

**Your Highest Priority** - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **1 Timothy 5:17-6:2** (#538)

**Introduction:** We live in divided times, don't we? Trust in leaders of all kinds – political, cultural, educational, medical – has plummeted over the past couple of years. Divisions between people about what is best in life and what our nation needs most have resulted in many on every side becoming suspicious of those who disagree with them, tempting our entire culture into picking “sides.”

From the start, let's acknowledge that we Christians can easily fall into the same sort of suspicions about leaders and authority. Yet the Scriptures call us to respond differently. The Bible calls Christians to live by faith – a faith which it defines and gives examples of – rather than being blown about by every political or cultural or media-driven storm that comes along. What's more, the highest mission of every Christian, our driving goal and overarching value even above the very real concerns that we can and do have about politics, authority, and individual rights, is actually quite different: our goal is to glorify God by being and making disciples.

None of this is to say that we should be passive with the changes our lives have all gone through over the past two years. But it is to say that our job as Christians isn't to solve every issue of our world. Instead, we are to give deep thought and Spirit-motivated action toward asking and answering “what does it mean to be a disciple now? How should I trust and follow Jesus when I don't like where things are going?” Let's answer one portion of those very real concerns this morning, as we speak about leaders and about power out of **1 Timothy 5 starting in verse 17...**

**5:17-18** We worked through Paul's teaching about widows last week; he continues with two other situations that faced the Ephesian church, both of which we'll look

at today. The first involves leaders in the church, and the second relates to bondservants. What Paul gives here are instructions about how to honor leaders – which isn't easy when you may not like them or are skeptical of their legitimacy.

First things first, Paul writes that elders who serve well are to be considered worthy of double honor. If we turn to another letter of Paul, **1 Thessalonians 5**, we read something that sheds light on what this means: “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” So, let me ask you dear congregation, what's your attitude toward our overseers? Do you aim to submit to your leaders? Are you asking the Lord to help you trust us? Do you look for ways to honor them and take what they teach and how they lead to heart? I know that's not terribly American – we love our independence, and criticizing leaders is almost a nation pastime. But that isn't to be our attitude as Christians and that isn't to be the norm in the church. We hope to benefit you, but you'll have to want to be led.

So much is this the case, that Paul speaks of the “double honor” that elders are worthy of, particularly for those who are responsible for preaching and teaching. This idea of double-honor is explained further in **verse 18**, which likely seems odd to you and I. The first quote comes from **Deuteronomy 25:4** and is repeated by Paul in **1 Corinthians 9:9**. If you look up either of these passages, you'll find that the metaphor has to do with people, not just oxen, and that Paul applies this truth to supporting those who instruct the church. That's confirmed all the more with the “wages” Paul speaks of next, quoting Jesus from **Matthew 10 and Luke 10**, again, speaking to how workers of the Gospel should be supported by those who are benefiting from their teaching. Paul sees a very real role for God's people to not just receive, but also to provide. Brothers and sisters, the reality is that you and I

are already content to give our money toward things we want and like. Shouldn't growing in Christ be something we are all the more ready to give money toward?

“But,” you may ask, “what about leaders who sin in public and unrepentant ways? Surely we aren't simply called to keep enduring a pastor or overseer who rejects God's Word?” That's a great question, so let's turn to it next...

**5:19-20** This is the balance to giving “double honor” to an overseer – they are to be amply supported by the church, no overseer who gives their life to the church should be worried about poverty. Yet with this blessing comes accountability: no overseer should think that they can do whatever they want or that they are above answering for their sins. Paul addresses this other side of the coin in two ways...

First, when it comes to accusations, there must be two or three witnesses. This comes from **Deuteronomy 19:15**. Friends, we must not give in to the spirit of the age, where many folks – including almost every media organization – treats an accusation as if it were the same as proven guilt. I realize there are very real and troubling situations where genuine wrong might have been done without somebody who can directly testify to it, but those situations – tragic as they are – are much rarer than our culture would have you believe. We must not rush to judgment, opinions and speculation are not facts. This tells us, by the way, that Paul has in view unrepentant sin that has become public – it has been seen by witnesses, rather than the sin which we all are called to deal with and repent of on a regular basis. The reason for this command is that – as we've seen in our own country – anybody in a position of leadership can be accused by anyone of anything. If we don't require evidence, then anyone who has a problem with a leader could easily have them removed, their reputation forever destroyed, without any evidence at all. In

the church, this would mean that good and faithful men would be sidelined, the work of the Gospel would be distracted or derailed, and the evil one would gain a foothold against the church. We must never let that become our pattern!

Yet, second, this also means that no overseer is above God's truth. Unlike our world, where money tends to let people get away with all kinds of things, the church is to follow a different pattern. When there are witnesses, when sin is proven, rebuke is warranted. Such men are to be called to repent. Not only for the sake of their own soul and reputation, but also so that the other leaders in the church would be humbled and called to keep a close watch on themselves.

**5:21-23** To this point, Paul's words have had broad applications, haven't they? Now in these verses, Paul makes them personal. Timothy is to not only keep these commands himself, but also apply them to the church in Ephesus. Partiality is to play no part – it doesn't matter if the accused is his best friend or a big donor; if there are multiple witnesses and their testimony proves true, Timothy is to correct any who fall afoul of the faithfulness required of a leader in the church.

In similar fashion, Timothy is also to express wisdom when it comes to putting men into leadership positions. As was mentioned earlier, one of the key traits of somebody being qualified for leadership is a track record of faithfulness. He isn't to quickly put somebody into leadership just because there is a need. Faithfulness matters more than being pragmatic or filling holes in the roster.

In **verse 23**, we read what seems to be an odd side comment. Timothy apparently suffered from some sort of stomach ailment and – seemingly – was stoically trying to grin and bear it. Paul's word to him was to take some wine, which was thought

to be helpful for all kinds of medical problems at the time. Note the balance here: Timothy is free to take some wine for a stomach ailment, yet – as we read back in **chapter 3** – neither he nor any overseer or deacon is to be a drunkard or addicted to wine. The way of faithfulness is neither legalism nor license – and we must be wary of both. Let’s continue on to the last of Paul’s comments about overseers...

**5:24-25** When it comes to sin, sometimes everything is very public and obvious and other times it isn’t. The same can be said for good works. Paul’s point is that time is a wise tool that shouldn’t be quickly cast aside when it comes to evaluating somebody. And it should also be a comfort for us: in time – certainly at the final judgment – all shall be revealed even when all is not as it should be in this world and life. Note the very real applications that come from this simple truth. First, it means that the current notion of getting justice for everyone and everything quickly and *right now* is doomed to failure. Justice is ultimately God’s work, not ours. This isn’t to excuse genuine wrongs, but it should make us humble: even at our best, we still get it wrong, we still miss things. Even in cases of real sin and guilt, our ideas of justice sometimes do little to bring about a solution.

Second, this should change our expectations. Our fast-paced world demands speed and cares little for the mistakes that inevitably result. When it comes to people’s lives, we owe them the time to understand and get things right. This isn’t a call to be slow to call out sin, but it is a call to be patient, to give time for thought and prayer, and to make sure we truly understand a situation before jumping in.

Friends, when you are upset with and concerned about your leaders here in the church, at least part of the answer is to keep looking for how you can honor them, even if you don’t agree with every decision. If you were in a position of leadership,

not everyone would agree with all your decisions either. Let's be slow to cast stones. Let's look to the Lord with trust that someday – whether in our own lifetimes or in eternity, all will be revealed by our True and Just Judge.

Now, let's conclude with one final situation in the following verses...

**6:1-2** Those who have sold their labor (which is what a bondservant is, and how they differ from a slave) are to still look for ways to honor their master. Talk about countercultural! The point is for Christians to put their efforts not toward improving their own lot in life, nor necessarily toward changing the world through activism and voting, but instead that we are to personally be faithful examples of Christ, no matter what our own personal situation looks like. That's priority #1.

Which is the point I want to leave us with: maybe you feel like you have little power in this life, maybe your own situation doesn't seem fair or isn't what you want. Brother, sister, wherever you are at, I want to encourage you to refocus your sight: your mission isn't to live the American Dream, it's to honor Jesus. Your goal is to enjoy Christ, the perfect and blameless Ruler. The Savior who is infinitely patient: with you, with our imperfect church, our leaders, and with our world as He prepares to return. Our Lord who Himself became a Servant. We are to be like Jesus, to follow His teachings, to conform to His pattern. Your identity isn't what's on your passport or what you choose for your social media profile or defined by what you buy or how you choose to express yourself. It's not your politics or your views on culture, education, science, medicine, or the media. It's certainly not how you feel on any given day. No, if you are a Christian, your identity is in Christ. And Paul's call to Timothy, to the Ephesians, and to us all is to act like it together so that we can enjoy and tell of the salvation we have been given! Amen!