then you appeal to witnesses (1 Tim 5:19), you publically rebuke them (1 Tim 5:20), and then tragically, there is excommunication, expulsion and disassociation of them. Still, even if we have to turn them out of the fellowship, we still love them. We still admonish them. We still pray that God would bring repentance into their heart and into their life. That my brothers and sisters is how we are treat those God has placed in leadership over us.

Church Discipline Flow Chart
 Adapted from
A Guide to Church Discipline by J. Carl Laney
 &
A New Testament Theology of Church Discipline by Al Brooke



