**Honour and care for elders who rule well** 22/9/24 dkm md am

Read: Deuteronomy 19:14-21, 1Timothy 5:17-25

Text: 1Timothy 5:17-20

Psalms: 23old, 50:16-22, 1, 134a

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to Timothy giving him instructions and advice concerning leadership of the church at Ephesus. The church was facing troubles from false teachers and men promoting ascetism, as well as members succumbing to the lusts of the flesh. He was also facing challenges to his leadership. In addition to standing firm and preaching the truth as handed down to him, Timothy was to elect and appoint elders and deacons to assist him in the ministry. Such men were to be carefully examined before being appointed or ordained by the laying on of hands (5:22). Elders and deacons can be, and should be, a great benefit in the ministry of the church. Those who do perform their duties well should be honoured or respected by the church.

Paul has already given instructions about honouring widows who have been faithful in the family and in the church (5:4,10). Many a church has been blessed by the ministry of women even though they are not office-bearers. ‘Honour widows who are really widows’ (5:3). The apostle now turns to elders who rule well, saying that these men should also be honoured, even double-honoured. What does he mean by double honour? Let us see as we look at these verses about elders under three subheadings: ‘Double honour’, ‘Double witness’, and ‘Discipline publicly’.

**1.Double honour**

The term ‘elder’ is self-explanatory; although younger men, like Timothy himself, can be elected and appointed elders if they qualify. One qualification is that he be able to teach and must rule his own house well before he rules the house of God (3:2,4). The word ‘elder’ translates the Greek ‘*presbuteros*’, while ‘bishop’, in 3:1, translates ‘*episkopos*’, but there is no difference (Titus 1:5,7). We get the name ‘Presbyterian’ from this term ‘*presbuteros*’.

We have only two offices in the church, elder and deacon. We have a council or court of elders which is called a session. The minister is an elder; he is the moderator or chair of the session. Some churches use verse 17 to divide elders into either teaching or ruling, but such interpretation is not valid. All elders are called to rule and verse 17 refers to elders who ‘rule well’ being counted worthy of ‘double honour’. It does however, go on with an ‘especially’, referring to those who toil or ‘labour in the word and doctrine’. While all elders must be able to teach, it is appropriate and biblical that one be set aside, that one be ‘especially’ the man to labour in preaching and teaching the word of God.

So what is the apostle referring to by the word ‘double’? Should the elder be given special dress to wear or a special hat and have people bowing down to him or touching his feet? I remember a church in India where the minister or ‘bishop’ came in with a high and highly decorated hat. Our young son said, ‘Look, a wizard!’ Not very respectful but what did the man dressed in robes expect! Elders or ministers can be aloof and separate without wearing special dress, of course. Some walk out the back door and go home after the service, not wanting to mingle with the flock. But I think the flock need to know their shepherd and the shepherd needs to know his flock. The preacher standing at the door shaking hands is becoming a thing of the past, and that even before Covid. Of course, nowadays the preacher has only a small part to play in many worship services.

Paul urged the Thessalonian church to ‘recognise those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord …and hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work’ (1Thess 5:12). Do not be a family that goes home from church to have ‘roast preacher’ for lunch! Rather, be a family that respects the minister who toils in the ministry, and pray for your minister, as your minister prays for you.

The second part of the ‘double honour’ refers to paying this elder or minister a suitable salary. Respect and remuneration we might say, because ‘wages’ is the subject of the next verse. The apostle Paul always insisted on his right to be rewarded in material terms for his labour in the word, even if he did not take up this right (1Cor 9:1-9). In the same way preachers should be offered remuneration even if they choose not to take it.

Paul taught this ‘right’ from the Scriptures. He refers to the law of Moses in both this letter and his letter to the Corinthians (5:18, 1Cor 9:9). In those days, as in some less-developed countries today, oxen tied to a long pole walk around in a circle threshing the grain out of the crop on the threshing floor. It would be wrong, and it was against the law, for this ox to be muzzled to prevent it from eating some grain. The principle was clear to the apostle, and hopefully to us. If the ox was muzzled and starved, it would soon get weak and stop work! A minister needs to be able to feed and clothe his family- unless you want him to leave!

Paul also draws upon NT Scripture, as in words of Jesus, in saying, ‘The labourer is worthy of his wages’. These words are found in Luke 10:7 where Jesus is sending out the seventy to heal the sick and preach the kingdom of God. As Jews going to Jews or the people of God, these men sent by Jesus deserved to be given a bed and food; they were to stay in the house opened to them. That Paul quotes Jesus in this letter of AD 62-63 shows that the teaching of Jesus was circulating in the church even if the gospels were not yet completed.

The principle is that the worker be provided for to the level of the people among whom he ministers. On the mission field we were told to live to the standard of equivalent local workers and were given a stipend for this purpose; travel home and children’s education was assessed separately. Our ministers are given a stipend set by the Presbytery or Synod and given a furnished house or manse, or a rent allowance.

Jesus, and the apostle Paul, said the worker is worthy of his wages. I am sure they did not envisage one worker being paid a higher wage than another for the same work in the same city or society! Paul denounces those who ‘desire to be rich’ (6:9), knowing that elders and ministers can be tempted by such desires. Sadly, some churches adopt a corporate culture in saying that to get a good man they must pay a good salary.

**2.Double witness**

The minister of a church is often seen as the leader, which he is, along with the other elders. Because he is the man who baptises people, he is often the target of persecution; he is the man beaten up or put in prison by persecuting regimes. As the ‘man up the front’ preaching the gospel, he is a public figure and therefore scrutinised, and often criticised. Scrutiny and criticism is good as long as it is not malicious (Eph 4:31). Faithful preaching of the word will touch the heart of hearers, sometimes to counsel and comfort souls, and other times to convict souls. The word of God is like a sword, a double-edged sword, piercing to the heart (Heb 4:12). Sometimes convicted souls do not repent but react by blaming others or becoming critical of others. The preacher can be the target of such criticism.

Under the law of Moses two or more witnesses were required before a man could be charged with wrongdoing (Deut 19:15). An accusation from just one person was not admitted. Jesus affirmed this principle or law in his teaching about a sinning brother in Matthew 18: ‘By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established’ (Mat 18:16). We see this principle being enacted, or failing to be enacted, in the trial of Jesus; the Jewish leaders could not get two witnesses to agree (Mark 14:56, 59). The apostle Paul continued to apply this ‘law of two witnesses’ in the church (2Cor 13:1). It was a law for judging all accusations or disputes, and especially for accusations brought against a minister or elder.

We call the meeting of elders a session or court. The presbytery is a higher court. Accusations against a minister must be brought to the presbytery, which is obliged to investigate the matter only if it is brought by two or more independent witnesses (5:19). This biblical principle helps to prevent ‘individuals or groups acting out of prejudice, jealousy or animosity against a church leader who might have acted justly in the discharge of his responsibilities’.

**3.Discipline publicly**

Paul was not so naive as to think an elder or minister in the church could not be tempted and not fall into serious sin. He saw Hymenaeus, who may have been a leader, stray from the truth; he delivered this man over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme (1:20). All men, including elders, can be tempted by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1John 2:16). Paul urged Timothy to watch his conduct as well as doctrine (4:16). He made special mention of treating younger women ‘with all purity’ (5:2).

Sexual immorality must not be condoned or overlooked in the house of God. Paul told the church at Corinth to expel a sexually immoral member: ‘Deliver him to Satan for destruction of the flesh’ is what he actually said (1Cor 5:5). The church must adhere to the moral standards of the Bible, not just the rules set down by society. Elders and ministers must adhere to these moral standards also, and even more so because they are setting an example, and because they will be judged more strictly (Ja 3:1). The Westminster Larger Catechism Question 151, states that some sins are more heinous than others, and one reason why they are more heinous is when the offender is ‘of riper age, greater in experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guide to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others’. Too often leaders in the church think they are above the law, and too often they get away with serious sin. Too often they are quietly moved on to avoid trouble or scandal.

Sexual immorality is not the only serious sin. In the next chapter Paul speaks of the love of money, a temptation to which the disciple Judas succumbed (6:10). Church leaders can also succumb to this temptation. The minister who ‘deserves his wages’ should have nothing to do with church funds, but some do, and some think they deserve more than they are being given.

Ministers and elders can also be tempted by the ‘pride of life’ (1John 2:16). Paul, like Jesus, warns against shepherds who are actually wolves in the flock of God. They may start out as shepherds but find that being a bully and driving the flock is easier than getting them to follow. Paul told the Ephesian elders to ‘shepherd the flock of God’ (Acts 20:28). Leaders in the church are commanded not to ‘lord it over others’ (Mark 10:42,43) but too many do, and some have been discipled for this sin.

When the leader of a country becomes a dictator, he declares himself to be above the law. Dictators have no place in the church of God, but that does not stop some men from trying! The church must maintain a plurality and equality of active and responsible elders. When decisions are to be made, these elders come together in a presbytery, as in Acts 15:6. The elders must respect one another and respect the decisions of the court, and above all honour God in all they say and do. This ‘court of elders’ must ensure two or three witnesses bring an accusation, and they must judge without partiality, being alert to any conflict of interest (5:21).

A minister or elder found guilty of sinning must be rebuked ‘in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear’ (5:20); this may refer to the presbytery or, more likely, all the church (Mat 18:17). If the rebuke is not met with repentance, the man is to be removed from office and even from the fellowship of the church (Mat 18:17, 1Cor 5:11, 2Thess 3:14).

Everyone must know that the church is the church of God not the church of one man. Everyone must know that the church is holy and not a place where sin is tolerated. Everyone in the church must walk in the fear of God, and they will do so when the leaders of the church are men of humility not arrogance, men of integrity and obedience to the commands of Christ, and men who are ready to discipline any whose conduct and/or doctrine falls short of what is biblical and glorifying to God.