

[The title of today’s message is] “Proper Behavior”, which has its first application as it were to those men who have responded to the Spirit’s call to take on [the] responsibility [of being elders]. But as true in all things Christian that which is to be carried out by the ones who have the greatest visibility is to be aspired to by all. These standards are not unique to just the specific office of elder. They are equally applicable to all so hopefully we will key and listen and ask the Lord, “What of this should be true of me?” In particular I would hope that as we reflect upon these instructions to Timothy if you are a parent then what you should be wanting is that you are wanting to have instruction from the Lord so you could raise children so they will become these kind of people. That is the desirable end. Join with me in 1 Timothy 5:17-25. Here the opening sentence is directed specifically to the office of elder.

*(5:17) “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (5:18) For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’ (5:19) Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. (5:20) As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. (5:21) 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. (5:22) Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. (5:23) (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) (5:24) The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. (5:25) So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.*

Before we take up Paul’s instruction in verse 17 there are a couple of issues remaining from last week’s message with properly honoring widows who are truly widows. Paul says in verses 11 and 12 of chapter five that younger widows that opt for marriage we are told have abandoned their former faith. I want to briefly address that troublesome statement. It can easily be mistaken. He does not mean that they have ceased to be Christians. Rather what they have done is they have gone back or not been faithful to the promise they had made to be married to Christ. This was the standard thing; they dedicated themselves and they would now have as their husband Christ and they would be totally devoted to the church and its ministries. That is where they would spend their time. But when they want to get married they break that vow and they then seek a partner. In Ecclesiastes it is explicitly stated and it would continue to be true all the way down to the first third of last century that a faithful person did not go back on their word. How many are familiar with the phrase, “A man’s bond was as good as his word”? That is not true anymore.

This is what it says in Ecclesiastes: *“When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?”* Let me just comment on that. We live in a place that is far removed from the standards given in Scripture. When you agree to take up a ministry in the life of the church you are obligated to remain faithful to that commitment. It would take some extraordinary and specific situations that would allow you to step away. We don’t do that. We have come to the place in our culture, and the church has become much like the surrounding culture where the imperative of the individual overwhelms any other consideration. [We should be saying to ourselves], “Whoa, what in the world is this about?” We

consider our personal agendas to come before our corporate commitments. That runs contrary to the teaching of God’s Word. We often wonder, “How is it that the church is to stand apart and be unique and distinct from the surrounding culture?” This is one of the ways. “Those people are as good as their word!” Then the question is, “Is that true?” We need to weigh this dimension of our spiritual lives and ask ourselves whether or not we are remaining faithful to the word or becoming conformed to the culture around us.

Paul’s concerns at this point really bring our focus to widows and to women, and that is what he wants in that portion of the letter to think about. Clearly it was expected in the early church that women could and should speak and act with commitment and personal honor. If they made a commitment they were to stand with it. However, he says, for a widow at sixty to be ready to be able to “set her hope on God and continue in supplications and prayers night and day” like that remarkable woman named Anna which you find in Luke 2:36-38. This is how Luke describes the woman who came up when Jesus was being circumcised: She was, “... *a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin* – probably about 17 when she married and having lived with him for seven and widowed at 24 – *and then as a widow until she was eighty-four* – 60 years! – *She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.* How would you like to be that woman? Do we encourage one another to be like that? Do we recognize that as a desirable model? That is when the questions begin to arise. In order for a woman to be like that it is clear that she needed to have already been disciplining her soul. You do not just suddenly become this way. Disciplining your soul, restraining your desires and focusing your heart and mind on the things of God and His Word. This is an aspiration, a long term desire that we take upon ourselves.

There is also trouble with verse 15. At verse 15 Paul makes the comment, “...*some have already strayed after Satan.*” Again, what is Paul saying here? He does not necessarily mean that such women have become Satan’s followers. That is a bit heavy. Rather what they have done is to unwittingly let themselves come under his influence and are following his ways. What would be some evidence: causing trouble, whispering accusations, attacking the character and goodness of the unsuspecting and so on. Let me ask you a question: have you ever know somebody who attacked someone’s character? Have you know a Christian who sank into gossip? Of course you have. It does not require that you abandon the faith to take up a practice of sin. Indeed, almost all of the epistles are written precisely to address the question of people, Christians who are following from their high calling in Christ and are beginning to engage in behavior that reflects not the Holy One who saves us but rather the one who desires our destruction. That is exactly what is going on. The wisdom in this is recognizing the works of Satan are far more often sly and subtle and petty and demoralizing. The works of Satan are far more often sly, subtle, petty and demoralizing than they are dramatic acts of violence or terror. If ISIS came bursting through the back door – heaven forbid – how many of us would be tempted to go join them? Well for heaven’s sake don’t be stupid! When evil walks boldly into your life you step back and you reposition yourself on the foundation of Christ. That is not the way the temptation comes. It comes nibbling, nibbling, nibbling, minor matters that you would pass off as hardly worth noticing. We are often willing to believe the nonsense of trivial sin is inconsequential or even amusing, while in fact such indulgence prevents us from listening to God. We become habituated to small sins. In line with this one commentator mentioned that in life there are only two options: you either follow Christ or you follow

into the webs of Satan, for he is the prince of the power of the air and he dominates all who are outside of Christ. You have to ask yourself a question:

The deeper issue here has to do with the spiritual focus and the spiritual quality of our lives. This in turn relates directly to the effective witness not only of individual Christians but equally of the churches of our community. Nehemiah 8:10 says that the joy of the Lord is the believer’s strength, but that joy is drained, losing its luster when our sensibilities are coarsened by an uncritical exposure to sin. I suspect that you and I on different occasions have walked into an assembly and you realized something was not right in this place. I would hazard that if you were to go behind the scenes you would find an undisciplined body of people who have ceased to pay attention to the distinction between the holiness of God and separating themselves from the ways of the world and you have a congregation that is engaged in a whole variety of minor sins, losing their sense of the vital, dynamic, holy presence of God. That is a great loss indeed.

So now we take up the study again at verse 17 dealing specifically at this point with elders. If people were angels we would need no laws in the restraint of evil. If Christians [were] saints in the discipline and substance of their souls and were wholly devoted to the glory of God and careful to always do that which is right we wouldn’t need most of the New Testament. But they are not. People are not angels and Christians need constant reminders and much encouragement to do what they know they should do let alone to spend the time in sorting things out and breaking new ground in meeting the ever evolving forms of cultural distraction and temptation which are calling us away from God. It is often noted that Christianity is an eminently practical faith. If you follow the Gospels, the gospel is given to the poor and the oppressed and the sick. Remember whom Jesus said He came to save? Did He come to save the healthy, wealthy and strong? No. He came to save the sick, the weak, the confused, the lost the bewildered. What happens so often is that after having met with Christ and begun to overcome the lack of discipline in our lives we find ourselves becoming the healthy, wealthy and wise. As we grow in our personal strength the temptation is to cease relying on God and increasingly rely upon our own advancing abilities. Did you ever notice? History repeats that sad tale over and over again.

It is instructive that the single imperative in the Great Commission which you find in Matthew 28 is not “go”; it is “make disciples”. Actual translation of the Greek is “as you go” or “in your going” or “along the way”, meaning “as you live, as you are about the business of being who you are, make disciples.” We have tended to shift the focus and concentrate on the “go” when the concentration is on “make disciples”. As people come to faith and are drawn into discipling relationships and then are gathered into faith fellowships for worship and guidance, a local church as a whole requires by guidance. It will be guided by ordinary people who come under the liberating influence of the word of God as this is illuminated in their understanding by the Holy Spirit. We have already seen the liberating truth of God’s word set people free from the controlling power of guilt and sin so they can grow in truth and grace. That is the dynamic, the liberating inner dynamic of the word of God. At the end of a year you should be able to look back and see the ways in which your life has been changed, increasingly setting you free from guilt and the power of sin. This is good news: Less of a gossip, less undisciplined in this and this and this in my life; deeper sense of affection and respect for so and so that I could hardly talk to before. [We are] looking for the evidences of the growth of grace in our life. That is the anticipation that all of us should have. Included in them is, “Hey, I have been able to draw close to so and have begun discipline them in the faith.” “As you go...” we are to make disciples. That is the nature of the

[commission]. The Spirit illuminates or gives understanding of God’s truth to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose so they are able to apply the truth effectively.

Let me ask you a question. Do you know the cleansing power of God’s grace? Do you know? Do you know the love of God through Christ; do you? Have you heard the Spirit of God talking to you, saying “You, I want you to be my child”? I can go on preaching week after week and continue to open up and expound the scriptures but it will roll like water off a duck’s back if you have not opened your heart to let the Spirit of God convict you and say, “Hey, stop where you are; listen to Who I am, and bow down before Me. For I am God and I desire to save you.” So the question is have you done that? I suggest that you think about it, pray about it as I continue to preach.

The primary means the Spirit uses to guide saved sinners who gather together to become a church is the preaching and teaching ministry of the elders. The centrality of that was overwhelmingly obvious in the early days of the church because the man preaching was probably the only one who had any portion of the Bible. Everybody else was hoping they could hear it. There weren’t a lot of scriptures available. It continued to be true even until the days of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Virtually nobody had Bibles except priests. Then after the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the fifteenth century, Bibles were everywhere, but you know it hasn’t changed. The preaching and teaching of God’s word by those who have been called by God continues to be the major way in which people are guided in the scriptures.

In Timothy 5:17 we are told that all elders are to be honored by virtue of their position, one necessarily earned through excellence of character and a proven track record of godly leadership in their homes. They are to rule well. This is confirmed by their reputation in the community at large. In addition and especially, elders were to be competent in handling the scriptures to help others, especially to refute the opponents of the faith. We have spoken of this before. If we turn to 2 Timothy 2:24-26, we read there of the kind of ability that the man who is called to be an elder needs to demonstrate. What Paul indicates in verse 17 that there are some amongst the elders who had a calling from the Lord and an equipping by the Spirit to preach and teach the Word. They have a specific set of responsibilities. Such men were to receive not only the respect of others but also financial support. In one of my most favorite verses in the Bible describes the kind of support: “*The ox deserves to eat while it is treading the grain.*” I would be the ox! The ministry should never allow those who talk a lot to get carried away with themselves. Fortunately Paul also says, “*The laborer deserves his wages.*” I particularly like the possibility if you notice in verse 17 that those who do this extremely well are worthy of double honor, which may mean I should get twice as much! However people like Ken Butler remind me that they do everything they do for nothing, and therefore twice of nothing is no more than that, so I think we will just stick with the way we do things now.

But what do you understand when you read this? Sometimes we are queasy about this. I would be too, but it is unavoidable. You should hold elders in high regard. That was one reason why I said last week, hold them not just up, but hold them accountable. “What is your prayer life like these days? What area of scripture are you studying for your own benefit? What ministries are you engaged in; what burdens are you carrying?” Ask the elders these questions. Why should you ask them these questions? So you will be prepared to respond when they ask you the same ones. Ministry is a dialogue. It is not

[speaking] down from on high. It is a face to face, one on one, person to person relationship that needs to be cultivated.

In his teaching on marriage Paul very wisely said that while getting married is not a sin, nevertheless those who marry will have trouble. I asked as a matter of fact how many [know] that getting married leads to trouble? Everybody knows if you get married you are going to get into trouble. It is a fact of life. Whenever I counsel young people or not so young people, when they are going to get married, I say to them, “Are you ready for trouble, because it is going to come?” When we gather together as a church, a bunch of saved sinners, there is going to be trouble. That is the parallel. When you meet with Christ by the grace of God and you are disciplined by someone and you are drawn into a fellowship, when you enter that fellowship, you will enter trouble. It always amazes me that people are surprised that that is the case, like they are surprised when they get married and they find out that Mr. Wonderful isn't! Look at 1 Timothy 5:19-22. He is continuing with his major focus on the elders.

*“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. 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. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.”*

You need to know all of those verses are primarily focused on elders. The thing you have to remember is that elders are saved sinners just like everybody else. This remains true even though they are expected to be exemplary in character, knowledge and dedication to service. You should expect them to be exemplary I am just an elder; you should expect it of me. At the same time those gathered together by the Lord as the local congregation are [also] saved sinners. Further, especially in a healthy, that is growing churches, there will be constantly saved sinners at many different levels of maturity. What is going to happen? Consequently what is a local church? A local church is a dangerous mix of imperfect leaders with imperfect members. That is what a church is. That is not the whole definition of a church but it is an irreducible aspect of the life of a church. So if you are going to have that combination what do you expect is going to come out of that combination? Trouble: trouble is going to come out of that. That is one reason why you have to work to avoid letting that trouble get out of hand. Consequently misunderstandings, confusions, cross-purposes and conflicts are bound to occur. From those things will come accusations especially against those who stand forward as elders. We should think about this.

On Sunday evenings a group of us are studying Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Paul writes to the Corinthians in chapter 4:9-13,

*“For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute...When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”*

I cite this to make it clear that Paul himself knew what it was to come under accusation. He knew, as it were, the rough and tumble of helping a group of people newly saved in the Lord and still at an early stage of breaking free from worldly perceptions and ways of getting things done. In order that they might thereby become an enduring community of faith capable of taking in new members and grounding them in the faith. So if you are going to be an elder you have got to be able to withstand

false accusations. You have to because they are going to come. You must be able to endure that. You must also be able to endure something else: the realization that you failed, that you blew it! We don't like necessarily to think of a formal process where two or three witnesses are brought forward and [are asked] “What do you have to say about this situation? And what do you have to say about the situation? Then you examine the credentials of the witnesses to make sure they are not just throwing out accusations without foundations. We understand that dynamic. But it is necessary. Why is it necessary? [It is] because saved sinners carry out things in sinful ways. Sometimes they make false accusations. To counter sinful and destructive tendencies of gossip and slander the leadership of any church needs to proceed with judicial care and restraint, insisting on multiple witnesses to corroborate complaints and examining those witnesses themselves. In Deuteronomy 19:15 it is laid out that no accusation should be accepted with less than two witnesses. Paul picks up the same perception and says it needs to happen in the life of the church as well. The leadership of the church needs to proceed with judicial care and restraint. Will this be slow? It will be slow. Can the process be abusive? Yes, it can be abused. But in our day we are so resistant to authority and so ready to believe the worst of those who stand above the rest that the damage unjustly done against them should not be underestimated.

Why a slow judicial process? [It is] fundamentally to protect the elders. Why should they be protected? [It is] because they are subject to false accusations. That is what happens. But why do I tell this to you [the congregation]? [I do so] because you are the body of Christ and it is absolutely necessary that the body understands and supports what the leadership has to do. If there is not mutual understanding the whole relationship becomes false and empty. That is counter-productive in the extreme.

Notice what Paul goes onto say in verse 20, *“As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that they rest may stand in fear.”* If the Old Testament can rightly be seen behind verse 19, two witnesses, then it is Jesus words from Matthew 18:15-20 that can be seen behind Paul's comment here. This is a process: accusations, investigations, exhortations, as well as failings and back-sliding. Obviously you attempt to do this quietly, involving only the immediate parties to the complaint and persevering. You operate with the assumption if not of innocence then at least of a repentant and humbled spirit on the part of the elder. One commentator indicated this is one way of honoring the elder. Finally, however, in the face of persistent sin and unrepentance the severity of a public act of discipline needs to be taken. Against whom [is it to be taken]? In this case [it is] against the elder. Paul's words here are presenting to us, to you and to me the question as to whether we are willing to go down that road. Are the bonds that join us together in Christ strong enough to sustain the fellowship of faith in such a process?

On different occasions – if you are a visitor today you have not had this exposure, but I have talked to this congregation before – we have lamented the fading away of discipline in the life of the church. What is essential for us to understand is that if the core of the church, if the heart of the church, which is the pastor, the elders and the [ministry] leaders of the church, if they are not willing both to execute and to be engaged in and to come under the disciplinary process then the whole is not going to work. It starts here at the center of the life of the church, of course it does. But that is not a matter solely left in the hands, as it were, of those individuals. The body has to be supportive of the process. It has to value the process. I know some people who when things began to fall apart in a local church simply pulled up stakes and left. That was sure helpful!

So what Paul says is that we are to be rebuked in the presence of all so that the rest will stand in fear. There is little question but that Paul had the elders in mind. He does not specify the nature of the failing or sin or its severity. Both the nature and the severity of the sin would determine what sort of disciplinary action would be needed. In some cases the elder would have to be removed from office, but only in some. Two questions confront us: how ready are we to support such a disciplinary process involving a leader in our church – this just as to do with us: are we prepared to support such disciplinary process, and are we willing to be subject to such discipline ourselves? That is the first question: here is the second question. How ready are we to forgive and accept the continued leadership by a leader who has been rebuked and corrected for failure? (By the way, we are not in this process right now and there is nobody subject to this. That is why I am preaching about it now. If there was a problem in the wings I would not be preaching this sermon. That would be disastrous. There is no problem that I know of any way!) What I want us to recognize is how profoundly this shapes and defines the way in which we relate to each other.

There is an additional concern that weighs upon us in this age. In Paul’s day there was virtually no recourse for the parties in a church dispute, for the civil laws and the courts paid little to any attention to the church as an institution or to Christians in their personal concerns. But today things are different. Today, and you and I not doubt have been exposed to this, in our day a disgruntled leader or church member can access the law courts to overturn any negative ruling and even sue the accuser and the church. We know this. So now we have another level of concern. What effect has this on our willingness to pursue church discipline and to submit to it? We talk about, we anticipate wisely what is going to happen when the government removes our tax exempt status. How much of a hit will the church take financially? There will be some; we know that. I think in this congregation it will not be overwhelming. I don’t think it will cause us to stumble. We are a remarkably faithful congregation. But what about this [matter of the courts]? Remember always that the enemy of our soul is desiring to prevent us from being obedient to the word of God. That is what he is doing, and it doesn’t make any difference to him how he does it as long as he can get us to stop obeying the word. So here is one to think about.

While we ponder these things consider that Paul’s words in verse 20 could easily be applied to any person in the congregation, especially if we think in terms of a person who tends to be, and this is another dimension [of the problem], a person who is a complainer, who seems to search for reasons for discontent and for questioning the credentials, good will, honesty and such of those who are in authority. This is part of life.

If we think through the need for truth to be lived if it is to actually bear the fruit of personal freedom from the controlling power of sin in a person’ life we will be helped to understand that as destructive as false teaching is in the life of a local congregation, and it is destructive, false doctrine itself may the fruit of an undisciplined life, coming up with justifications for its sub-scriptural ways. Both Paul and John give instructions regarding those who sow discontent and division in the church. This is what Paul wrote in Titus 3:10, *“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him...”* Same thing comes up in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13. Nothing says the divisions were over doctrinal issues, by the way. Experience teaches us that most often it is other issues, those of personality and preferences and who should to what, when and where that cause divisions in the life of the church. I will stop.

Do you know Jesus Christ? Do you know Him well enough that you can rest in His love through every degree of turmoil? Do you know Jesus Christ well enough so that you love the body He has created, the church? Jesus has come to gather for the Father a people for Himself. That is us. He wants and needs us to love one another enough so that we deal with reality and not pretense for our spiritual lives. The church in America has enjoyed decades of peace and respectability. It is now gone. Consequently the community around us is not going to continue to honor, support and encourage us. Instead it is going to watch to see when we break. Let's not break.

Please pray with me: Father in heaven, Paul wrote in a day when the church was despised if noticed at all. That day may be coming soon for us. Whether it is or not, Father we want to respond with obedience to what Your word says to us. If we are to be a body of sinners saved by grace who learn to walk together, work together and love one another, then we are going to have to pay attention to put the word to practice. Father in heaven You have promised that as we put our trust in You, Your grace will give us all we need We trust You for that, Father. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen