

1 Timothy 5:17-25
Deuteronomy 24:5-25:4
Psalm 146

“Elders”

(October 16, 2011)

Why does it matter whether you muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain?

The point is not primarily about oxen (see 1 Cor 9:9).

The point has to do with the general principle that the laborer is worthy of his hire – whether you are dealing with an ox – or a man.

It is particularly interesting that Deuteronomy 25:4 follows a lengthy discussion of widows and orphans.

1 Timothy 5 will move from widows and orphans to the principle that the laborer is worthy of his hire.

Our OT reading is Moses’ exposition of the 8th commandment – “You shall not steal.”

Theft is not merely a matter of taking what belongs to someone else.

Theft may also be *withholding* that which is due to another.

Moses is concerned, not only for “honoring contracts” – but also for “honoring *people*.”

The contract says that his garment is to be held in pledge – but it would shame a man to make him sleep in the cold without his garment, so you must restore to him his cloak before nightfall.

The point is not “honoring contracts” – but “honoring *people*” – honoring those who are made in the image of God, and *especially*, those who are weakest: the widow and orphan.

And this point is also made in our Psalm of response to God’s word.

So let us sing Psalm 146.

Read 1 Timothy 5

I think that I was so focused on the main point of the passage last week, that I neglected to make one observation that may be important.

Last time we saw that those who are “truly” widows are to be honored – and we saw that this honor should include an “honorarium” – financial support.

The OT scriptures made it clear that the people of God are to provide for widows.

The question naturally arose,

does that mean that the church must provide for wealthy widows?

And Paul’s answer is “no” – those who are “truly” widows

are those who are “left all alone” with no one to care for them.

But in verses 9-10 we have one of the most clear and succinct statements of what it means to be a godly woman.

And I didn't spend much time there.

Now it is true, that Paul is speaking of the elderly widow –
but he is describing what she has been doing for the last 40-50 years.

And this provides a picture of what God wants *you* (women) to be:

She has been “the wife of one husband.”

In other words, she has been a “one man woman.”

(like the bishop and deacons have been one woman men).

Incidentally, 1 Timothy 5 is the passage that demonstrates that “one woman man”
means “one at a time.”

Because Paul says to the younger widow that she should remarry.

Then, if she is over the age of 60 when her second husband dies,
she may be enrolled as a widow who has been a “one man woman”
(in spite of the fact that she has been married twice –
she was a “one-woman man” both times!)

It has to do with what sort of person you are.

Are you faithful to your spouse?

But Paul goes on to talk about the sort of person she is.

He says she must have “a reputation for good works”

with respect to four types of people:

“if she has brought up children (love of family),

has shown hospitality (love of strangers),

has washed the feet of the saints (love of the church),

has cared for the afflicted (love for those in need),

and has devoted herself to every good work.” (5:10)

I know that many of you have struggled to figure out what Christ is calling you to do as a woman

You have a lot of responsibilities in many areas of life.

I would suggest that you think about your life as a Christian woman
in terms of these four good works:

love of family: you are charged with “bringing up children”

(notice that it doesn't say merely “to bear” children, but to “rear” them –
whether by rearing your biological children,

your adopted children,

or other people's children who happen to come your way!

Some of you may wind up being the “neighborhood mother” –

don't think for a moment that this is a distraction from your calling!);

love of strangers: showing hospitality to travelers or newcomers

(Paul says that all Christian women should demonstrate

love for strangers);

love of the church: washing the feet of the saints
means humbling serving one another in the body
(just as Jesus humbled himself and washed his disciples' feet);

love of the needy: caring for the afflicted – the word suggests even long-term care
(it's the same word used in v16 to say that a believing woman
should “care” for her relatives who are widows.)

Women, think about your life in these terms of these four loves:
family, strangers, the saints, and the needy.

But don't just think about today – or this week –
think in terms of the next ten years
(or for you who are younger – over the next 50 years!).

Let me walk you through this by stage in life:

If you are a younger woman without children,
then you should be focused on 2-4 (strangers, the church, and the needy).
You have time and energy.
The world around you is telling you that everything is about you.
But Christ calls you to love him – by loving strangers, the church, and the needy.

If you have young children at home, then
an awful lot of your time is consumed with “bringing up children.”

You may not have much time and energy for the others –
but do not forget about them!
Because if you are going to bring up children who are going to be godly adults,
then *they* need to see you modeling
love for strangers, the church, and the needy.
And husbands – you need to help in this!
If you have little ones at home,
your wife *needs you* to help think through
how to weave love for strangers, the church, and the needy into everyday life.

After all, husbands, these things are not extras that are for the “really good Christians.”
This is what the Christian life looks like!
The Christian life looks like loving family, strangers, the saints, and the needy!

And as your children get older, you will be able to include them more and more
in developing these three parts of the Christian life.
Until the day comes when you have an empty nest,
and then you find out how well balanced your life has been!

If you have lived simply and solely for your children,
then you find yourself wondering what is your meaning and purpose in life?!
But if you have loved Christ by loving strangers, the church, and the needy,
then you find that those areas simply increase,
as you devote your time, energy, and wisdom to them.

So, as a Christian woman,
Paul urges you to think about your life in terms of these four categories.
It is not as though you have to spend a quarter of your time on each,
but over the course of your life as a woman of God,
these four things should characterize you.

This is what it means to have a reputation for good works –
to devote yourself to every good work:

to bring up children,
to show hospitality to strangers,
to wash the feet of the saints,
to care for the afflicted.

I realize that today we are supposed to be looking at the elder,
but since we have more women in the church than we have elders,
I did not want to move on until we had covered that point.

1. The Double Honor of Elders (v17-18)

¹⁷Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

As we turn to the elders, we immediately run into a question:
who are these elders?

We have heard about the bishop (3:1-7).
We have heard about deacons (3:8-13).

But who are the elders?

In 5:1 Paul spoke of the "older men" – which is the same word used here.
But just as there are widows, and then there those who are "truly widows" –
so also there are elderly men, and then there are men who are elders!

In Titus 1, Paul will urge Titus to "appoint elders in every town,"
and then goes on to say that "an overseer [or bishop], as God's steward,
must be above reproach." (1:5, 7).

But in Titus, Paul makes no reference to deacons.

Some argue that the office of elder was simply continued from the Old Testament – and in favor of this, they point out that the synagogue had “elders” the leading laymen in the synagogue, so it would be quite natural for the church to have elders as well.

Others argue that the elder = the bishop, which would mean that there is no difference between ruling elder and teaching elder.

Others argue that the elders = the bishop plus the deacons, which would mean that there is no separate office of elder.

There is a problem with all of these approaches:

Paul is not describing how to set up an ideal polity;
he is not writing a book of church order.

Rather, Paul is talking to Timothy about how to function in the particular polity of the church at Ephesus – a polity that is well-understood by both men, and so therefore one that requires very little explanation.

So you could set up your church order in any of these ways, and still be faithful to what Paul says to Timothy!

Because what Paul says is that there must be elders who rule (preferably well!), and that some of those elders must labor in preaching and teaching.

This forbids the “single-elder” approach of some churches.
The plurality of the eldership is essential to biblical polity.
How you do that plurality is not so important.

But you need an “eldership” – a body of elders (in Greek, a presbytery).

In the PCA we have three kinds of presbyteries:

the local presbytery – which we usually call a “session”,
to deal with local matters;
the regional presbytery – which we usually call a “presbytery”,
to deal with matters that pertain to the whole region;
and a national presbytery – which we usually call a “General Assembly,”
to deal with matters that pertain to the whole denomination.

The Presbytery of Ephesus (the council of elders) does not appear quite to fit any of these three.
The Presbytery of Ephesus appears to be what I would call a “city presbytery” – it would include all the churches in Ephesus under one eldership.
From the material we have in the NT, and into the first part of the second century,

it seems clear that the city-church was more organically connected
than the modern presbytery,
but not so insular as the modern congregation.
We have tried to encourage something of the “city-church” model
through the “LaPorte Road Crew”
where we encourage our members to visit our daughter church in LaPorte.
When we are able to have a daughter church in the South Bend area,
we would like to practice this even more!

But Paul says in verse 17,

¹⁷Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

When Paul said to honor widows, he meant to provide for them financially.
Double honor, here, means to provide *well* for them financially.

This plainly encourages the church to pay pastors and teachers –
but I would point out that it also endorses the idea of paying *elders* who rule well.

It is true that preparing sermons and lessons takes time –
but so does governing and leading the church.

I suspect the reason why few churches have paid ruling elders
is because no one wants to have to decide who is “ruling well” and who is not!

So how should we put this into practice in our day?
I know some churches have done this by “hiring” certain elders for specific tasks.
If there is an elder who is especially good at counseling,
or does particularly well at visiting/shepherding,
then the church could hire him (part-time or full-time) for that work.

All Christians should seek to do the things that Christ has called us to do –
whether we get paid for it or not! –
but if the church asks someone to do something that takes a lot of time and work,
then it is appropriate to pay them for it!

¹⁸For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

It is one thing for a person to say, “No, I love to serve – I do not want to be paid,”
it is entirely another thing for the church to say,
“we need you to do this, but we won’t pay you for it!”

In some cases we draw the line somewhat arbitrarily:

we pay people to clean the church building on a regular basis;
but then we have a work day to do periodic projects on a volunteer basis.

Of course, we generally provide coffee and donuts for that day –
so no one could accuse us of “muzzling the ox”!

But Paul says that there is a basic principle of fairness –
that if you expect someone to put a lot of work into something,
you should also expect to pay them for it.

You no doubt recognized the first quote in verse 18

as a quotation from Deuteronomy 25:4.

But where does the second quote come from?

“The laborer is worthy of his hire” comes from Luke 10:7.

You can find the general principle in Deuteronomy 24,
but the words are a direct quote from Luke 10:7.

So Paul (not surprisingly) seems to think of the words of Jesus as “scripture.”

2. The Discipline of Elders (v19-20)

In verses 19-20 Paul turns to the question of how to discipline an elder:

¹⁹Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

Both parts of this are important.

1) if you don't have two or three witnesses, don't even consider the charge!

This is a good rule of jurisprudence in general –

but in the case of an accusation against someone in authority,
it is essential.

You need two or three witnesses – and their testimony must be identical!

2) but if the elder is found guilty, he must be rebuked publicly.

“those who persist in sin” is a present participle –

it's not that there is some sin in his deep, dark, past,
but rather, that he *is sinning*.

Now, I want you to notice something.

Paul does not say that they must cease to be elders.

In some cases, an elder may need to be deposed from office –
but not all!

After all, an elder is supposed to be an exemplary Christian.

Not a sinless Christian.

There is only one who is sinless – and that is Jesus.

Your elders are not Jesus.

Your elders are supposed to *model* the Christian life for you –
and the whole of the Christian life, as Luther said, is to be a life of repentance.

So, from time to time, we may need to be rebuked before you
as an example – “so that the rest may stand in fear.”

Remember, as Peter tells us, that judgment begins with the household of God,
and if it begins with us, what will happen to those who do not obey the gospel? (1 P 4:17)

3. Do Not Be Hasty in Ordaining Elders (v21-25)

But for this reason, Paul says to Timothy:

²¹In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.

Verse 21 provides a serious warning to Timothy.

Do not pre-judge a case!

Just because you really like this elder, you may not let it slide.

Just because you haven't been getting along with this elder,
do not let that affect your judgment.

Remember that the judgment belongs to God.

Indeed, the divine court is the context for Paul's charge.

You might wonder, why does Paul mention God and Christ, but not the Holy Spirit?

The reason is because Paul is describing the heavenly court.

The reference to God and Christ and the elect angels
reminds us of the heavenly court of Daniel 7,
with the Ancient of Days and the ten thousands that served him,
and the one like a Son of Man coming before the Ancient of Days,
and being given an everlasting dominion.

Timothy and the earthly courts of the church
are to implement the divine justice of the Son of Man.

Christ Jesus is the head of the church.

His word must prevail in the judgments that our elders render.

And because this is true, Paul exhorts Timothy:

²²Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.

If elders are supposed to be exemplary Christians,
then Timothy should be slow to lay hands on a man.

Make sure that he *is* exemplary before ordaining him.

Elders are called to implement the divine justice of the Son of Man.

If you ordain a man who is not ready to be an elder,
then you are taking part in his sins.

The exhortation “keep yourself pure” then reminds Paul of another thing:

²³*(No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.)*

Paul seems to think that Timothy might misunderstand his exhortation to purity.

Certainly it would be “impure” to get drunk,
but wine has considerable medicinal benefits.

Water is dangerous for your health.

We tend to forget this in the modern world, but it is still true!
Would you drink straight out of the St. Joseph River?
Of course not!

In a city like Ephesus, if you only drink water, you will likely have stomach problems!

The alcohol in the wine would kill some of the bugs.

But Paul’s exhortation is more than a curiosity.

It provides a valuable illustration of what Paul said in the previous chapter:

“bodily training is of some value.” (4:8)

Apparently Timothy had decided to abstain from wine
(perhaps out of concern that he might get drunk).

Paul now tells him that he needs to include wine in his diet
in order to promote his physical health.

There may be times when your pastor or elder may exhort you to do something

not because “thus sayeth the Lord” but because this would be good for your sanctification

There are things that fit into the category of “wise counsel” –

“pious advice” – which should be taken seriously,
but do not rise to the level of “thus sayeth the Lord.”

(You might say, Oh, but Paul is writing scripture here, so it *is* “thus sayeth the Lord”!

And it is true that Paul is writing scripture –

which means that *sometimes* scripture gives “wise counsel”
that you will need to figure out what to do with!

To cite my favorite example:

Proverbs 26:4 says, “Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.”

Proverbs 26:5 says, “Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

So which one should you do?
Should you answer the fool or not?
It depends on what sort of fool you are dealing with!
Some fools need to be answered – other fools need to be ignored.
You need wisdom to know which is which!

But Paul then returns to the question of how to identify men who should (or should not) be ordained as elders (v24-25):

²⁴The sins of some men are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. ²⁵So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

In other words, the reason why you should not be hasty in laying on hands,
is because sins and good works will eventually reveal themselves.

If a man is an exemplary Christian, it will become clear over time.
If he is a fraud, it will become clear over time.

If you rush a man into the eldership, you may discover that his sins only appear later.
And then the whole church will suffer for it!

But in other cases, you discover that a man's good works are not so conspicuous –
and a man who was ignored and overlooked for years
may prove to be a wise and faithful elder.

Do not judge with a superficial judgment!
Do not judge with the world's expectations!

Some men look really good at first glance –
but over time you realize there is something wrong here!

Others may not look very impressive at first –
but in time their good works become clear.

How much time does it take?
Presbyterians usually require that a man be a member for at least a year
before he becomes an elder or deacon.
But the point is not "how long" –
the point is what is the long-term pattern of his life?

You want elders who are exemplary Christians –
men who will live faithfully before the congregation as living testimonies
to the faithfulness of Jesus.