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CHURCH LEADERSHIP: KEEPING IT GODLY

1 Timothy 5:19-25

By

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Lesson 18

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Moral failure among pastors is happening with shocking frequency in the American church. A *Leadership* survey (Winter, 1988, pp. 12-13) revealed that one out of eight pastors have committed adultery since they've been in local church ministry. Almost one out of four admitted to doing something they feel was sexually inappropriate. One out of five acknowledged fantasizing at least weekly about sex with someone other than their spouse. If you widen the question to monthly, the number grows to over one out of three.

When a church leader falls into sin, it always wreaks havoc to the cause of Christ. The more visible and well-known the leader, the greater the harm. Some in the church justify their own sin by thinking, "If that strong leader fell, then who am I to resist?" Divisions arise in the church between those who advocate tolerance and love toward the fallen leader and those labeled as unloving because they call for his removal from public ministry. The world mocks the whole thing and shrugs off the gospel.

So it's crucial for the church to put godly men into leadership and to make sure that they remain that way. How can we do that? How can we do everything possible to insure that our church leaders are godly men? And, if and when a church leader does fall into sin, how do we deal with it properly?

These are the questions Paul answers in 1 Timothy 5:19-25. Some of the elders in Ephesus had fallen into false teaching and ungodly conduct, which always goes with false doctrine. Paul doesn't give a comprehensive answer, but he brings up two crucial safeguards to help keep church leadership godly: First, the proper exercise of church discipline toward sinning elders (5:19-21); and second, the careful selection of elders (5:22-25). He is saying that ...

To keep church leadership godly, elders must be disciplined properly and selected carefully.

Since some in Ephesus had already fallen, and, perhaps, rumors and accusations were circulating about others, Paul deals first with the remedial process of discipline before going on to talk about the preventative steps to take in selection, so that the church will put only godly men into office.

1. To keep church leadership godly, elders must be disciplined properly (5:19-21).

This section is like strong medicine: you don't want to have to use it, but it's good to have on hand in case you get sick. I hope we never have to apply these verses in our church, but we had better know that it's in our "medicine cabinet" in case we ever need it.

The verses reveal three aspects of proper discipline of church leaders: The need for factual evidence (5:19); the need for public rebuke (5:20); and, the need for impartiality (5:21).

- A. Proper discipline of church leaders requires factual evidence (5:19).

Paul is citing the law of Moses here. Deuteronomy 19:15 states, "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed."

It's a simple principle: a case must be tried on the basis of factual evidence, not hearsay or rumors. Paul specifically applies it to church leaders here because they're more liable to false accusations and slander than others, especially men who preach God's truth. Satan is always trying to discredit the authority of God's Word. One method he often uses is to attack the credibility of the man who teaches the Word. If people doubt his integrity, they can easily shrug off his exhortations to godliness. So Satan often stirs up people who have been offended by the preaching of God's truth or who are upset because a church leader has had to confront them privately about their sin. They spread half-truths and outright lies to discredit the man and his message.

What do you do if someone comes to you with something damaging against me, one of the other elders, or some Christian leader? It's important to the testimony of Christ that we handle such situations in a godly way. If the person is spreading rumors or gossip, he needs to be corrected. If he has a legitimate problem, it

needs to be processed according to Scripture. I've found these five questions (which I got from Bill Gothard) to be useful:

(1) "What is your reason for telling me?" Widening the circle of gossip only compounds the problem. Why do I need to know this? If the person says, "I just wanted you to know so you could pray," then you should caution him not to say anything more to anyone before he checks out the facts and takes biblical steps to deal with it (Matt. 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1). Gossip flatters our pride by giving us "inside" information. But we must resist both the temptation to listen to it and to encourage someone else to give it unless we're part of the solution.

(2) "Where did you get your information?" Refusal to identify the source is a sure sign of gossip. Is there more than one independent witness? If not, the accusation should not be received and the accuser should be shown this Scripture and warned about spreading the charges any further.

(3) "Have you gone to those directly involved?" If the person has not gone to those involved, he is probably more interested in spreading gossip than in helping to restore the one or ones who have sinned.

(4) "Have you personally checked out all the facts?" It's easy for "facts" to get distorted as they travel from one person to another or when they're given by a person with negative motives.

(5) "Can I quote you if I check this out?" A person spreading gossip won't want to be quoted by name. They don't want to get involved in the messy business of helping confront and restore a person in sin. They're just spreading an evil report.

Thus the first need in disciplining an elder is to get factual information. If the charges are true, then there is a second need:

B. Proper discipline of church leaders requires public rebuke (5:20).

The proper translation here is, "Those who are sinning," meaning, those guilty of the charges who do not repent. Sinning means some clear violation of God's Word, not just something someone doesn't like or agree with. I once was called in by another church to arbitrate a conflict where a deacon had sent a letter to

the entire congregation charging the pastor with not feeding the flock and not visiting the members enough. The pastor hadn't sinned and the deacon hadn't talked directly to the pastor about the situation, so the deacon was in sin.

If it is a public sin, such as false teaching on some major issue or a sin that is in public view, then a public rebuke may be called for as a first step (as Paul did with Peter, Gal. 2:11 ff.) If a leader has gone public by writing a book promoting serious error, then it requires public rebuke, either in print or verbally, to warn God's people (Titus 1:9). Paul often named individuals (1 Tim. 1:20) and specified the nature of the false teaching (2 Tim. 2:17-18; Titus 1:10-16).

But normally the steps of private rebuke (Matt. 18:15-17) need to be followed before any public rebuke is made. The goal is never to blast the man, but to restore him. If he repents after private rebuke, it may be necessary for a public confession to the church. Depending on the seriousness of the sin, the man may need to step down from his office until he rebuilds a godly reputation. While moral failure need not disqualify a man from public ministry for the rest of his life, he can't possibly restore the necessary qualifications of being above reproach, a one-woman man, and having a good reputation with outsiders in a few months (1 Tim. 3:2-7).

Public exposure of sin, especially in a church leader, is just the opposite of our human tendency. If a church leader sins, we're inclined to cover it quickly and keep it under wraps, or perhaps gossip about it. But to expose it seems like it would damage the reputation of Christ or the church. And so we "hush-hush" the matter. I know of situations where pastors who sinned morally are just quietly moved to new places of ministry. Thankfully, I've also received several letters from churches or Christian organizations exposing the sin of a leader who fell, asking prayer for his restoration.

If we don't deal with the matter God's way, Satan will deal with it his way. It will lead to gossip, slander, divisions, and greater sin in the body. God's way is to deal with the matter publicly. There are three values of rebuke before the church:

(1) Public rebuke clears the name of God and His church from association with and toleration of evil. If a church leader sins

and the matter is covered up, there are still going to be leaks. When the leaks spread, people begin thinking that the church tolerates evil. That erodes trust in the message we proclaim and in the holy God we serve. Thus God's method, even in the case of His choicest servants, is to uncover the sin before everyone. As the Lord said to David after his sin with Bathsheba, "Indeed, you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun" (2 Sam. 12:12). God wants evil exposed so that the world may know that He is apart from all sin and does not tolerate it.

(2) Public rebuke causes others to be fearful of sinning (5:20). Fear is not necessarily a bad motivator, if it keeps us from sin. Public discipline, especially of a church leader, makes people see the gravity of sin. It causes a healthy fear of God. If people know that church discipline will be administered impartially (5:21), they will be fearful of becoming the object of such rebuke and will avoid sin.

(3) Public rebuke causes the sinner himself to be fearful of sinning again (5:20, "also"). No one would want to go through something like that again. If the church is consistent in carrying out discipline, it will act as a deterrent to sin.

Thus, proper discipline of church leaders requires factual evidence and, in some cases, public rebuke. Paul adds a third need for proper discipline:

- C. Proper discipline of church leaders requires impartiality (5:21).

Church discipline will be effective only if it is applied impartially. If a man of influence is shown leniency, while a less powerful man is treated harshly, much harm will be done to the church.

Paul here invokes a solemn charge to Timothy: "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, ..." "God and Christ Jesus" are contained under the same article in the Greek, which points to the deity of Christ. God is the ultimate judge, who has committed all judgment unto the Son (John 5:22, 27). Church discipline is carried out in the presence of the Lord (Matt. 18:15-20). The elect angels are probably included to bring up the awesome picture of God on His holy throne, surrounded by

the angels, or because when Christ returns in judgment, He will use the angels as reapers.

Why does Paul lay this heavy charge on Timothy? I think he did it because Timothy, by nature and personality, was a timid soul who loathed confrontation. Thus he would have a tendency to back off from confronting a powerful elder who was in error. But to do so would be to be partial in administering discipline, which undermines the whole process. Thus Paul is saying, in effect, "Timothy, fear God more than any powerful man. Maintain these principles without bias or partiality."

Thus to keep church leadership godly, elders must be disciplined properly. That is the remedial step which the church is required to take. But there is also a preventative step which the church must take so that church leaders will not fall into sin:

2. To keep church leadership godly, elders must be selected carefully (5:22-25).

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. If we want to avoid having leaders fall into sin, then we must use caution (5:22) and careful observation (5:24-25) in the process of selecting them for office. Sandwiched in is a brief digression about Timothy's health (5:23).

- A. The need for caution in selecting elders (5:22).

Some interpret the laying on of hands to refer to the restoration of a repentant elder. But in light of the usage in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6) I take it to refer to a public commissioning of elders to their office. Since some elders had fallen into sin, Timothy may be inclined to hastily appoint others to replace them. But if he did and those men were not well qualified and fell into sin, Timothy would have a part in their sin. So Paul warns him to keep himself pure.

The mentioning of keeping himself pure brings to Paul's mind the other danger of the false teachers, namely, their bent toward asceticism (4:3). He does not want Timothy mistakenly to think that he should abstain from all wine, especially in light of his frequent health problems. So he digresses to give his son in the faith some fatherly advice, namely, to drink a little wine for medicinal reasons.

Since Paul digressed, I will too. The moderate use of wine is not prohibited in Scripture, but drunkenness or being enslaved to alcohol clearly is. Drinking any alcohol is dangerous, since it is physiologically addictive. No one plans to become an alcoholic. It sneaks up and ensnares you unawares. Also, since we live in a culture where so many are enslaved to alcohol, we need to be extremely careful that we don't cause our brother in Christ to stumble. If a believer who has had a problem with alcohol sees me drinking and is led back into enslavement, I have sinned against my brother. For that reason, I choose to abstain.

A second part of this digression is to note that Paul didn't say, "Timothy, claim your healing by faith!" He was recommending a medicinal use of wine and a sensible recognition that Timothy needed to take care of his body. Good nutrition, proper rest and exercise, and using medicine when we need it are not opposed to a life of faith, but rather are a part of being good stewards of our bodies as unto God. Yes, we should pray for healing; and yes, we should thankfully use modern medical knowledge.

Coming back to the subject, Paul goes on to urge ...

B. The need for careful observation in selecting elders (5:24-25).

The manner in which Timothy can avoid appointing unqualified elders is to take his time (5:22) and observe the lives of these men carefully. Careful observation will reveal two classes of men:

(1) Those unfit for office (5:24). There are two categories here: Those obviously unfit—their sins march on ahead of them for everyone to see; those not so obviously unfit—their sins follow after them, but eventually come to light. At first glance, they may seem qualified, but time will show their track record, that they are not godly men.

(2) Those fit for office (5:25). Again, there are the same two categories: Those obviously fit for office—their good deeds are evident; those fit for office, but not so obviously. The last half of the sentence is a bit confusing, but I take it to be parallel to verse 24, so the sense is, "Those good deeds of other men are not so evident at first, but they can't be hidden in the long run."

So Paul is saying that people aren't always what they appear to be on the surface. Men should not be selected for leadership in the church on a superficial or hasty basis. They don't always turn out to be what they seem to be at first. Carefully observe their way of life, especially in their home (3:2, 4, 5). Also, how is their public reputation (3:7)? Don't put a man into church leadership unless he has a proven record of godly character and good deeds.

Conclusion

We always are in danger of drifting with our worldly culture rather than confronting it with God's truth. The theme of our culture is tolerance of anything except someone who is not tolerant. It has affected the American church. A recent *Christianity Today* news article told of two well-known Christian authors who are under attack from what the article described as "self-appointed heresy hunters." Yet as the article quoted from one of the authors, it is clear that she has fallen into seriously false and non-Christian teaching, which she excuses as a failure on her part to communicate. But the tone of the article was that these "heresy hunters" are hounding these poor victims.

The Bible is clear that elders are not only to exhort in sound doctrine, but also to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9). But the mood of our day is that we can't criticize or judge anyone, no matter how far out of line they are, because that implies that we're right and they're wrong, and that doesn't fit with the supreme virtue of tolerance.

During the time of the Reformation, many Catholic priests had mistresses and illegitimate children. Many of them were greedily misusing church funds to live in luxury. One major distinctive of the Reformed churches was a return to church discipline. They sought to hold their pastors and members accountable to the holy standards of God's Word. God greatly honored that return to righteousness among His people.

Although you get accused of being hateful when you confront sin and call people to holiness, and although some do it wrongly because they lack compassion, it is not hate, but the love of God that confronts sin and false doctrine. Sin and teaching contrary to God's Word destroy people. Holiness and sound doctrine save

people from God's judgment and build them in the joy of the Lord. Our God is holy. We His people, and especially we who are church leaders, must be holy ourselves in all our behavior. God's word to all of us from these verses is, "Keep yourself pure from sin" (5:22b).

Discussion Questions

1. When is it proper to expose false teaching by a Christian author or well-known leader? When is it not proper?
2. When does talking about someone who is not present cross the line into sinful gossip?
3. How should we respond when someone shares with us something inappropriate about someone else?
4. How can we faithfully carry out church discipline without becoming sinfully judgmental?

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