

Disciplining an Elder

Detailed Outline

Part 2 of 4

I. Disciplining an Elder, 1 Timothy 5:20-23

We are to protect our pastor-elders from false accusation. But what if, upon investigation, we have witnesses that the elder has sinned? Verse 20 provides the answer:

“As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all.” (1 Tim. 5:20 ESV)

A. Elders Who Sin

1. The context addresses an elder's sin. It is “sin” that is the problem, not merely a leadership blunder or minor shortcoming or misjudgments. We all have plenty of these.
 - a) In this case, witnesses are required to verify the truth of the charges (vv. 19, 20) and a public rebuke is demanded. This would not be required of minor offenses or misjudgments. This shows that it is a serious sin that must be dealt with publicly.
 - b) Minor offenses can be dealt with by the elder himself or by the other elders in cooperation with him. For example, an elder may have hurt someone's feelings badly by misspeaking or not being sensitive enough to the person's complaint. This would not require witnesses or public judgment.
2. The clause, “those who persist in sin,” translates a present active participle (*tous hamartanontas*).
 - a) The present tense stresses continuous action in Greek. The ESV and NASB emphasize strongly the persistent nature of the sinning.
 - b) There is disagreement among commentators, however, as how to translate this present tense participle.
3. Some commentators believe that only those elders who stubbornly persist in sin after private warnings are to be publicly rebuked and that repentant elders need not be rebuked publicly.
 - a) Of course, if the elder persists in sin, there is no question that there must be discipline, removal from office, and possibly excommunication. Such an elder is in rebellion, displeasing to God, disgraceful to the church, and completely unqualified. He is a rebel, and will not listen to the Lord of Lord's instruments – that is, the elder's brothers and sisters.
 - b) A church leader who persists in sin should be stopped and rebuked before all. It appears that, in the church in Ephesus, there were elders persisting in sin. They needed to be disciplined but they had not been. So the particular situation is presented as it is concurrent with the writing of the letter.

- c) In such a case, an elder would be removed as an elder because he no longer meets the qualifications; he is discredited, and if no action is taken by the other elders, the entire eldership will be discredited. Of course, if an elder refuses to repent, he would be disfellowshipped from the congregation according to Matthew 18.
 - d) But would this phrase imply that only elders who persist in sin are to be disciplined? Is Paul only concerned with a persist sin of leaders and not with the sin of a leader that has required witnesses and public rebuke?
 - 1) What happens if an elder commits adultery only once but then repents of his sin? Can he continue as an elder since he has not done this sin persistently? Should he still be publicly rebuked before all?
 - 2) Some people would say that is right – he has repented of that one act and should not be publicly exposed. He can even continue as an elder if he has repented.
 - 3) Whether or not the present participle addresses this issue or not, I don't think Paul is saying only those elders who persist after private warning are deserving of public rebuke.
 - 4) Consider 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and 3:10. This elder no longer qualifies! He is not a one-woman man, and he is not above reproach in his marriage. And whenever adultery happens, there is also lying, hypocrisy, abuse of other people, and dishonor brought upon the Lord's name. Such an elder must be removed because he is no longer above reproach. He is a horrible example to the other men in the church.
 - e) There is a common error we hear almost repeatedly that is somewhat similar to this view: we all sin, and there is reconciliation of sins. Therefore, we shouldn't be disciplining elders like this.
 - 1) Yes, there is forgiveness of sins! Yes, we love and restore those sinning member (2 Cor. 2). We are all sinners, and we should be filled with compassion and great love (Gal. 6:10).
 - 2) But this is a different issue! It is a question of qualifications as an officer in God's holy temple, among the people of God. So we must not confuse these issues. It is causing terrible problems in churches today.
4. Other commentators interpret the statement to be sin whether it is ongoing or repented of! HCSB and NIV translates our text, "publicly rebuke those who sin." They say the present tense is descriptive and that the continuous aspect is not stressed.
- a) This view sees a **contrast** between elders who are **innocent of false accusations** (v. 19) and elders who is **guilty of sin** that is verified by witnesses (v. 20). The elder to be publicly rebuked is the one who is found guilty of sin as proven by witnesses (v. 19). This must be something of a serious nature.
 - b) The elder's disposition toward his sin is not the issue here. Paul gives no consideration as to whether or not the elder is repentant.
5. Commentators are divided on this question and it is hard to be decisive. But here is what is clear: **An elder's sin cannot be covered up or hidden. Because he is a public figure and an example to the flock, he is treated more severely.**

6. In either case, what Paul says is general enough to apply to the hundreds of life situations that churches confront.
 - a) There is something different that happens in the discipline of an elder (James 3:1). Elders are judged more severely.
 - b) We have to remember that Matthew 18 is in the background to this passage.
 - c) However, this passage in 1 Timothy 5 adds special material concerning the discipline of a church leader. That is why the emphasis on a public rebuke is so necessary.
7. Another example: One elder embezzled money but was repentant, so the elders handled the issue privately.
 - a) The elders made a big mistake in doing this, because it will come out eventually. People will talk about this and will become very angry. It's their money that's been embezzled and no one's telling them about it! There have already been people who observed the problem and brought the accusations before the elders in the first place. It's impossible to hide it!
 - b) These elders should have followed this passage and publicly brought this matter before the church. They should tell the church the situation, what the elder did, that he is being removed from office, that he is very repentant and will repay the money. They should then tell the people to direct any questions they have to the elders.
 - 1) Only then can the elders protect their congregation against rumormongering and false reports!
 - 2) If the elders don't expose the sin, they will lose the trust and confidence of the congregation. The people will stop giving and perhaps even leave the church.
 - c) When an elder sins, even if he is repentant, he must be removed as an elder, and it must be explained to the congregation. There needs to be censure, reproof, and exposure. Situations like this must be handled wisely by the elders. This is the best thing for the church and for the elder who sinned!