

Keep Yourselves Pure

Deuteronomy 19:15-21, 1 Timothy 5:1-25 (ESV)

June 4, 2006

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.... 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.... 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.” Here we have a series of imperatives delivered from the apostle Paul to the pastor Timothy. At one level, these directives have to do with a difficult situation in the church at Ephesus, at some remove from us in both miles and years. But at another level, these instructions are based upon, reflect, and help to embody the very gospel of Jesus Christ. For that reason, they continue to be of interest and importance to us yet today. So think together with me about the gospel assumptions and implications of these very imperatives.

In that the elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, it is at least suggested that other Christians, maybe so-so elders or even ordinary church members, are recipients of a singular honor. We have already read that widows, for instance, are deserving of honor. And given that few of us are especially honorable in and of ourselves, I submit to you that it is necessarily the case that we have received such honor from another, from one greater than ourselves, from one who alone is truly honorable, from one who alone deserves our worship and praise, from one who alone took upon himself our dishonor precisely in order to cover us with his honor. The sheer fact that there is any honor at all in the Christian church points unfailingly to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, who came down from heaven to earth to live among us as one of us, who though he alone was without sin took our sin upon himself so that we might be forgiven, and who died as one of us in order that we might live forever with him. He suffered ignominy in order that we who are but worms might be accounted and so made children of God. What an honor! Thus, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor.” Thanks be to God for the whelming generosity of Christ!

There is more. “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” According to what we have just read from the Old Testament, that was standard procedure for all the people of God, not only the

elders. The fact that such a rule was needed in the first place and then had to be reiterated by Paul suggests both that some Christians, including elders, were misbehaving and also that some other Christians were so eager to point that out that they may have exaggerated their claims. As John Calvin pointed out centuries later, some people are too ready to give offense and some people are too ready to take offense.

Again, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Consider that behind the immediate problems of possible misbehavior and potential false accusation lie both the reality of justice and also the commitment of God to justice. That is a good and wonderful realization. We do not live in a universe of moral caprice. We do not live in a world of moral indifference. We live, instead, in a world where what we do matters. And that is good.

What is particularly interesting for our purposes today is that Paul continues this teaching about elders saying, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” Think with me about what this means. In that he identifies “those who persist in sin” for particular treatment, it is at least suggested that it is possible that there are some among us who do not persist in sin. He does not say that any are without sin. Only one has been without sin. We shall return to him in a moment. For now, consider the enormity of the reality that it might be possible for at least some of us who were born in sin and who lived in sin not to persist in sin, if only for a little while.

Do you see what this means? In that it is even possible at all that we not persist in sin surely means that we have been redeemed, that we have been saved, that our sin has not been counted against us, that we have been cleansed, that we have been reborn, that we have been made new and whole, and that we have been given a new life. Thanks be to God! As we said earlier, there has been one without sin, and only one. But his sinlessness was not only for himself. His sinlessness was for you and for me, in order that we might be redeemed, in order that we might be removed from the realm and power of sin, in order that we might not persist in sin, in order that we might be good and faithful servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” Again, even the ability for the rest to fear a godly rebuke, or to fear merely a pastoral rebuke, suggests a sensitivity heightened beyond the natural. The natural response is often to reject and ignore a rebuke. And anyone who does not know God would have no capacity to fear God at all. But for one to be able to stand in fear of a rebuke of sin indicates an awareness of the one who is greater than sin, an awareness of the one who gave himself to defeat sin, to pay the price of sin. For one to be able to stand in fear of a rebuke of sin means that God has been at work in the world, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,

not only to forgive sin but also to purge the world of sin. So the very rebuke itself points directly to the gospel undergirding it. For this gospel we are grateful.

Continuing along these lines of rebuking sin, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others.” The fact that ordinations can be performed inappropriately hastily means also that they can be performed with appropriate deliberateness. The fact that ordinations can be performed with appropriate deliberateness means that they can be performed appropriately. That ordinations can be performed appropriately, that ordinary human beings can become officers in the church of Jesus Christ, again means that one who is greater than we are has claimed us for his very own, has rescued us from ourselves, has lifted us to himself, and has joined us to himself. That we can be ordained at all is indicative of the far reaching mercy of God. Thanks be to God for that! At the same time, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.” That is to say, some proposed ordinations should never take place. Not everyone who wants to be ordained is to be ordained. But at least some other ordinations are good and divinely intended. And that in and of itself is evidence of the mercy of God. The church is a divine institution. And God will order it, which is the purpose of ordination, as he sees fit.

Why take such care about ordination? “Do not...take part in the sins of others.” Oh, we are painfully aware of the sins of others. We may even be sinfully aware of the sins of others. But the fact that we can be instructed not to take part in the sins of others means that a new day has begun in human history, that the extensive, invasive, corruptive, and corrosive power of sin has been severely curtailed, that the contagious and deadly force of sin has been held back, that a new possibility for Christian life has been created, and that real obedience has become a genuine option. That is no little matter. That is, instead, astounding. That is good news.

Finally, in a more positive restatement, “Keep yourself pure.” In what may be the summary of this chapter, Paul writes to Timothy, “Keep yourself pure.” And I submit to you that, by extension, this imperative reaches to us all: “Keep yourselves pure.” No one said it would be easy. But the fact that it can be commanded at all means that it is at least possible. And the fact that it is possible, the fact that miserable sinners like you and me might possibly keep ourselves pure, is a great and wonderful blessing, a benediction beyond comprehension. Something new and different has happened in the world. Our old rebellion has been undone. Lives have been turned around. The kingdom of God is emerging. And even people like you and me are being included. Thanks be to God!

So, hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ, even as it is inextricably intertwined with these pastoral imperatives: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and

Keep Yourselves Pure

teaching....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....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.”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org