**Take charge and take care of yourself** 29/9/24 dkm pm h, md

Read: Deuteronomy 16, 1Timothy 5:17-25

Text: 1Timothy 5:21-25

Psalms: 1, 139:1-9, 19:8b-14, 117

We come to what is the best-known verse in this letter for some, namely Paul giving permission for Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach’s sake- some leave off the conditional phrase! (5:22). This verse, like every other verse, must be understood in context but the context of this verse at first sight seems unrelated. We will come to this verse after dealing with more important matters, namely the choosing of elders for the church, and their conduct.

The apostle Paul left Timothy in charge of the church at Ephesus; he was the apostle’s representative. But, as in every church, he was to appoint men as elders and deacons. The importance of choosing the right men cannot be overstated. The Jerusalem church set the standard and the procedure: seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These men were set before the apostles for the laying on of hands (Acts 6:3,6). Here in this letter to Timothy, Paul gives further qualifications of men to be elected as elders and deacons (3:1-13). He speaks of laying hands on such men in what seems to be an act of ordination (5:22, cf. 4:14). Some scholars see it as somehow referring to reinstating men after being disciplined.

‘I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels’ (5:21). The apostle Paul is giving Timothy a solemn charge or responsibility, which many commentators think refers to what has just been said about discipline with regard to elders and ministers. One criticises the NIV for starting a new paragraph at verse 21 rather than making this verse the conclusion of the previous teaching about elders. Paul is still talking about elders, but the charge refers to what follows, just as it does in 2Timothy 4:1. So when Paul refers to ‘these things’ in verse 21 he is not necessarily referring to what he has just said. Indeed, he highlights the need for impartiality and fairness, not only in discipline but in the appointing of elders in the first place.

Our first subheading is, ‘No prejudice or favouritism’ our second, ‘Careful choosing of leaders’, our third, ‘Dare to be different’ our fourth, ‘Hidden sin but not hidden good works’ and our fifth, ‘Attend to physical needs’. Before proceeding with these points, a comment about the elect angels in verse 21.

The apostle is giving Timothy instructions about a serious matter in the church. Many a church has been destroyed by the conduct of an elder. The church at Ephesus was struggling with false teachers who may well have been leaders, elected or otherwise. Timothy was young and somewhat vulnerable it appears, but he must stand firm in the gospel both in his preaching and his administration (2Tim 4:2). Not only was he the apostle’s man in Ephesus, he was God’s man. The church is the church of God. Timothy had been set apart by the laying on of the hands of the eldership to lead or shepherd the church (4:14, Acts 20:28).

Paul was acutely aware of his responsibility before God as an apostle, and charged Timothy to be aware of his responsibility before God, and also before the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels (5:21). The elect angels, as distinct from those who did ‘not keep their proper domain’ (Jude 6), are referred to in context of the second coming, and hence judgment day (Mat 24:31). The charge in 2Timothy 4:1 refers to Jesus judging the living and the dead at his appearing. Too many leaders, and indeed people in general, think avoiding the judgment of men is more important than avoiding the judgment of God. Payment of a bribe or a fee to a good lawyer might get you acquitted in a human court, but God’s court is not a human court. In God’s court all will be revealed, and the judgment will be fair and without favouritism.

**1.No prejudice or favouritism**

Racism, sexism, favouritism, nepotism- so the list went on as police officers complained about the low morale in the police force. We hear of the same issues in many workplaces and societies today, but not in the church we hope! We do not face sexism when we adhere to the biblical qualifications for elders, but other sins can sneak in. Nepotism, the favouring of relatives, is not uncommon in the church; or it might be favouring men from the same background, like a classmate. We hope racism does not rear its ugly head in the church, but some churches only have members of a particular race, and I do take issue with a mission which only takes on Jewish believers.

Moses told the people of Israel as they prepared to enter Canaan, to choose wise, understanding and knowledgeable men to be to be their leaders; there were twelve tribes in Israel. He told judges to judge righteously and not show partiality (Deut 1:17, 16:18,19). God hates partiality in his church (Ja 2:1-4). The rich and famous must not be favoured over the poor because God will defend the poor. Leaders in the church are not to ‘lord it over others’ and not to show partiality in making judgments.

We have a plurality of elders so no one man gets to judge, but still we see partiality. Some elders can be influenced by others, or can be eager not ‘rock the boat’ as we say. The charge given to Timothy, and elders and ministers today, is to avoid all prejudice and partiality, knowing that it is more important to please God than to please man. God has committed all judgment to the Son (John 5:22). ‘He will judge the world in righteousness’ (Acts 17:31), so let us be judging righteously and without partiality today.

**2.Carerful choosing of leaders**

Elders have an important role to play in the church, a role of great responsibility. But elders can err and can sin, as the apostle pointed out in verses 19 and 20. The church needs elders but must not be hasty in the laying on of hands (5:22). This is similar to the qualification about not being a novice (3:6), and about testing men (3:10). Most qualifications are about character and conduct rather than knowledge; knowledge of the Bible is assumed in the ‘ability to teach’ (3:2).

Character and conduct take time to assess. An obvious test is attendance at the means of grace. But we also want to know about the man’s conduct in the home- does he rule his family well? (3:4)- and even in the workplace. When visiting students back in their village to see how they were leading, I found they ‘rolled out the red carpet’ as we say and put on a great welcome. This was fine, but was it the real picture of their work? Sometimes I would visit unannounced. As a minister I like to visit homes to counsel and pray, and also get a sense of the man’s ruling of his home.

Douglas Milne writes, ‘Men may be voted into leadership simply because there is no one else available, or because they have status and influence’. We must be alert to such thinking in choosing elders and deacons. If the wrong person is chosen, the fellowship and the ministry will suffer. But while being cautious, we must not be unreasonable in testing and asking for more than Scripture demands.

**3.Dare to be different**

What does Paul mean in charging Timothy not to share in other people’s sins, but keep himself pure (5:22)? Assisting a man into a position of leadership when he does not qualify is to be complicit in sin. Timothy had just been warned about favouritism, which is a sin. A ‘you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours’ attitude may operate in corporate culture, but let it not be in the house of God. Men in leadership of some Christian institutions in India got away with gross misconduct because they were on the boards of each other’s institutions. ‘But what about other people on the boards?’ you might ask. Well, too often they were just making up the number and had little knowledge of the facts. But when the board was investigated every member was held responsible. Leaders in the church must inform themselves of the facts, of the truth concerning a man to be ordained. They must be willing to differ from the majority if it means ‘sharing in other people’s sins’. At the same time, they should respect the majority decision.

We must all keep in mind our responsibility before God even as we vote for an office-bearer. Elders who ‘rule over you ... watching out for your souls’ must do so with great responsibility as those who must give account to the Lord (Heb 13:17). Paul urges us as brethren who are spiritual to gently restore one who gets caught up in sin, but be careful not to get caught up in sin ourselves (Gal 6:1). He urges Timothy to keep himself pure even as he counsels and disciplines members of the church. He must resist the temptation to compromise or cover up serious misconduct or heresy on the church.

The mention of ‘keeping yourself pure’ triggers a diversion with regard to Timothy and his life, specifically his health. The matter of ‘using a little wine’ was important in the light of ascetism in the church (4:3,4); we will come back to this in our last point. For now, we move on to verses 23 and 24 which relate to other people’s sins.

**4.Hidden sin but not hidden good works**

Maybe we should have dealt with the matter drink now because this is a sin which can be covered up for a long time. ‘Some men’s sins are clearly evident’ but some are not (24). There are overt alcoholics and there are secret alcoholics. While Timothy was encouraged to take ‘a little wine’ for his health, being ‘given to much wine’ disqualified a man from beign an office-bearer in the church (3:3,8).

Other sins can also be hidden from public view, from members of the church and even from family. But all sin is known to the Lord and will come to light on the day of judgment. You can be a closet watcher of pornography, as well as a closet drinker. Jesus said, ‘the flesh is weak’ and we must seek help to avoid such lusts of the flesh. Jesus is ready to help us by his word and his Spirit. He urges us to take drastic action in this regard (Mat 5:29). We do not have to pluck out our eye, but we do have to burn books or smash the TV, PC, or other device on which we are watching pornography if we cannot control what we watch. We do have to smash the bottle or pour it down the drain if we cannot control what we drink. The apostle refers to love of money in the next chapter (6:10), and again we have to take drastic measures if we get tempted to gamble in whatever form.

So many secret sins to bring down even a leader in the church. So let us be alert to the temptations of Satan and ask the Lord to deliver us. Let us help one another through sharing and through prayer. We must be ready to forgive men who have been delivered from such temptations, but not consider them for leadership unless and until they have been delivered.

‘Likewise, the good works of some are clearly evident’ (5:25). In fact, good works are hard to hide because they involve other people- unlike the secret sins just referred to. Prospective elders should be known for good works. The qualifications of ‘hospitality’ and ‘gentleness’ could be seen as ‘good works’. An elder must be more than a man who likes to be noticed for his piety; Pharisees were condemned, not applauded by Jesus! Timothy was not to be deceived by men hiding their sin, or indeed by men parading their piety. Careful and prayerful observation of doctrine and conduct, while keeping a watch on one’s own doctrine and conduct, is what Paul urges.

**5.Attend to physical needs**

Lastly, we consider Paul’s advice to Timothy to ‘use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent illnesses’ (5:23)- not that there is much left to say! My mother kept a bottle of brandy in the cupboard for medicinal use; my father was a veteran and loved a beer but rarely had a drink at home. In India it was hard to buy alcohol, and no true Christian drank. Yet Timothy was permitted medicinal wine or alcohol.

Was Timothy somehow caught up in ascetism that Paul had to advise him in this way? When all foods were declared good because God created them, was wine not included? (4:3,4). Just because we don’t drink wine does not make us an ascetic, of course. That Paul refers to Timothy no longer drinking only water points to the water being polluted and making Timothy sick, which is not uncommon in many places today. In India I sometimes drank Coke because the water was polluted; wine is probably healthier than coke!

But wine to excess is dangerous to one’s health and behaviour. To lose self-control is sin. The inability to say ‘No’ to wine or alcohol is also a sin, and some people taking only ‘a little wine’ cannot say ‘No’! Our society chooses to be blind towards alcohol and its harmful effects, be it on unborn babies, or children; it is deliberately avoided in discussion around domestic violence. Thankfully, some years ago our eyes were opened to the deaths alcohol was causing on our roads, but other harm and deaths continue.

As believers, we must not compromise with regard to drinking. Paul’s advice to Timothy is not a licence for believers to party and get merry on wine, or to be a closet drinker. A ‘little wine’ is okay but being ‘given to much wine’ is sinful for any believer, and a disqualification for an office-bearer in the church.