

"Words For Pastor and People" (Part 9)

We're moving toward the end of this series of messages from 1 Timothy. Hopefully we're realizing that some of the questions and problems that arose in the first years of the Church are issues we face in the Church today. Let's continue our study in 1 Timothy by looking at 1 Timothy 5:17-18: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The laborer deserves to be paid.'"

Apparently, some people back then thought that fulltime preachers and teachers and church leaders should work with little or no pay. *Imagine that!* The Apostle Paul says let the "elders" (church leaders) who are doing a good job be worthy of *double honor* - especially those who preach and teach.

Then he quotes an Old Testament Scripture found in Deuteronomy 25:4, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Farmers would bring an ox into a threshing floor, where they harvested wheat. The ox would trample the wheat with its hooves, separating the wheat from the chaff so it could be harvested. The Old Testament law here in Deuteronomy forbids a farmer from muzzling the ox as it tramples the wheat. That would allow the ox to eat some of the wheat as it worked. So, if you provide that remuneration for an ox, you should also pay your preacher! The Apostle then quotes some *words of Jesus*: "The worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7).

If I spend too much time on this Scripture, it will sound very self-serving - like I'm lobbying for more pay! That would be as tacky as when members of Congress or state lawmakers vote themselves a pay raise! I once preached a series of sermons on 1 Corinthians similar to what I'm doing in 1 Timothy. In chapter 9 Paul elaborates even more about decent wages for those making their living in church ministry. I decided to skip that section!

I'm not going to say much more about it today, other than a few comments. Scripture teaches that those who make their living in the work of the gospel should receive a decent wage. This applies not only to ordained ministers, but for others employed by the church. Churches will sometimes pay their staff members as little as they can get by with, like, "If you work for the church, you should expect to work for peanuts." Hardly anybody goes into church work expecting to get rich. But I think those of us employed by the church would appreciate the "double honor" Paul talks about in being given a fair and decent wage. That is Scriptural! So, as Forrest Gump would say, "*That's all I have to say about that!*"

The next 4 verses have to do with discipline of church leaders. Timothy was sent to the church in Ephesus to administer discipline to some of the leaders. The first century church didn't shy away from holding people accountable.

Here are some principles that apply to clergy and lay leadership in a congregation: "Never accept any accusation against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses" (1 Timothy 5:19). If accusations are brought up against a church leader, they have to be supported by 2 or 3 witnesses. Deuteronomy 19:15 says, "A single witness shall not suffice to convict a

person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained." I know of a youth pastor who moved to a new church, and shortly thereafter was accused of some indiscretion. The accuser was a lady in a family that had a history of moving from one church to another and causing trouble. My friend was caught off guard by the accusation. He was asked to resign, and he did, even though the whole process violated the laws of his denomination. There should have been a hearing, where he could have defended himself.

It's a scary thing, that one person can start a rumor about a pastor or church leader that may be totally false. Yet, there will always be some who'll believe it. And it can ruin a person's ministry and life. I've often thought how vulnerable I am – I counsel people in private, or ride to a meeting with a female, or interact with children in the church – and it only takes one person to make an accusation! So, there was wisdom in the old Jewish law that said you couldn't condemn someone just on the basis of one person's testimony. And people today should not be presumed *guilty* before they have an opportunity to defend themselves.

"As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest also may stand in fear" (1 Timothy 5:20). While we have to be concerned not to *falsely* accuse anyone, where there *is* sinful or improper behavior it needs to be confronted! Not swept under the rug. I can't help but think of the mess the Roman Catholic Church is in because of covering up the behaviors of sexual predator priests (unfortunately, the Protestant Church has done its share of that too). Again and again in the Bible, it tells us that we must be *accountable* to one another in the Body of Christ if the church is to be spiritually healthy.

"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I warn you to keep these instructions without prejudice, doing nothing on the basis of partiality" (verse 21). Paul warns Timothy that he must be impartial, and not play favorites. Don't shy away from confronting people just because of who they are, or maybe because of all they do in the church.

The next verse says this: "Do not ordain anyone hastily, and do not participate in the sins of others; keep yourself pure" (verse 22). To "ordain" literally means to "lay hands on" (to consecrate someone). In light of the previous verse, this probably means: Don't rush into ordaining, or perhaps re-ordaining someone to church leadership, who is of questionable character, or has fallen from grace. If you do, in a sense you're participating in his or her sin. Here again Scripture is insisting that church leaders have integrity, and that there should be high standards for church leaders!

There's a more general application of this principle in Ephesians 5:11. "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." At school, at work, at a party, if we know somebody's doing wrong, sometimes we can passively go along. But the Bible says there are times when a more active stance is necessary - when we need to expose the thing that's wrong!

Let's skip down to verses 24 and 25. "The sins of some people are conspicuous and precede

them to judgment, while the sins of others follow them there. So also good works are conspicuous, and even when they are not, they cannot remain hidden."

Both good and evil can be open and obvious. Or, it can be hidden! Some sins are easy to spot! A drug addict – with the hollow eyes, erratic behavior, shaking when in need of a fix. The cheat or embezzler, when he or she gets caught. The person who is totally self-centered, or has a bad temper. We can see these sins and their results, but there are other sins, secret sins, that can be hidden behind a façade of righteousness - people who *appear* to be good but are hiding evil and ugly things. But *God* sees everything! And on Judgment Day, the secret sins will be exposed.

But the same is true of goodness! Some people's good works are plain to see, and may already be recognized and praised. But there are other situations where a person's good deeds go unnoticed - they're not conspicuous. Yet *God* sees and knows!

Some of you have done some very kind and unselfish things, but few people know about it. Maybe you've helped someone in your family or neighborhood, or done something in the church. Maybe you've given up something for someone, and hardly anybody knows about it. And you didn't do it for recognition. I remember one night a while back, I was about ready to leave the church building. It was rather late, and I saw a couple of members cleaning up the restrooms. I said, "What are you doing!" They said the church custodian was on vacation, and they were just doing what needed to be done.

Don't get upset that some people do *evil* things and seem to get away with it...and other people do *good* things that go unrecognized. God sees it all, and everything will come to light on the Day of Judgment!

Now, let's back up to verse 23. Some of you are going to like this! Paul writes, "No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." Paul digresses a bit. "Oh, by the way, Timothy, drink a little wine for your stomach's sake!"

Apparently Timothy was a tee-totaler! And apparently he had stomach problems. So, Paul tells Timothy to drink some wine as *medicine* for his stomach issues. He says, "Drink *a little* wine!" This verse may cause some Christians who drink alcohol to yell, "Yippee!" The verse may also bother some who advocate total abstinence from alcohol.

Methodism in its history has advocated total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. What is the present position of the United Methodist Church on alcohol? As of General Conference, 2016, the Social Principles had a lengthy presentation on the use of alcohol, and its implications for individuals and society. But the bottom line was still recommending *total abstinence*. Honestly, I don't know if anything was changed at the 2024 General Conference. I haven't heard yet.

I'm not naïve enough to believe that most United Methodists refrain from alcohol! And frankly, I haven't pushed the issue, because I'm more inclined to believe the Scripture teaches *moderation*, not necessarily total abstinence. However, let me say this: In light of the fact that

alcoholism is a major health concern in the U.S. today, and causes untold heartache, refraining from alcohol is certainly an option Christians might consider, and could be one way of expressing a total devotion to Christ.

When Paul advises Timothy to drink some wine for his stomach ailments, he is urging Timothy to take care of himself. To take care of his body! Our self-care is important! This is good stewardship, good management of the gift of our physical body. A healthy diet, exercise, getting enough rest. We often crowd our schedules too much and get all stressed out. If we're not taking care of ourselves *physically*, this can affect our *emotional* state, and our *spiritual* well-being also. Sometimes clergy are the worst offenders. Historically, it's been difficult for our conference to get health insurance for our clergy, because of our lousy health record! Take care of yourself!

One final topic as we move into the next chapter: "Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are brothers and sisters; rather, they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved" (1 Timothy 6:1-2). This is advice to *slaves*! Christian slaves are to set a good example if their master isn't a believer, so the Christian cause will not be damaged. And if their master is a follower of Jesus, don't try to take advantage simply because he's a brother or sister in Christ.

Do you find any problem with these verses? How come Paul didn't raise questions about the social institution of slavery? Why didn't the church try to abolish a system that made slaves out of human beings?

It's estimated that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire at that time. Realistically, any hint of a revolt against slavery by Christians would have been quickly and ruthlessly put down by Rome. The infant church was trying to establish itself and was already viewed with suspicion. To encourage slaves to revolt against their masters would have most likely led Rome to snuff out Christians and the Church right there and then. Yet, in the New Testament, *we already have the beginnings* of a movement against human slavery. In Galatians 3:28 it says, "There is no longer...slave or free...for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Why has it taken the church so long over the centuries to stand against social systems that are evil? Slavery existed in our country until the mid-1800's. It took until 1964 to have a Civil Rights Law that gave black people equal rights. Women were not allowed to vote until 1920. Yet, in some ways the Church and Christian believers are at the forefront of fighting for people's rights. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a pastor, and many of the Civil Rights Leaders were Christians and church people.

There is slavery today! It's estimated that there are 28 million people in forced labor situations, 22 million trapped in forced marriages, and millions more held in sex trafficking – sex slaves. Christians, and the church, ought to be leading the way against institutionalized evils that demean and destroy human lives. Thank God, in many ways Christians are taking the lead in these vital matters!

