

Serving the Church

1 Timothy 5:1-6:2

Covenant Waterfall, 23 April 2023

Introduction

It's just another day in South Africa when you're minding your own business, driving on the freeway, abiding to the speed limit, when suddenly behind you right on your tail, out of the blue – host of luxury cars, speeding, flashing their blue lights, hooting, bullying you out of your lane, so that some government official may go about his business. Particularly grating – as these are the people our tax money pays to serve the South African public. Acting full of entitlement and arrogance, little regard for the people they are meant to be serving.

Similar thing in this morning's passage. Already seen that the church Timothy is pastoring had a problem with false teachers. False teaching had an impact on how people in the church were treating each other. Church was battling with groups of people lacking humility toward each other and not serving each other, as they ought to do. Paul picks out three groups of people in particular: widows, elders and slaves. We'll see as we go through this text that because we are in Christ, we are to serve each other sacrificially, as Christ serves the church.

- Widows
- Elders
- Slaves

Verses 1-2 – **“Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, ² older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.”**

Passage starts off with a general instruction on church relationships that guides the rest of the text. Particular instruction to Timothy as a young pastor of the church, but applicable to all of us. If you are young, like Timothy, and in a position of leadership, don't treat your

elders harshly, instead be respectful to them. Encourage them like you would your own father. Also, don't look down on those younger than you, treat them as brothers in the faith. Treat older women like mothers and younger women as sisters – especially keeping those relationships pure. Describing servant leadership – avoid abusing authority, becoming a tyrant, and instead serve your people with respect and in purity.

Having established this principle of servant leadership, let's see how it is applied to three groups of people in the church:

A. Widows, vv.3-16

The first group of people in the church that Paul focuses on is widows. The church has a special responsibility to care for its poor members – especially its widows. See this from Acts 6, where deacons were appointed to care for the physical needs of widows in order to free up the apostles and elders to focus on the ministry of the Word. Why this focus on providing for widows' needs? Most widows – especially in the ancient world – but also today, were condemned to a life of poverty and misery, as without their husbands, very hard to earn a living. It's for this reason that verse 3 tells us that the church should, **“Honour widows who are truly widows.”** Serve them and treat them well, providing for their physical needs.

Yet Paul also cautions Timothy to discern who are “truly widows” and who are not. Verse 4: **“But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.”** Truth to the saying, “Charity begins at home”. If there are widows who have extended family – children or grandchildren – it's not the church's responsibility to look after them, but their own family's responsibility. In fact, to care for your own household, especially by looking after your parents in old age – and not abandoning them – is an expression of godliness. Since they have looked after you – growing up, now that they're old, time for you to return the favour – pleasing in God's sight. It's what the fifth commandment calls us to – honour your father and mother, that it may do well with you in the land (Ex 20:12). Verse 8 says that to not look after your family, especially members of your own household is an expression of a denial of the faith – it's a profoundly un-Christian thing to do – someone who does this is **“worse than an unbeliever.”** Example of how good

belief / doctrine is expressed in good practice (and vice versa). We act out what we truly believe.

So who then is to be considered a true widow that the church ought to assist? Verse 5 – **“She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.”** Those who really are all alone, without any family to help them, who are believers – trusting in God through prayer. Verse 9 adds that they need to be at least 60 years old, not having been in a polygamous marriage before, having a good reputation – living a godly life of integrity, faithful in bringing up their children, being hospitable and have served the church faithfully.

The church is not bound to care for widows younger than 60, as they are encouraged to get remarried (vv.11-14). Nor is it bound to care for widows who are unbelievers, not members of the church – verse 6. Scope of the deacons’ responsibility – serve the poor and needy within the church.

B. Elders, vv.17-25

Next – turn to elders. Verse 17: **“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching.”**

See here that elders (Gk = presbuteros) who rule well – who do a good job at what they’re called to do – are worthy of double honour – especially those who preach and teach. This verse is evidence for the existence of two kinds of elders. One office, different orders. All elders are called to rule, pastor, discipline and pray for the church. Yet some, in addition to this, are called to focus on preaching and teaching – the ministry of the Word.

In the Presbyterian world we see this as justification for having two types of elders: ruling elders and teaching elders. Both have some authority, but different responsibilities.

Teaching elders = minister or pastor (I am ordained as a teaching elder). Typically had a seminary education. Ordained by presbytery, member of the presbytery. Focus – ministry of the Word and sacrament (preaching and teaching), along with leadership, pastoral work and prayer.

Ruling elders = ordained by the session, members of the church. Focus – ruling the church – discipline, pastoral work, perhaps some occasional teaching, but may not administer the sacraments.

Verse 18 continues: **“For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain”, and, “The labourer deserves his wages.”** Those elders who serve well, especially those who preach and teach are, as verse 17 said, “worthy of double honour.” Here in verse 18 we see what is meant by “double honour” – entitled to be paid decently. Paul quotes two texts from the Law of Moses, Deuteronomy 25:4 – don’t muzzle an ox, and Leviticus 19:13 – a labourer deserves his wages. Point of this? Pay your pastor decently – it’s a godly thing to do! Church shouldn’t let the pastor be stressed about money. Instead, pay him enough that he can focus on the job – preach and teach well - without distractions.

This is in contrast to two extremes we find in the church world today – either a poverty mind-set – keep the pastor poor. Or – prosperity gospel mind-set – pastor lives like a rock star. General rule of thumb – pay your pastor according the average of the community in which he lives.

Verse 19 continues: **“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”** Remember – context = false teachers stirring up confusion in the church. One of the ways they were doing this – falsely accusing elders. Here Paul quotes again from the Law of Moses, Deut. 19:15 – which stipulates that two or three witnesses are needed in order to bring a charge against someone. Same rule applies in the church – prevents false accusations and damaging of the reputation of an honourable elder, at same time allowing for elders who have really sinned, to be held accountable for their actions.

Verses 20-21 elaborate:

“As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. 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.”

Elders are not exempted from accountability for their actions, just because of their position in the church. If an elder is guilty of misconduct, if there’s evidence from two or more witnesses, he must be disciplined. Verse 20 is talking about those who “persist in sin” – in other words, those who make a practice of sin – ongoing, unrepentant. If they carry on in it,

in spite of being pastored through the issue privately, still no change – they are to be rebuked in front of the church.

Why? Aim to bring them to repentance. Church discipline is meant as a wakeup call for those who are blinded by their sin. See the gravity and seriousness of sin. Verse 20 – another reason for church discipline – that the rest of the church may stand in fear – realise too the seriousness of sin, not make light of it – motivation to godliness and obedience, live in a healthy fear before the Lord. Verse 21 – important to apply the same standards to all – impartial in how church discipline is conducted. Not fair to call out some for sin, but then wink others' sin away. Warning too in verse 22 – not take part in sins of others. Temptation in church discipline is that those in sin will encourage you to join them in their sin. Why? If you're tarnished too, can no longer accuse them. Therefore be on guard against temptation and evil, keep yourself pure!

Verse 22 – **“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands...”** Laying on of hands is a reference to ordination of elders – see this in other places like 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6. Point here – don't rush into ordaining elders. Ensure there is a period of testing for all elder candidates so that they can prove themselves in living a consistently godly life, above reproach and showing that their doctrine is indeed sound. Need elders of proven integrity in order to faithfully serve the church. Verse 24 adds that the sins of some are obvious, while others' sins take time to manifest. Again shows the importance of a testing period for elder candidates. Ultimately the truth always pops out – can't hide secrets forever and the Lord has a way of exposing hidden sin in his time.

Verse 23 - **(No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.)** Seems random here – but is relevant – false teachers – asceticism – denial of pleasures, even good pleasures from God – like alcohol. Seems like Timothy had been influenced by this teaching in some way, as Paul is assuming all he is drinking is water, and not wine. Paul instructs him in Christian liberty – it's ok to drink a bit of wine, even if it's just for medicinal reasons! Even the Bible says that some wine is good for you 😊

C. Slaves, 6:1-2

“Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honour, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. ² Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.”

Third group of people in the church – slaves / bondservants. Issue was that some slaves who were believers, members of the church, were acting inappropriately toward their masters, who were also believers. Thinking that because they were fellow believers, excuse for laziness, disrespect, over familiarity. Taking advantage of their masters because of their faith – not serving them as they should do. Paul rebukes these slaves – not at all appropriate! Instead, precisely because they are believers it means that they are to work and serve their masters even better. Us too – glorify God in our labour. Hard work, serving, pleasing earthly masters is a virtue and something that pleases the Lord.

Conclusion

If we’re honest with ourselves, we’re all guilty at some point of desiring to be served rather than to serve, entitlement attitude, of disrespecting people around us – manifestation of our pride, arrogance and self-righteousness. Before our holy God, our sins, all sin, deserves to be judged. On our own, all found to be wanting – face God’s just wrath for all eternity.

Yet God in his mercy has not left us to this fate. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, of whom Matthew 20:28 says, **“came not to be served but to serve...”** In what way did Jesus come to serve? Isaiah 53 describes Jesus as the “servant of the Lord” who has **“borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”** (v.4), who was **“wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.”** (v.5) **“and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** (v.6).

The Son of Man came to serve us by paying the debt that we owe for our sins. On the cross, Jesus took upon himself our griefs and sorrows, all our sins and transgressions – our pride, vanity, self-righteousness – every vile sin – and endured the punishment for them that was

meant for us. Instead of wrath and punishment, in Christ he grants us peace, healing, forgiveness of sins, and salvation.

Repent and trust in the true Servant of the Lord, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, who gave his life as a ransom for sinners like you. He laid his life down on the cross, he served us to the uttermost, so that us guilty sinners may walk free: forgiven, cleansed, reconciled to our Father and transformed by his Spirit who helps us serve each other sacrificially for his glory.

Amen.