

Protecting the Elders

Detailed Outline

Part 1 of 4

I. Protecting a Pastor-Elder from False Accusations, 1 Timothy 5:19

*"Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses."
(1 Tim. 5:19 ESV)*

One way to honor your elders is to protect them from malicious people and false accusations. Remember the context of this letter: false teachers had caused chaos in the church. There were lots of problems caused by these teachers – some of them were elders, it appears. So accusations are going to fly in this church, especially at the leaders.

A. The problem of false accusations

1. We must not be naive about the fact that there are plenty of hateful, unstable people who aim to ruin people in authority. Godly men like Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Paul, and even Jesus Christ all experienced the bitter sting of false accusation.

"And David said to Saul, 'Why do you listen to the words of men, who say, "Behold, David seeks to harm you?"'" (1 Sam. 24:9)

2. In verse 20 of our passage, Deut. 19:15 is quoted about witnesses. The whole context of Deuteronomy 19 is the sin of the malicious witness who bears false against a brother or sister (verse 16).

If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing . . . (Deut. 19:16)

3. If an elder stands between a husband and wife in conflict or disciplines a prominent church member, accusations will fly. Amos wrote:

*"They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth."
(Amos 5:10)*

4. Let me put it this way: The more diligently and conscientiously an elder becomes involved in others' problems and deals with their conflict, the greater the risk of facing angry, false accusations.
 - a) When people become angry at their leaders, they think they have the right to strike out at them and say whatever they want to say.
 - b) So Scripture provides protection for elders by stating, "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses."
 - c) This means, don't even listen to unsubstantiated charges, and don't automatically accept as true an accusation made against an elder.

B. The problem of people's love for hearing scandalous tales

1. As sinners, we love to hear scandalous stories and rumors.
 - a) Proverbs 18:8 says, *"The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels, and they go down into the inner parts of the body."*
 - b) If you don't believe this, look at all the gossip magazines and TV shows trafficking in scandalous stories. Our culture promotes this!
2. But Christians are to be people of truth, love, light, and integrity.
 - a) Therefore, we should hate scandalous tales and unsupported rumors.
 - b) We should silence them whenever we hear them because they are destructive and harmful to individual people and to the life of the community.
 - 1) Good people have been ruined by unfounded accusations, and we should not allow this to happen in the Christian community.
 - 2) Illustration of parachurch organization's prayer meeting and the announcement that Marilyn and I separated.
 - 3) If you hear rumors or tales, always check with the person whom they are about, even if you heard it from "reliable sources."

C. The legal principle of verification by witnesses

1. Fair, reasonable protection from accusation doesn't imply immunity from accusations.
2. Paul adds the condition, "except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." This means that an accusation brought by two or three people who have witnessed the sin, or by two or three people who have either witnessed the sin or have verified another's accusation, must be investigated and properly judged.
 - a) The legal principle on which this directive is based is Mosaic legislation found in Deuteronomy 19:15 and 17:6.

"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." (Deut. 19:15)
 - b) An accusation of sin is to be substantiated by responsible witnesses, not by a single accuser. This is true for all people, not just elders. The person is innocent until justly proven guilty.
 - c) You don't like to be falsely accused of deeds or words you didn't do. So treat others just the way you would want to be judged.
3. As unpleasant and time-consuming as a fair investigation into an accusation might be, it must be done. Sin must not be hidden, nor can an innocent person remain falsely accused. There is due process and elders deserve due process from accusations of sin. The Old Testament testifies to this need.
4. God is a righteous and just God (Ps. 7:11, 67:4) and his children are to be just judges. Let us be objective, just, and fair when we hear rumors or scandalous tales about others. And when we do have to investigate these, let us seek to be fair and just like our God.

Disciplining an Elder

Detailed Outline

Part 2 of 4

II. 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 presence 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 rumor-mongering 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!

Judging Courageously

Detailed Outline

Part 3 of 4

III. Disciplining an Elder, 1 Timothy 5:20–23

B. Public rebuke

1. Paul's instructions go on to add that an elder who has been proven to be guilty of sin by witnesses is to be rebuked before the church.
2. The imperative verb "rebuke" includes the ideas of public exposure, correction, reproof, censure, or reprimand.
3. Elders must be wise in how they implement this rebuke depending on each particular case.
 - a) In the previous example of the elder who embezzled from the church, the elders would call a public meeting and there expose the sin.
 - b) They would correct the situation and explain to the congregation that the brother had repented and that he will pay the money back. Then they would call the people to come to them (the elders) if they had any questions or concerns.
4. Godly wisdom, counsel, and prayer will guide the local church and its spiritual leaders in implementing this instruction in individual cases.
 - a) Each case will be different in how it needs to be handled. The context is general enough and flexible enough to let the particular situation determine all that has to take place.
 - b) The main issue is the trust of the people. Do the people trust the elders, or do they feel the elders are trying to hide something?

C. In the presence of all

1. If the elder is proven guilty, Paul states clearly: "*rebuke them in the presence of all.*" This means public exposure before the entire congregation, not just the council of elders.
2. An elder's sin must be publicly exposed, not hidden or swept under the carpet.
 - a) A spiritual leader's sin must be treated with great concern because it has grave ramifications; it can lead more people astray and can cause the unbelieving world to mock God, the church, and the gospel.
 - b) If the world sees that local churches take sin seriously, especially in the discipline of sinful leaders, then it will believe that Christians mean what they preach.
 - c) The church is a holy temple and its leaders are to be examples of holiness.
 - d) Furthermore, only when the discipline of an erring church leader is made public is there any chance of controlling one of the most divisive forces in a church: rumor-mongering, gossip, and misinformation.

3. Public rebuke of an elder who sins fulfills another important purpose: *“that the rest may stand in fear.”*
 - a) Other people are to learn important lessons from the public exposure. Not only is the public discipline for the correction of the sinning elder, it is also for deterring others from sin.
 - b) “The rest” seems to refer to the other elders, but the entire congregation would also experience some measure of fear.
 - c) The fear the elders would experience includes not only the fear of sinning, but also of the shame of public exposure.
 - 1) Example of an elder our church had disfellowshipped over sexual issues—the church “wasn’t ready” to act on discipline. It was an excuse not to deal with the issue.
 - 2) In our Deuteronomy 19 passage, the malicious witness against an innocent person is to be severely punished:
“And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you.” (Deut. 19:20)
 - 3) In Acts 5, when Ananias and Sapphira lied to the apostles and were struck dead by God, the Bible says,
“Great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard these things.” (Acts 5:11)
 - 4) When we as elders execute discipline properly, great fear comes upon the church and the world, as it sees the church openly and transparently dealing with the sin of our elders.
 - 5) God uses such fear as a powerful deterrent to keep people, especially church leaders, from sinning. This is a righteous and good fear!

IV. A Call to Courageous Obedience and Justice

To see how seriously God takes this matter of disciplining a sinning elder, look carefully now at verse 21. The Scripture says,

“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.” (1 Tim. 5:21)

No part of Christian ministry is more difficult than investigating, exposing, and disciplining sin, especially the sin of a church leader. One can easily think of a thousand clever excuses for evading the discipline of a church leader. This is particularly true if the leader is rich or a prominent member of a powerful or large family within the church, or a highly gifted leader and teacher.

At heart, we are cowards, afraid to take action, afraid to disturb the balance of church politics, afraid to face angry people or a church split or just the emotional turmoil of facing a person with sin. This is one of the most emotional things to do in the life of a church. We’re afraid people will leave or that the offerings will decrease if we follow through with discipline.

A. God, Christ, and the angels are watching (v. 21)

Knowing the human propensity to avoid such harsh realities, Paul dramatically charges Timothy (and the church) to comply with his instructions in verses 19 and 20. The absolute seriousness of Paul's words is seen when he says, *"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels,"* I am making the following charge.'

1. The mention of "God" himself, the Mediator "Christ Jesus," and the elect "angels" of God emphasizes all who see and will someday judge.
 - a) The heavenly court is watching Timothy and the elders. God is watching, and all this will be brought up someday at the Judgment Seat of Christ.
 - b) We should fear God's judgment and evaluation more than we fear losing money or people at the church. Our values are all mixed up.
2. Then Paul adds his own apostolic authority: *"I charge you to keep these rules."*
 - a) Paul is not just a missionary or a theologian. He is Christ's ambassador. He is Christ's sent one. To hear Paul is to hear Christ. To disobey Paul is to disobey Christ. His writings are Christ's writings, divinely inspired and breathed out by God. The point is, we must obey these rules.
 - b) Paul uses the word "charges." This is a strong word: "adjure" you, "warn you." Paul adds that Timothy is to execute "these rules," that is, these apostolic rules.

"The solemnity thus created suggests that this task was among the most important Timothy was to attend to." – Philip Towner

B. Judge without prejudging

1. Timothy is to be objective and to administer justice as God would and as the Old Testament demands.
2. "Without prejudging" means without "bias" or "discrimination," that is, without judging someone guilty or innocent before the facts are known.
 - a) "Without prejudging" seems to refer particularly to verse 19.
 - b) It is possible to be prejudiced toward those who accuse an elder of sin, or toward certain elders, so we are to guard ourselves against such prejudices.
 - c) This is particularly true if we don't like someone or we have something against a leader. We will be quick to show bias and to discriminate and not act as just judges.

C. Judge without partiality

1. The second term, "partiality," may refer primarily to verse 20.
2. Showing "partiality," "favoritism" or "preferential treatment" to prominent leaders is a common practice in the world.
 - a) But Paul says, when listening to an accuser or rebuking the guilty, all proceedings are to be done "without prejudging" and without "partiality."
 - b) God is a just judge, and those who are leaders of his people must be just judges also.
3. This is an important requirement because God, Christ, and the angels see and will someday judge the proceedings.

Assessing Prospective Elders

Detailed Outline

Part 4 of 4

V. A Call to Courageous Obedience and Justice

D. Judge sin and do not fear the consequences

1. Despite this forceful appeal to act, the public discipline of church leaders has been almost unheard of in most churches until recently. The practice of covering up church officials' sins and the trick of quietly moving the offending official to another church is common.
 - a) Sadly, the predominant reason churches are beginning to discipline sinful pastors is not because they fear and honor God, but because of the proliferation of multi-million dollar lawsuits against churches by people who have been hurt and abused by sinning pastors.
 - b) Illustration: The Roman Catholic church has suffered one of its worst blows of public credibility because of the multiple scandals of priests sexually molesting children. What has outraged Catholics is that these heinous sins were covered up, and the priests were moved on to other places and never disciplined.
2. Covering up sin and moving the offending party on to another church is injustice to those who have been sinned against. And it is downright, out-and-out disobedience to what God commands us to do in this passage.
3. The failure to publicly discipline church leaders demonstrates a grievous lack of love for God and his Word. It reveals that we do not fear and serve God, but we play church games.
 - a) No matter how difficult or unpleasant such discipline may be, we must "keep these rules" in obedience to God.
 - b) The fear of God's judgment and assessment of our stewardship is to be our constant motivation and encouragement in all such difficult matters.

VI. Assessing Prospective Elders (1 Tim. 5:22-25)

Investigating accusations of sin and publicly disciplining leaders are always emotionally traumatic experiences. So in verses 22-25, Paul counsels Timothy about how to best avoid further problems with church leaders. This is invaluable material for all of us.

A. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands (v. 22).

Paul begins with an important cautionary note:

*"Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure."
(1 Tim. 5:22)*

1. The laying on of hands is an ancient symbolic act that can be used for appointment to office or commissioning one to a specific task (Acts 6:6). It publicly transfers responsibility or authority to others. It also expresses blessing and approval.
2. Here it is applied to appointing elders. If there are elders who have been dismissed from office, there is the temptation to quickly appoint someone new to take their place.
 - a) Because of the crying need for church leaders, there is always pressure to make careless, hasty appointments, but they create more serious, long-lasting problems.
 - b) Time, testing, and careful examination are still the best principles to follow when appointing church leaders. This means that prevention is still the best cure.
 - c) In numerous cases of leadership failure (but certainly not all), the real problem is that unfit, unproven men were appointed too quickly to those positions.
 - d) Paul advises Timothy that one way to prevent unworthy men from becoming spiritual leaders is to avoid rash, hasty appointments.
3. Some scholars believe this principle applies to a disciplined elder who seeks restoration to a position of eldership after being either removed from office or publicly rebuked by the other elders before the congregation because of sin.
4. I contend that the passage address new prospective elders and not restored elders.

B. The laying on of hands creates a bond between two parties.

1. The one (or ones) who appoints, by the laying on of hands, “shares” (*koinoneo*, “take part” or “participate”) in the *sins or successes* of the one appointed.
 - a) If an unfit person is appointed to leadership without proper examination and then sins by creating division, teaching false doctrine, or acting immorally, those who appointed the leader “share responsibility” for those sins (2 John 11).
 - b) The appointers share in the guilt of the appointee, because the appointer did not properly assess the person’s sinful, unfit character.
2. The more we understand the solemn, personal responsibility of appointing people to positions of leadership in the church, the more we will exercise reservation, thoughtfulness, and prayerfulness in our appointments.
3. One good reason to encourage the practice of the laying on of hands is that it creates an observable, personal, and tangible sense of responsibility and fellowship between the parties involved.

C. Paul’s personal warning to Timothy

1. Fully aware of the seriousness of his charge to Timothy, Paul adds the positive word, “*Keep yourself pure.*”
 - a) The unwise appointment of an unqualified elder could stain Timothy’s reputation. It could cause him to “share responsibility” in that person’s sins and failure.

- b) So Paul reminds Timothy to keep himself pure. And this can be done by proactive examination of all candidates for office. That is by carefully and prayerfully examining all candidates to church office (1 Tim. 3:10; 5:24, 25).
- 2. Verse 23 is a short footnote, sparked by the word “pure” that requires clarification.
 - a) Knowing about the situation at Ephesus (1 Tim. 4:1–5) and Timothy’s personal habit of abstaining from drinking wine and frequent health problems, Paul encourages him to drink:

“No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.” (1 Tim. 5:23)

“A little wine” will not defile, although using much wine would. Hence, Timothy could take some wine and remain pure before those he leads.
 - b) This brief, personal digression expressing regard for Timothy’s personal health is a clear example of the true-to-life nature of this letter and is an affirmation of its Pauline authorship.

D. Help for assessing prospective elders

Paul’s warning against sharing in other’s sins could easily frighten those who must appoint people to responsible positions in the church.

To counter this fear, Paul picks up where he left off in verse 22 and cites two brief maxims that explain how to prevent an unfit man from being appointed to eldership or even restored:

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. (1 Tim. 5:24, 25)

“As far as avoiding mistakes is concerned, and thus possibly making the wrong man an elder, Timothy need not worry, for the difficulty as to judging is not great. This is said for Timothy’s comfort.” – Richard Lenski

“Timothy has been called on to diagnose character, and Paul supplies him with a clue for the task, and the verdicts he has to pass.” – E. K. Simpson

1. First category of people

“The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment.” (v. 24a)

- a) Some men’s sins are easily discerned, they are obvious, that no one would think of appointing them to office, thus no evaluation for appointment to leadership is necessary.
- b) Their “sins” precede them; that is, they show in advance of any formal examination that the man is utterly unfit for a position of spiritual leadership.
- c) The “judgment” Paul refers to is human assessment (Matt. 5:21; John 7:24), not God’s judgment. God is not the subject here because all sins are evident to him (1 Cor. 4:5).

2. Second category of people

But now Paul deals with what is more difficult problem to discern and maybe Paul's chief concern:

"But the sins of others appear later." (v. 24b)

- a) The sins of some men are not easily seen on the surface, so action must be suspended until the man's character and conduct are examined.
 - 1) Paul assures Timothy that the "sins" of these men will be exposed at the time of their examination. God is not the only one who can see sin—men can too, if they take the time to investigate. Like the first category of unfit men, these men, although their sins are more subtle, must be refused eldership because they are not above reproach.
 - 2) This is a reason why you should always avoid hasty appointments. And also to protect yourself from sharing in their sins or the need for public rebuke.
- b) But if an unfit is appointed to office after careful examination, those in charge cannot be accused of sin because they did all they humanly could to assess the candidate's character.

"In exceptional cases of deception and hypocrisy, which only [God] who is able to see the heart could detect, evidently no sin can be charged against the conscientious judge who has nevertheless been deceived ... In such rare cases Timothy will not be fellowshipping the sins of such men; he will still be pure." – Stellhorn

Only God's final judgment will be perfect and not limited by human fallibility.

3. Third category of people

The form of the second maxim is similar to the first:

"So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden." (v. 25a)

- a) The good works of some men are obvious before any examination is made. Their lives are full of loving deeds, concern for others, their faith is seen in their actions and their beliefs are acted out for the good of others. They have godly lives.
- b) These men are easily identified as men who are fit for church eldership.

4. Fourth category of people

Some men's good works are not obvious but become apparent upon examination:

"And even those [good deeds] that are not cannot remain hidden." (v. 25b)

- a) The good works of these men cannot be hidden, and it will become obvious that they are fit candidates for appointment to eldership.
- b) Paul is assuring Timothy that as long as he does not act hastily in appointing elders and carefully examines the candidates, he will find the right men.
- c) Armed with these words of encouragement, Timothy and the church leaders are prepared to accomplish the challenging task before them.