

How to Honor and Discipline Elders

We have discovered that the New Testament refers to the leaders of a church as the elders. We have discovered that God wants every church to have more than one elder. There should be a plurality of elders in each church. All of their responsibilities fall into two categories: overseeing the church and pastoring the church. In 1 Timothy 3, we were given a list of qualifications that help us determine whom the Holy Spirit has prepared to become elders of the church. If these qualifications are followed, the church will have the leaders that God wants to serve as elders. In this study, the Holy Spirit tells how the church should honor these men, and when we should remove one from office. We will learn a number of principles about elders.

Recently, the Holy Spirit has been telling us how to give honor to different groups of people. The first group of people we are to honor were described in 1 Timothy 5:1-2. In that passage we are told to honor the elderly and those who are younger than ourselves. We are to show honor by encouraging those who are older than ourselves. If we are dealing with a sin situation, then we are to appeal to them. We were also told to show honor to those younger than ourselves by treating them as if they are our brothers or sisters.

The second group of people we were told to honor are real widows. The command is given to us in 1 Timothy 5:3-16. Families were told to honor widows by financially supporting them, when necessary. The church shows honor by financially

supporting true widows when they have no family who can. In this study we will be told to honor a third group of people, the elders.

WHEN TO SHOW HONOR TO ELDERS (v 17-18). Our study is from 1 Timothy 5:17-25. We are going to discover four principles that will help us know how to show honor to elders. The first principle is found in verses 17-18. The verses say,

The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” 1 Timothy 5:17-18 (NASB)

There are three important parts to these verses. The first part is that we are told to give double honor to those elders who rule well. The second part is that we are told to give special honor to those who preach and teach. This means that God recognizes that some elders will perform their responsibilities better than others. Then we are given the biblical reason why we should give double honor.

So, let's start with the first group, those who rule well. In verse 17 the Greek word for “rule” is *proistemi*. The root meaning of this word is to “put in front,” or “to stand first.” This word can also be translated as to be in charge or to manage. Then the Holy Spirit adds the word “well” because He knows



some elders will do a better job than others. The Greek word that is translated as “well” is *kalos*. This word has the meaning of moral goodness mixed with beauty. Consequently, it has the meaning of “excellence.” That is, the elders who deserve double honor are those who perform their responsibilities with excellence or superior to most of the elders.

Even though all of the elders will have the spiritual gift of leading or administration (Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28), that does not mean every elder will have the same level of effectiveness (1 Corinthians 12:6). There can be two reasons for this. First, some elders will have the spiritual gift in greater supply. Consequently, some will perform their responsibilities better than others. Second, some elders will be more committed to serving Christ and excel in what they do. These are the individuals who must be given double honor. I said must because Paul is giving us a command. That reveals the Holy Spirit wants the church to be evaluating their elders. How else will the church know who deserves double honor?

Now, what is the meaning of to give double honor? The Greek word translated as double means two times. The Greek word for honor is *tima*. We have studied this word before in chapter five. It just means “respect.” So, an elder who excels in leadership is worthy of twice as much respect as the other elders. It is important to remember that 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 tells us that every elder should be appreciated. The passage says,

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (NASB)

This means God wants us to appreciate all of the elders. But those elders who lead and manage with excellence are to be given more honor. Those who lead must do it in a godly way.

I know of a man who was the chairman of his church. The church decided to pay him some money to manage the church. I assume that initially he performed his task well. But later, it was discovered that he was not performing his management function for which he was paid. Yet, he continued to collect

his monthly salary. His church attendance became irregular and in time stopped. Yet the church allowed him to continue as the chairman of the church. He is a terrible example of one who managed the church in an ungodly way. He was not worthy of any type of honor. He was not even worthy of appreciation. There are other men who are outstanding examples of how to lead and manage the church with excellence. But this man was not one of them.

The second important part of these two verses is about the elders who work hard at preaching and teaching. They are especially worthy of double honor. Notice the word “especially.” It comes from a Greek word which means “chiefly” or “above all.” That is, those elders who labor hard in preaching and teaching are the chief ones who deserve double honor. The reason these elders are especially deserving is that they work hard at preparing for preaching and teaching. The Greek word for “work hard” is *kopiaio*. It has the meaning of working so hard that the individual becomes so tired, as if he was beaten. The Greek grammar is a present participle which implies that he keeps doing this. That is how he studies, preaches, and teaches the Word of God. These elders are constantly weary from their preparation and preaching or teaching. It is reported that Spurgeon was completely exhausted on Monday because he did this.

Now there are two important facts that we must remember about these two groups of elders. First, some elders are worthy of double honor because they make the commitment and are driven by their love for Christ to put in the effort. The second fact is that verse 17 reveals that preaching and teaching is the greater responsibility of an elder. It is what every elder should strive for. It is more important than making decisions for the church. Sadly, most men in church leadership think their most important role is making decisions. But that is not true. It is preaching and teaching. Any elder who is superior in preaching and teaching will be providing biblical leadership. This helps us understand that there are not two classes of elders—ones who manage and others who preach and teach. Every elder is responsible for leading and managing, as well as laboring hard to preach and teach.

The third important part of these two verses is found in verse 18. Here Paul quotes from two passages of Scripture that

give us the biblical basis for the command in verse 17. The first quote is, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING.” It is from Deuteronomy 25:4. This quote reveals that God says the animals are worthy of a reward for their hard work. The next quote is, “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” This is from Luke 10:7. This time God says that humans who work hard also deserve a reward. These two passages are the biblical basis for giving double honor to the elders who manage with excellence and those who work hard in preaching and teaching to the point of exhaustion.

We are to honor elders by rewarding all of them with verbal appreciation, a note of appreciation, or however else you desire to do that. But verse 18 also reveals that a few should be given honor with financial compensation. That has been the practice in Christian churches to financially support one or more elders so that they give themselves full time to preaching and teaching.

So the first principle is that we honor elders, giving double honor to elders who rule well, and especially to those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

SHOW HONOR BY BEING FAIR TO ELDERS (v. 19). The second principle or the second way we show honor to elders is to be fair to elders when they are slandered. The principle is given to us in verse 19.

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. 1 Timothy 5:19 (NASB)

I think each of us have heard pastors and teachers being criticized. Someone thinks his preaching was too serious, and someone else thinks he tells too many jokes. Some of us have done that. We tend to criticize their preaching and leadership for various reasons. At times the criticism may be valid. Maybe the elder did not prepare well for his sermon, and it is obvious because it is disorganized and lacks depth in its content. Maybe he has not been studying the Word of God daily and growing in the truth. I have known a pastor who eventually left a church because his spiritual life was not what it should be. For months he had not opened his Bible for until he stood in the pulpit on Sundays to preach.

I know another pastor who left a church because his min-

istry was shallow, but he blamed his congregation. Hosea 4:9 warns us that a congregation eventually becomes like its leaders. If the leadership has a shallow relationship with God, then the people will too! Here is Hosea 4:9,

**And it will be, like people, like priest;
So I will punish them for their ways
And repay them for their deeds.
Hosea 4:9 (NASB)**

Verses 17-18 tell us that such elders are not worthy of any honor.

But verse 19 is not about a shallow and anemic pulpit. It is about an elder who has been accused of a sin that could disqualify him from the office of elder. Now a pastor who is in sin will also have a shallow and anemic pulpit because the Holy Spirit will not bless his ministry.

Notice the first part of verse 19 says that we are not to receive an accusation against an elder. The Greek word for “receive,” is *paradechomai*. The Greek word literally means “to take in hand from” or “to accept.” That is, we are not to believe something someone says about an elder and immediately assume it is true. Sadly, this happens often! Someone hears an accusation and they believe it. Several people get together and speculate about the meaning of an elder’s behavior. They gossip! Sadly, they violate this verse. It says that an accusation can only be considered when two or three witnesses have witnessed the same sin. Two or three witnesses saw or heard the same sin at the same time.

This may seem like a high standard, but it is a safeguard against unfair accusations against an elder. Elders are very vulnerable. The principle requiring two or three witnesses also appears in Deuteronomy 19:15, and again in Matthew 18:16. It is only fair. Now sometimes an elder’s sin may escape our notice, but God sees it. Verses 24-25 will address this situation.

So, verse 19 gives us the second principle of how to show honor to elders. We must not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.

SHOW HONOR BY REMOVING DISQUALIFIED ELDERS (v. 20-21). The third principle or the third way to show honor to elders is to remove those who disqualify themselves. This princi-

ple is given to us in verse 20. It says,

Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. 1 Timothy 5:20 (NASB)

This verse assumes that several things have already occurred. First, there were two or more witnesses to the accusation, Second, an objective investigation has been conducted by the elders of the church of the accusation. If the accusation is found to be true, then the elder must be given an opportunity to repent and stop sinning. If he does not stop sinning, then verse 20 applies. If he does not stop sinning, then he must be rebuked in front of all the congregation. The Greek word rebuke is not the normal word for “rebuke” in the New Testament. This word has the idea of exposing the sin. His sin is to be described to the congregation. Why? So, that everyone will fear committing the same sin. The primary goal is holiness and not embarrassment or punishment.

Now this verse may surprise some since it is obvious the investigation discovered the elder was guilty, and then he was given an opportunity to stop sinning. The usual practice of many churches is to remove the elder immediately if the sin is something like adultery or murder. This is the correct response because it is not possible to stop those sins once they have been committed. Those situations cannot be corrected or undone.

What type of sins disqualify an elder? The sins that clearly violate the qualifications for elders are listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The sins also include any sin that is a habitual habit or practice.

There is another reason to remove a man who is disqualified from continuing to serve as an elder due to sin. His dishonor would tarnish the reputation of the other elders and of the church. He would tarnish the spiritual example of the elders as a group. 1 Peter 5:3 tells us that elders are to be an example to the congregation. Being an elder is not a reward for good behavior to the church. Elders are to be godly examples to the flock. Sinning elders bring dishonor!

Verse 21 tells us that we must always apply these principles equally to every elder. There must not be any exceptions.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus

and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. 1 Timothy 5:21 (NASB)

Now we are told that we must maintain these principles or standards without bias or partiality.. That is, it does not matter if the pastor or some other elder is loved by everyone in the church. If the accusation is true, and he did not stop being a glutton, stealing, lying, being a Diotrephes (3 John 9), or whatever, then he must be removed. These principles are to be maintained in the presence of God, Christ Jesus, and the angels. The idea is that they are watching. Since the Holy Spirit uses the same Greek word for “in the presence” in both verses 20 and 21, this helps us understand the rebuke of a sinning elder must occur not just before the elders, but before the entire church.

SHOW HONOR BY CAREFULLY SELECTING ELDERS (v. 22-25). The fourth principle or the fourth way to show honor to elders is to carefully select them. Verse 22 says,

Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin. 1 Timothy 5:22 (NASB)

Here we are told to be careful about laying hands upon anyone. Earlier in 1 Timothy 4:14, Paul referred to the laying on of hands when Timothy was made a pastor. So, we should understand to lay hands upon anyone was giving approval to a man to serve as an elder, since this passage is about elders. This means that laying hands upon a man to appoint him as an elder expresses approval of the man and his calling to serve as an elder. It is equivalent to ordination.

Then Paul warns us to be cautious about laying hands on anyone. He warns that those who lay hands on a man share in their future sins. Then Paul commands, “Keep yourself free from sin.” That is, sharing the man’s sins while he serves as an elder in the church. This should cause anyone who chooses men to be elders to act carefully and slowly. Unqualified men will eventually cause harm to a church, and those involved in his selection and approval will share in his sins in some way.

Verse 23 is a side comment.

No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. 1 Timothy 5:23 (NASB)

Apparently, Paul was initially thinking about Timothy's spiritual life, and maybe then he thought about Timothy's physical health. Since it was a common practice at that time to use a little wine for stomach problems, Paul followed that advice. That suggests that Timothy had a stomach ailment.

In verses 24 and 25 Paul gives us four facts about selecting men to be elders that we must remember. In verse 24, Paul said,

The sins of some men are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their sins follow after. 1 Timothy 5:24 (NASB)

The first fact is that the sins of some men are obvious to everyone. Consequently, these men will be rejected immediately from being appointed to serve because their sins are obvious. The statement that their sins are "going before them to judgment" most likely does not refer to the bema seat judgment of believers, or to the great white throne judgment of unbelievers, because both events occur after the person dies. The idea is that their sins will become obvious after they have been appointed. So, this appears to refer to the church's decision or judgment about the individual after he is appointed. That is, the church may make a mistake by an initial decision to appoint him, and then later discover his sins after he is an elder.

The second fact is that the sins of some other men will later become obvious. That is, the church must strive to select qualified men as elders, but they may not always be completely successful.

The third and fourth facts are given in verse 25. The verse says,

Likewise also, deeds that are good are quite evident, and those which are otherwise cannot be concealed. 1 Timothy 5:25 (NASB)

The third fact is that the good deeds of some men will be obvious. As a result, it will be easier to determine that some of

these men are qualified to be elders. The fourth fact is that the good deeds of other men are not as obvious, but in time they will become evident.

CONCLUSION. We have learned two ways to show honor to elders. First, we have learned that we must give double honor to those elders who rule well, and especially to those who work hard at preaching and teaching. This means we should seek ways to say thank you and express our appreciation. We should financially compensate those elders who serve the congregation full-time.

Second, we must be slow to accept slander against elders. We must require two or three witnesses to the sin before doing anything. We must give elders an opportunity to stop sinning.

Then in verses 20-21, Paul encourages us that the process is imperfect. We must not be discouraged if some men are appointed as elders who do not belong.

I have known pastors and elders who disqualified themselves. One man was an assistant pastor who was a friend. He was caught kissing his church secretary. I had to vote along with the other elders to revoke his ordination. Eventually, he was rebuked before the entire congregation for his sin. But who would have known that he would ever do that?

I knew a youth pastor who abused some of the teenage boys in a church's high school ministry. He was a married man. He had children. Eventually, the church discovered that he was a secret homosexual. The church had to remove him from the ministry. I knew another man who was an assistant pastor. He was caught with pornography on his computer. His own son found it. The church had to remove the man from the ministry.

I know a man who served as an elder. After two years of service, he was removed as an elder because he had a critical spirit. I have known several men who disqualified themselves, yet the churches did nothing about them.

On the positive side, there are many good men who are worthy of double honor. We must not be discouraged if these fine men are overlooked. Some are especially deserving of double honor because they labor hard in preaching and teaching. It is these men who give life to the church. They are to be honored.