

1 Timothy 5:17-20, Which pastors should we pay? Why?

Having addressed a financial issue being handled improperly regarding the widows in the church, Paul moves on to another financial issue. Apparently the leaders of the church, the elders, were not being compensated properly. Therefore, Paul goes on to tell Timothy who should get paid and why and it has nothing to do with studying and preaching. Then Paul gives instructions on how to handle accusations against elders.

5:17-18, the elders—the pastors—worthy of “double honor,” are those who “rule well” and ruling well doesn’t mean preaching. It may include preaching but it may not include preaching at all. If you’re a pastor who also preaches, it means that along with ruling well over God’s flock as one of His shepherds, you *also* do a good job of studying and preaching His Word. But if all you do is study and preach, even though you may be the best preacher in the world, you’re not worthy of double honor. Because the condition to receiving double honor is ruling well not preaching.

What does it mean to “rule well”? Let’s start with what it means to NOT rule well: the church at Ephesus had prime examples of elders who weren’t ruling well: they were twisting God’s Word and teaching things that were not part of His Word and all of it was causing serious problems in the church, 1:3-7, 19-20; 2:8-15; 4:1-4, 7. Consider the behavior of some modern preachers; do they deserve a double honor?¹

What does it mean to rule well? I used to think that being a pastor meant that I had to know the Bible well—Greek, Hebrew, Theology, etc.—so that I could prepare and preach edifying sermons. Then I got a rude awakening when I finally began to preach: people started coming to me for help with their serious problems: addiction, divorce, anxiety, panic attacks, deep depression, self-harm, homosexuality, etc., etc. I quickly discovered that I could not help them. I wondered two things, “For years, I’ve known these people and seen them every Sunday, why didn’t I know that they were struggling with this stuff?” and “After all that seminary training, why can’t I help them?” That’s when the Lord showed me that the job of a pastor is not professor, it’s shepherd. Preachers are not supposed to teach God’s children “about” God; they’re supposed to show them who He is on a personal level. They’re supposed to show them how to have a personal and close relationship with Him, how to walk with Him in their daily lives. It includes preaching, but that’s not the bulk of the job. We see this reality in 1 Timothy, both in the qualifications God gives for pastors and in what He tells Timothy to do as a pastor: regarding the qualifications, God tells the church to look at a potential pastor’s character, especially as a father and husband because God’s about to hand over His family to him, 3:1-7. Thus, the role of a pastor is that of a father. This is why Jesus and those who followed Him called their disciples children (John 13:33, 1 Corinthians 4:14-17; 1 John 2:1; 3 John 1:4). Their job is to show God’s children how to be a child of God, how to be like His Son, how to think, speak, and act like Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). This means that pastors who fail to shepherd God’s children in this way deserve \$0.00 compensation.

And this is what God tells Timothy to do as a pastor for His children in Ephesus: Timothy must know God’s Word well for it contains the instructions for godly living. Thus, studying and preaching will be important, 4:13, but instructions are useless unless they’re applied. Therefore, Timothy must take God’s Word and show them how to live it, 4:6, 11. As a good father, he must model it for them so that they can see the daily salvation that awaits them when they give themselves entirely to God’s instruction, i.e., when they walk with Him daily in close relationship, 4:12-16.

¹ The TV show Preachers of L.A. follows the lives of several pastors; ask yourself if these elders are ruling well: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X39_ogP-LOQ

1 Timothy 5:17-20, Which pastors should we pay? Why?

What does “double honor” mean? Whenever we have a question about God’s Word, we must look at the immediate and surrounding context. We know that “double honor” means financial support because of the justification that Paul gives in 5:18 for his statement in 5:17. Paul quotes a passage from the Old Testament Scriptures and one from the New Testament. Both of them indicate that God is talking about financial support: the first quote is from the Mosaic Law, which is comprised of 613 commandments, not just the Ten Commandments that everyone knows. It’s from Deuteronomy 25:4 and the lesson God wanted the children of Israel to understand is that an ox had every right to eat from its labor, which is why God did not want any farmer muzzling his ox. Was God just concerned about animals here? No, He was also giving us an object lesson, which God later applies to a pastor’s salary in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 9:9-11).

The second quote is from Luke 10:1-12, which are the Lord’s instructions to the seventy disciples before He sent them out to make disciples. Part of those instructions included the right of these disciples to partake of the material blessings of those they ministered to. Why did they have the right to benefit financially from them? Because “the laborer is worthy of his wages” (10:7). That is, those who work for you physically or minister to you spiritually, like pastors, have a right to benefit financially from those they serve (though Jesus never had in mind the financial abuses that some pastors are guilty of).

5:19-20, what if an elder is accused of sin? What is the church supposed to do? God gives instructions on how to deal with such incidents. In performing his duties, an elder, if he’s doing his job properly, if he’s ruling well, is going to come in contact with the sin of others. Part of Timothy’s job was to correct the sin he found in Ephesus, regardless of who committed it, 1:3; 5:1-2. In the process of correcting these folks, one or more of them may accuse Timothy (or another elder) of sin. The accusation may be true or false and this is what God wanted done about it: the church was to refuse an accusation if it was only accompanied by one witness. In order to proceed with an investigation, the accusation had to have “two or three witnesses.”² If you’re familiar with Scripture, you know that this phrase comes from the Old Testament Scriptures: whenever Israel had to adjudicate an accusation of sin, the threshold was two or three witnesses, one was not enough to proceed. And if the witness was found to be false, then that false witness had to suffer the fate of their victim had their false testimony been believed (Deuteronomy 19:15-19). Why did God want Israel to discipline the false witness so severely? So that “those who remain shall hear and fear,” i.e., to prevent anyone else from making false accusations in the future (Deuteronomy 19:20).

God wanted something similar to happen in the trial and conviction of a sinning elder. That is, if the accusation was true and properly investigated, adjudicated, and a guilty verdict was found, then they were to take that sinning and now repentant elder and bring him before the entire congregation for a public rebuke. Why the public rebuke? To deter any elder from behaving this way in the future, i.e., so “that the rest also may fear.”

² Leaders are appointed by God and He doesn’t like it when their position is treated lightly. This is why David refused to kill Saul, the king of Israel, even though Saul kept trying to kill him (1 Samuel 24:1-15). And it’s why God strongly rebuked Miriam and Aaron when they disrespected Moses position (Numbers 12:1-16—God struck Miriam with leprosy because of it).