

1 TIMOTHY 5:17-20

(Reading: Luk.10:1-24; Deut.19:15-21; 1 Tim.3:1-7)

The Lord's Leaders – And You!

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

We are living in a time when the leaders within our society are very much under the media spotlight.

More than ever before public office comes with the threat that any moment someone could spell the beans on you.

Whether you are the Duchess of York or the Transport Minister for New South Wales, you could suddenly be severely compromised.

On the one hand this should be something we're thankful for.

Those in responsible positions must be held accountable.

And the more they're under the microscope they better they will behave.

Or at least, the more careful they will be!

On the other hand it means that the public develop a very cynical view towards their leaders.

As yet another high profile figure takes a tumble – whether in politics, sport, industry, or the media – the cynicism towards any leader becomes all the greater.

People are not thinking about how his record shows his good qualities or good deeds but when he will come to a nasty fall.

They say you have to earn the right to be respected but what if there is no sense of what respect is to begin with?

How about if it is a dog-eat-dog world out there?

And doesn't that actually seem to be the situation out there?

Those in the public eye get away with whatever they can.

And even if they're caught, as so many celebrities are, doesn't it seem they use their status as a handy get-out-of-jail free card?

The text for the sermon this afternoon lays before us a completely different approach.

As the apostle continues to deal with the different parts which make up how church properly works, he says we have to have the highest possible opinion of our church leaders.

Congregation, Paul declares this exactly because this is not the secular world we're a part of.

Rather, because we are God's new society in Jesus Christ we are those who are His.

Even though Paul has three chapters earlier on exhorted us to pray for our worldly rulers that is a different kind of respect.

While we obey the earthly leaders so that we **might** live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness this is now about obeying our spiritual leaders because we **are** living peaceful and quiet lives.

You see, our secular authorities we have to put up with.

In the church our leaders are those we are looking up to.

Our first aspect deals with this.

In the verses 17 and 18 we note that THIS IS HOLDING HIGH THE CHURCH'S LEADERS.

Look at how verse 17 begins.

“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well,” it says.

Having read the first seven verses of chapter 3 we can see why these men would be good leaders.

Long before they were ordained as elders in the church they have been faithfully following the Lord Jesus in their lives and their relationships.

You can see this clearly in their marriages, their families, their business dealings, and their social interactions.

They are transparently and honestly the Lord's!

Indeed, the first two words of the text make this patently so!

And now you're wondering.

How could anyone get this out of the two words, “the elders”?

Well, you think about it.

“Elder's” is here plural.

So there is a council of elders together who are ruling the church.

They are a team.

And how hard is it anywhere these days to have such co-operation amongst those in authority?

If anything, the most important people are so full of themselves they don't have room for anyone else.

It's the Prime Minister who gets to choose his cabinet.

While he may have to take into account the various factions of his party, he gets quite a bit of say.

It's the C.E.O. who's running a company.

While the Board of Directors might be paid attractive amounts of money, the C.E.O. is certainly getting more.

And that's exactly because it stands and falls with him.

But here there is no one man who stands out like this.

This is no hierarchical or independent church where it all comes down to the one Archbishop, Pope, or Senior Pastor.

These are those who get along – equally!

How's that to test a man's humility?

What a way to bring out true spirituality!

These are men who are excellent ministers of the gospel.

They are wise and active workers in the vineyard.

They are the most loving and firm shepherds of God's flock.

They are proactive in seeking out the good of the Lord in His local congregation.

Dear believer, such a man is worth his weight in gold.

In fact, the apostle says exactly this.

He writes that they are worthy of 'double honour'.

Some have taken this expression to mean that such an elder should receive double pay.

There are those who justify even high amounts of remuneration because of this!

But that's not what Paul is speaking of in this verse.

While a workman deserves his wages, as we'll see in a moment, here we need to particularly focus on the word honour.

Because if we can tie in that word to a financial package, fair enough!

But does it?

Looking elsewhere in this letter the same word is used in verse 3 above this text when Paul speaks of widows.

There it is translated as giving proper 'recognition' to those widows who are really in need.

With this understanding it tells us that the elders who oversee the church well must be honoured because of the place they have and the faithfulness with which they serve.

In 1st Thessalonians 5:13, Paul speaks about the position these men hold and how we should relate to it.

As we read there, "Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."

And in Philippians 2 verses 29 and 30 we read of the special diligence shown in carrying out that work.

As the apostle writes there about a fellow elder, "Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me."

Paul goes on with some further elucidation next.

He next mentions a certain type of elder as being worthy of our highest honour.

These are those "whose work is preaching and teaching."

Now, we know this was certainly what Timothy was called to do.

The previous chapter has shown that clearly.

In verse 13 Paul told Timothy to devote himself “to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.”

So amongst the body of elders there were those who especially were involved in preaching and teaching.

While all the elders were required to be able to teach and defend the faith, as we read in verse 2 of chapter 3 and we find in Titus 1:9, there are yet those who are particularly gifted for this.

The word ‘work’ here tells us it’s a specific task.

These elders are particularly set aside for doing this.

While today we think naturally of ministers as being so gifted, it’s clear there may be more than one of these in the early New Testament churches.

So while a congregation may have one such man, there could be more.

This particular gifting is so important to the Church of Christ that these elders are to be paid for doing it.

And it’s a remuneration which is to the degree that their primary focus can be on preaching and teaching.

Paul uses a quote from the law in verse 18 to show this.

From Deuteronomy 25:4 he speaks about an ox which isn’t muzzled while it is treading out the grain.

In other words, while that ox is doing its job of processing the grain it’s allowed to eat some so that it has the strength and energy to keep on doing its work.

The same goes for the preachers of the gospel.

In order for them to properly prepare and carry out the preaching and teaching they need to be able to spend the time on it.

You won’t get feed on a diet which consists of a message quickly cobbled together at the last minute.

And much as someone may have the gift of the gab it’s not what will build up that congregation.

Paul then even quotes some words from the Lord Jesus to support this.

He says that, “The worker deserves his wages.”

We might well wonder where he got those words from.

While we read it in Luke 10:7, there were no written gospels around at this time.

But while there was no completed canon of scripture as such, it does show that there’s certainly a body of sacred and authoritative writings which are commonly known.

And while Paul rarely quotes from the Lord's sayings, those times he does definitely prove he knew the gospel accounts.

The context in Luke 10 was in relation to those seventy-two Jesus had sent out.

They were told to receive the accommodation and food they received while on the way as part of their support for gospel ministry.

Here the same principle applies also within a local church setting.

To support them in their faithful service they were to receive a remuneration.

Now we don't exactly know how much it was, or how it related to the average income within the local congregation.

We don't have any copies of early church budgets!

But the rule here is that this particular elder gets paid for this work.

And it's not a payment by results either!

There was none of that commission-sales type stuff going on in the Bible!

Because here was a man who had already been tested and found to have the gifts.

You don't then have some Damocles' sword hanging over the guy!

This is no three year results-based contract.

Imagine trying to say that to the ox!

You see, there is always an accountability.

And that's what we come to with the second aspect to this passage this afternoon.

For now the verses 19 and 20 tell us how THIS IS KEEPING OUT THE CHURCH'S ENEMIES.

Dear believer, you are called to do your utmost to respect those the Lord has placed over you in the church.

That is both when you feel really blessed by their ministry and when you **don't** feel particularly blessed by their ministry.

Because it's a lot easier to be critical than it is to be positive.

And even if you feel that you have every justification for your criticism of the elder or elders, there is a still a clearly defined path to deal with that concern.

You don't straight away go off bad-mouthing them to members of your family or your closest friends in the church.

You see, in a bible-believing church those elders have not become elders because they were good-looking or nice chaps to talk to.

They have been ordained into office because they have been living Christ-like lives.

They are serving where they are because they've been faithfully serving elsewhere.

This is also a warning for elders themselves.

Often the most destructive splits in a congregation or a denomination are caused by those in roles of leadership going against each other.

It becomes a power struggle.

Men are trying to lord it over each other.

I mean, how did most of them start?

A good question, because for many of those situations they can't really remember anymore.

But, I can tell you this, the vast majority of those ungodly divisions relate down to one or a few people assuming a power to themselves they ought not to have.

This was illustrated by what happened after a worship service in a Reformed Church.

Now the Reformed churches have the practice that when the worship service begins and when it ends that the minister leading the service is given a handshake.

This handshake symbolises that this minister is being entrusted by the Session of that church, through the duty elder's handshake, to lead God's people in worship according to His Word.

On this particular occasion, the duty elder was not happy with what the visiting minister had preached during the sermon.

So at the end of the service he refused to shake that minister's hand.

He believed that as the duty elder he represented the Session's views.

But the elders had not decided that together.

So the right thing would have been to go up to the minister, shake his hand, and then also politely let him know that in a few minutes there needed to be an immediate meeting of the elders with him.

What that elder did, though, was quite destructive.

As subsequent events proved in that congregation.

This is why Paul raises what the law said about this for the Old Testament covenant community.

Because that applies now equally as well within the local church.

There needed to be two or three witnesses who present the cases before a properly constituted court of the church.

That's what we read of in Deuteronomy 19 verse 15.

There could be no way only one person could have another convicted.

This is the same line as the Lord followed in Matthew 18.

There it is clear that everything must be verified by more than one person and through a rigorous legal process.

This is why we have the justice system that we do.

It's was very much based on these principles.

But what about if the charge is legitimate?

Let's say that the duty elder followed the right course of action and that minister did meet with the Session of that church.

And what if the elders did find there was a case to answer.

Then they would have to bring it to the wider assembly of the elders at Presbytery.

There the case would have been considered with both parties giving their sides.

And if the concern was upheld that minister would be reprimanded, the charges would have been sustained, and the punishment would be published.

This is what we read of in Titus chapter 3.

There is verse 10 and 11 the apostle says, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time.

"After that, have nothing to do with him.

"You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned."

While you might well find that the minister with the false teaching has conveniently joined a more accommodating denomination in the meantime, ranting and raving all the while about these extremist fundamentalist churches, yet the biblical stand has been made.

That man missed the mark when it came to preaching God's Word.

Whether through adding something on top of the gospel or by taking something away from the gospel, he had failed to preach the Word.

When that becomes publicly known, those who may have thought they could say and do the same are warned.

You might well have an exodus out of the denomination, as one American Lutheran denomination had when they made a stand against liberalism, but it means that for those that remain it is confirmation of God's blessing.

This is another reason why you should never pay a preacher by the results of his preaching.

Because preaching the gospel could well mean people leaving his church.

Elders who have been elders for many years, because they are elders for life, leave that church because they don't like such a harsh and unloving message.

Not that it is harsh and unloving, mind you!

It's actually because they aren't been told anymore that their good works give them credit with God.

Now they have to depend only on God's grace in Christ.

That means they have to have faith!

We have seen that the word 'publicly' could refer to Presbytery publishing its decision.

But it can also mean a local Session announcing such a decision to its own congregation.

There is not reason why that should not be done in a public worship service.

While some may say it should be only done in a closed meeting for members, it was not in a closed meeting for members only that he was ordained in the first place!

It was in a public worship service.

There is nothing to hide here!

Someone once came to a previous congregation where I was ministering.

They had come out of a previous church situation where the minister had bluntly plagiarised another minister's sermons and then refused to apologise and seek repentance for doing that.

This man had been an elder there.

When he tried to raise his concern he found that he was blocked at every turn.

And because it was an independent church he couldn't turn to any wider assembly either.

Well, the Sunday he and his family came and worshipped with us was the day we deposed an office bearer for adultery.

It was personally a deeply saddening time, because that man had served well in office.

But there was no choice.

He refused to change his way and desist from his sinful behaviour.

So we as a Session had to follow the steps of discipline.

Now, you would have thought that with this happening in a public worship service we wouldn't see that man or his family come back!

They had already had so much negativity!

It was quite the opposite, though.

He was so struck by how we followed the biblical model he and his family, and others, became very much a part of us!

Congregation, the elders cannot be involved in a popularity poll.

The church is not after votes.

The aim must always be to bring the sinner to repentance and warn others. That glorifies God.

That proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is using the Keys of the Kingdom!

Dear Christian, the apostle says in 2nd Corinthians 9 verse 6, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

When you support God's servant to preach and teach His word, from your heart, you will be blessed in your heart.

Then while you might leave church with an empty pocket you certainly won't leave empty-handed!

When you see the absolutely vital role of the eldership in our church, then you see the way the Lord has kept his Church over the ages.

It has been faithful elders who are the supporting ligaments in the Body of Christ, always pointing us to, and keeping us under, the direction of the Head, Christ Jesus.

Charles Spurgeon tells the story of a minister, who, while preaching to his congregation, was himself converted by the words he preached.

While that man had not been a believer before yet it was the framework of the church which meant that he had to preach the Word, and so himself be challenged by that Word.

And I'm sure he had some wise fellow elders in that church who encouraged and exhorted him to do that.

In the same way, while the eldership is doing what it is meant to do and respect them for who they are and what they do, we ourselves will hear God's Word.

God's blessing is there where His will is done.

May we be found doing exactly that!

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Lord God of Hosts, fill with righteousness and true holiness all those whom You have set as shepherds over Your sheep.

We plead with You that by their faith and piety they may overcome the evil one, and save Your flock from the danger of his attacks.

And may Your sheep listen to their voice, and follow them upon the narrow way.

In the name of the Great Shepherd, who gave Himself for His sheep, Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.