

“Keep These Rules without Prejudging” (1 Timothy 5:17–25)

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I haven't used the Proverbs much at all in my preaching, which isn't by design. Proverbs is a very important book of the Bible, full of wisdom and insight. And there are some very funny proverbs, like this one:

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout
is a beautiful woman without discretion (Prov. 11:22).¹

You have to think about that a little bit to get it.

Another one of my favorite proverbs is this:

A fool's lips walk into a fight,
and his mouth invites a beating (Prov. 18:6).

That's a good one, isn't it? The idea is that foolish people speak before they think. They rush to judgment, and the consequences aren't good. \

There are a couple of proverbs near that one that address similar issues. The next verse says,

A fool's mouth is his ruin,
and his lips are a snare to his soul (Prov. 18:7).

So, the words of a fool lead him into trouble. That's because they're not based on knowledge, but only opinion. Proverbs 18:2 says,

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his opinion.

A lot of times, we form opinions quickly. It seems like people don't think, they just react. They see a person and they quickly form an opinion. They hear of something on the news, and they quickly have a theory. The problem is that opinions don't require a lot of thought. In fact, they often don't require any conscious thought at all. Often, our opinions are no more than gut reactions.

But Christians are supposed to seek wisdom and understanding. We're not supposed to go on gut reactions and quickly-formed opinions. Proverbs 18:15 says,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

An intelligent heart acquires knowledge,
and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.

Knowledge is often very different from opinion. Our first reaction to things may very well be wrong. Proverbs 18:17 says,

The one who states his case first seems right,
until the other comes and examines him.

Our first impressions and our “hot takes” can be wrong. What first seems right can later seem wrong.

Why do I bring this up? Because in the passage that we’re looking at today, the apostle Paul tells his younger associate, Timothy, that he shouldn’t prejudge, that he shouldn’t do anything from partiality. In other words, Paul tells Timothy that he wouldn’t act rashly. He shouldn’t make decisions unless they are based on real evidence. And that’s a good lesson for all of us to learn.

Today, we’re going to look at 1 Timothy 5:17–25. This book of the Bible is a letter from Paul, the preeminent evangelist and church planter of the first century, to his younger associate, Timothy, who was responsible for the health of a church. In this passage, Paul tells Timothy about some things related to the leaders of the church. Here, they’re called elders. Elsewhere, they’re called overseers (1 Tim. 3:1) or shepherds (Eph. 4:11). We often just call them “pastors.” Now, that might not seem very relevant to you if you’re not a pastor, or if you’re not a member of a church. But the principles that we see in today’s passage should inform the way that all of us live, particularly those of us who trust our lives to Jesus Christ.

So, let’s read today’s passage, then we’ll break it down into parts to understand it, and finally we’ll think about how it should affect our lives. Here is 1 Timothy 5:17–25:

¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” ¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. ²¹ In 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. ²² Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. ²³ (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) ²⁴ The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to

judgment, but the sins of others appear later.²⁵ So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

Let's walk through this passage together.

As I said, this paragraph is about elders, or pastors. The first two verses state that elders should be paid. Paul says that those “who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” “Double honor” may refer to receiving both respect and financial support. It's not enough to give a pastor one or the other. Other passages in the New Testament teach this idea. Some passages teach about respecting and submitting to leaders of the church (1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:17). Others teach about the importance of financially supporting ministers. Galatians 6:6 says, “Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.” Paul also talks about this in 1 Corinthians 9. He says, “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?” (verse 7). And then he says, “If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?” (verse 11).

There are many reasons why a pastor should receive financial support. We can talk about the value of spiritual leadership, the eternal value of the word of God, the fact that a financially-supported pastor is free to work without stress, and so on. But it comes down to simple, proverbial wisdom. Everything that is of benefit comes at a cost, and someone has to pay that cost. I'll come back to that idea later.

Before I move on, there are a couple of interesting details in verse 17 and 18. In verse 17, Paul refers to those who rule in the church, and then he says, “especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” Some churches have taken this to mean that there are ruling elders and preaching elders. But that clause could be translated, “namely those who labor in preaching and teaching.” That's a picky grammatical point that rests on how we translate one Greek word (μάλιστα, *malista*). But I think that's probably the right translation. What Paul is saying is that those who labor are those who preach and teach. The work of a pastor is largely preaching and teaching the Bible. He leads with the word of God.

The other interesting point is that in verse 18, Paul quotes two other passages in the Bible, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. Paul calls both of these passages Scripture, which is a way of saying that they are the word of God (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). The

first passage, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” is from Deuteronomy 25:4. It teaches a basic principle: an animal who is treading the grain, in order to separate the kernel of grain from the husk, should be able to eat some of that grain. Paul applies that principle to supporting pastors. The idea that we should take away is that though the Old Testament law is not in force today, we can and should apply basic principles of that law to our lives. The second passage, “The laborer deserves his wages,” is from Luke 10:7. Jesus spoke these words. I just want to point out that Jesus viewed the Old Testament as God’s word (see John 10:34–35, for example), and Paul viewed Jesus’ words as God’s word. The apostle Peter believed that Paul’s letters were Scripture, too (2 Pet 3:15–16). There are many such verses that indicate that the whole Bible is God’s written word.

In verse 19, Paul shifts gears. He says that charges against elders must be based on two or three witnesses. This is a biblical principal. Deuteronomy 19:15 says, “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.” Interestingly, that passage in Deuteronomy goes on to talk about a “malicious witness” who accuses someone of wrongdoing. Paul may have that in mind here, too.

Why does Paul single out accusations made against an elder? It may be that people are more willing to wrongly accuse pastors of something. It may also be that Paul knows that all it takes is one false accusation to ruin a man’s life. So, if people accuse a pastor, there should definitely be multiple witnesses who can attest to the pastor’s sin. And when we’re talking about sin, we mean a sin serious enough to address publicly, something that, if not repented of, could disqualify a pastor.

Why would people make false accusations against an elder? Because they think the church is “theirs” and they don’t like the way the pastor is leading. Power struggles are behind a lot of ungodly behavior. The thirst for power can lead an otherwise good man to do a bad thing.

And lest you think I’m making this up, I can tell you that multiple pastors have told me that they have been falsely accused of something by people who want to gain or reassert their power in a church. Less than two weeks ago I met a man who has been the pastor of a church in Pennsylvania. He has been at that church for seven years. He told me that the same married couple has twice tried to stir up trouble against him. (I believe the husband in the couple is a leader in the church, possibly the youth group leader—I can’t remember.) This pastor explained

to me that his church's by-laws clearly state that there are two reasons to dismiss a pastor: for teaching false doctrine and for immoral behavior. Early on in his tenure at the church, he switched the Bible translation that the church used. They were using the King James Bible, and he switched to the English Standard Version, the same translation we're using here. This couple tried to accuse him of teaching some kind of false doctrine. I can't remember the details. But more recently, the wife in this couple tried to start a whisper campaign against the pastor. He had preached a sermon in which he happened to address the men. He said that lust and pornography were serious problems for men, and they are. This woman then started to whisper in the church that the pastor had an "eye problem." She meant that the pastor was looking at things he shouldn't be looking at. So, the pastor and the other elders had to address this couple. He said he put the man "in quarantine;" if he wanted to continue to be the youth group leader, he had to meet with the pastor and the other elders to study what it meant to be an elder in the church. So, this couple has twice tried to stir up trouble against this pastor, but their attempts have been thwarted.

Now, there are times when accusations against pastors are backed by multiple witnesses. And if that is the case, the pastor can either confess his sin and repent, or they may "persist in sin," as Paul says. Paul tells Timothy, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." Unrepentant elders should be rebuked in public, in front of the congregation. This will cause the other elders—"the rest"—to stand in fear, lest they fall into sin as well. Publicly addressing sin serves as an example. It says, "This kind of behavior won't be tolerated here." Paul is clearly talking about those who continue in sin, probably some kind of egregious sin. He doesn't mean that those who sin once are kicked out of a church.

Since disciplining a church leader is difficult, and since we're so prone to have our emotions and biases get in the way, Paul tells Timothy not to be prejudiced and not to be biased. In verse 21, he writes, "In 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." Timothy shouldn't be prejudiced against an elder. He shouldn't show partiality towards an elder or an accuser. Instead, he should act as though he were standing in the presence of God, Christ, and angels, because in reality we all stand in their presence, though we can't see them. We all should act as though God is witnessing everything we do, because he is.

While on the topic of rebuking and possibly dismissing sinning elders, Paul tells Timothy not to put someone into that position of leadership too quickly. In verse 22, he says, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.” Paul may be thinking of installing new elders. Or he may be thinking of reinstalling an elder who had sinned. Either way, Timothy shouldn’t act too quickly. If he puts a man who is unfit for the job into a leadership role, it could harm the church.

Paul also tells Timothy not to participate in the sins of others and to keep himself pure. Earlier in this letter, Paul told Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16). There is always the possibility that any of us could fall into sin. So, be careful.

But it’s possible that Timothy might take that command to be pure in the wrong way. In Ephesus, where Timothy was located, there were false teachers who taught that people shouldn’t eat certain foods and that they shouldn’t marry (1 Tim. 4:1–5). They might have taught that people shouldn’t drink any alcohol whatsoever. Timothy might have been observing that supposed rule. But in verse 23, as a bit of an aside, Paul says, “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.” There’s nothing wrong with drinking some wine—at least if you’re not addicted to it. If you’re an alcoholic, stay away from it! The Bible doesn’t forbid all drinking; it warns against drunkenness, but it also says that wine is a gift (Ps. 104:14–15). In Timothy’s case, Paul says he should drink wine for his stomach problems and for his “frequent ailments.” We don’t know what these were. Perhaps Timothy had experienced a great amount of anxiety and stress, and a little wine might relax him. That’s a bit of speculation, but I think it makes sense given how difficult leading a church can be, and how Timothy was probably experiencing opposition in Ephesus, at least from the false teachers.

In the last two verses, verse 24 and verse 25, Paul returns to the idea of not making hasty decisions. Timothy shouldn’t quickly put someone into a position of leadership because a man’s qualities are not always easy to see. Some sins or character defects are obvious; some become apparent only later in time. Some good works or good characteristics are obvious; some become apparent only later in time. That’s what Paul means when he writes, “The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.” Sometimes, our initial view of people is wrong. We don’t know everything about a person. We should refrain

from making judgments until we've given things time. In this case, when someone is being considered as an elder candidate, the church needs to know who he really is. Some men can appear godly, but they have sinful characteristics that they are hiding. Some men may seem rather ordinary, but their godliness comes through in the end. The basic principle is that you can try to hide sin, but you can't hide sin forever. Your sin will find you out. And you can't hide your good works. In the end, those will be revealed. That is certainly true when we are all judged by God on the last day. Everything done in darkness, whether bad or good, will be brought into the light.

Now that we've walked through this passage, let's think about how it applies to our lives.

There are some obvious applications to life in the church. The church should pay pastors, those who labor in preaching and teaching. I am grateful that the church takes care of my family. If you are here and you're not giving generously to the church, please consider doing that. The finances of the church don't all come to me. Twenty percent of what goes in the offering plate goes to missionaries. We also need money to maintain and upgrade this facility, to have materials to use, to pay for utilities and insurance, and so on.

We should also be careful about making accusations against pastors. Pastors are flawed, sinful people like anyone else. And some egregious sins must be addressed. But some people will attack pastors if they feel threatened, usually because the pastor has made some decisions that they don't like. And all it takes is one accusation to end a man's pastoring career. As another pastor friend of mine told me, some people will chase off a pastor and not think twice about what that does to the man's life, to his family. As long as they can have control of the church, as long as the church can be "theirs" or go the way they like it, false accusers don't care. So, there must be real charges against a pastor and they must be backed by multiple witnesses.

Another application to the life of the church is that we shouldn't be too quick to judge a candidate for leadership. If we don't really know a person's true character, we shouldn't rush to make them a pastor, or a deacon, or a teacher, or any other position of authority. We should get to know a person. Again, our first impressions can be wrong—so can our second and third impressions. We shouldn't rush to judgment.

Now, all of that may not seem very relevant to your life right now. To be honest, you might not care at this moment about what happens to pastors. I understand. But this passage still applies to you. Just as we can learn basic principles from the Old Testament and apply them to

our lives, we can do the same with this passage. And one basic principle we all can learn is that we shouldn't rush to judgments. We shouldn't be hasty in forming our opinions.

One of the great problems in our society today is that we rush to judgments. We are all very reactionary. This is most true when it comes to political issues. But it also seems to be true of any potentially controversial topic. We are all very quick to have an opinion, to believe that we're right about something, even if we don't really know what we're talking about. It's like we're rooting for a sports team. If you're a Red Sox fan—and you should be—then you don't need to know who plays for the Sox or who plays for the Yankees. You know the Sox should win and the Yankees should lose. You don't care if the Sox players are using steroids and corked bats. All you care about is that they win. You know the Yankees are a detestable lot and they deserve to lose.

Of course, I'm being a bit sarcastic here. But that's how people react to heated political and religious issues. And it's a problem. We shouldn't rush to make judgments about complex issues. Perhaps we should slow down and think.

There's a great book I read recently called *How to Think*, written by Alan Jacobs. I think the subtitle of the book tells us what it's really about: *A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*.² At the beginning of the book, he says that most of us don't want to think. Instead, we just emote. He quotes T. S. Eliot: “when we do not know, or when we do not know enough, we tend always to substitute emotions for thoughts.”³ We tend to view anyone different from us as a “repugnant cultural other.” Before they open their mouth or write a word, we just know they're wrong.

Jacobs says we should be more virtuous than this. We should actually listen to people and try to understand them. We should slow down and not react when we hear something we think may be wrong. We shouldn't mischaracterize other people in order to win an argument. We should value learning over debating. In other words, we should slow down and think, and we should treat other people with respect, even if they may be wrong.

Christians should be leaders in doing this. It's embarrassing that more Christians don't know how to think deeply about a complex world. It's embarrassing that Christians don't act virtuously. And I think some Christians don't apply their theology to their own lives. Christianity teaches us that we're all sinners. We have all turned away from a holy God who created us to

² Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds* (New York: Currency, 2017).

³ T. S. Eliot, “The Perfect Critic,” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920), quoted in Jacobs, *How to Think*, 22.

know him, love him, and worship him. Because of that turning away from God, the power of sin is at work in us. Even Christians struggle with the lingering effects of sin. And sin can affect the way we think. We can be wrong in our judgments. So, we should slow down and consider whether we actually know what we're talking about. We might very well be wrong. Christians should be the most humble people of all, willing to consider their own faults instead of pointing fingers at others.

Earlier, I said that any benefit we receive comes at a cost. That's the way the world works. Every gain we have comes at a cost. The thing we can never forget is this: Our ultimate gain—being reconciled to God, forgiven of sin, and granted eternal life—came at an ultimate cost. Our sin is so bad—*we're* so bad!—that it took nothing less than the Son of God becoming a human being and dying for us to fix the problem of sin. The gospel—the core message of Christianity—teaches us that all humans are sinful. Our desires are messed up. We want the wrong things. We make wrong judgments. We go astray. The only way we can be restored is for Jesus to come, to be the perfect man, and to die in our place. That way, his perfect righteousness is credited to our account and the debt of our sins is wiped away. It's as though we owed trillions of dollars to God, and Jesus paid off that debt and left an extra trillion in our account. But we only receive that benefit if we trust him. This should humble us.

I would urge us all not to be hasty in our judgments. Christians, we should know for our thoughtfulness, our patience, our carefully considering evidence. This should all be part of loving God with all our minds.

And if you think you know all about Jesus but still don't trust him, consider the possibility that you may very well be wrong. Consider that you may be rejecting Jesus because you want to retain authority over your life. Consider that you may reject Jesus because you don't want to change. It's not that there is insufficient evidence for Christianity. It's that you don't even want to consider that evidence in the first place. We all can be that way about various things in our lives. But that doesn't get us to the truth, and only the truth can set us free (John 8:32). Jesus himself is that truth (John 14:6). He came to rescue us from our wrong judgments. The only way to be saved from condemnation on that day when all our sins and good deeds are finally exposed is to run to Jesus and find refuge in him.