

1 Timothy 5:19–21 – Elder/Overseer Guidelines

Accountability for Leaders

Anyone in a leadership position is susceptible to false accusations. Leadership involves making decisions. Decisions are not always popular. Once emotions get involved, motives can be questioned, accusations can often follow, feelings can be swayed. At the same time, leaders sometimes abuse their power, too: they become prideful, arrogant, and quickly can fall into sin. Leaders need some protections but not total immunity. Verses 19–21 provide a balanced framework both for protecting elders and also for holding them accountable:

- I. Dealing with Accusations Against Elders (v. 19)
- II. Dealing with Oversight of Elders (v. 20)
- III. Dealing with Impartiality Toward Elders (v. 21).

1 Timothy 5:19. Dealing with Accusations Against Elders. Verse 19: ***Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.*** This stipulation serves to protect elders from false accusations. Two points are important to note: (1) the OT context and (2) the actual word Paul used for “**charge**.” First, the OT context is rooted in Deuteronomy 19:15: ***A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.*** Deuteronomy 19:15 grounds this in firsthand witnesses, not rumors or hearsay. In fact, the next verse, Deuteronomy 19:16, has something to say about false accusers. It states malicious witnesses who falsely accuse a person of wrongdoing are to be brought before the priests and judges. In the end, whatever the false witnesses meant to do to the accused was to be done unto them instead. Paul doesn’t state that specifically, but he does say in verse 16 “***those who persist in sin, rebuke,***” which applies as much to false accusers as it does to elders caught up in sin.

Second, the Greek word Paul used for, “**charge**” (κατηγορίαν), is used only three times in the NT.¹ The only other time Paul used it, Titus 1:6, it carries the sense of an “accusation.” It is translated, “accusation,” in John 18:29 also, when Jesus

¹ 1 Timothy 5:19, Titus 1:6, and John 18:29.

used it. Mounce notes its verbal cognate “is a technical term for a formal court accusation.”² Paul spoke in verse 19 of formal accusations of any type of sin against an elder.

It reminds me of my first full-time pastorate. A couple of weeks into it, a man came to my office and closed the door. That made me uncomfortable from the start. He sat down, crossed his legs, and said, “You need to fire one of your fellow pastors.” I asked, “Why?” He made several accusations. I thought to myself, “Here we have was a single accuser, his accusations were second-hand (at times, third-hand) hearsay, and his attitude was threatening.” What’s more, it came with a veiled threat. He insinuated it would not go well for me if I did not act on his accusations. So I acted on his accusations, but not in the way he expected. I followed the biblical procedures. I went to the accused. I then personally investigated each accusation, interviewing with a Deacon present each person involved. None of the accusations were true. Paul wrote verse 19 precisely to prevent those types of frivolous accusations and the intimidation tactics that often go along with them.

1 Timothy 5:20. Dealing with Oversight of Elders. Verse 20: *As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.* Several interpretive choices must be made here: (1) Who are “*those who persist*?”; (2) What does “*rebuke*” mean?; (3) Who are the “*all*?”; and, (4) Who are “*the rest*?” Let me state my conclusions before answering each question on its own. Anyone who persists in sin—false accusers, elders, or anyone else—is to be confronted before the congregation in accordance with Matthew 18:15–20 in a sincere effort of restoration—not chastisement. That process will have an impact as congregation members witness this in fearful respect.

Who are “those who persist in sin?” Many limit this to sinning elders because of the immediate context. The larger, OT context, from which Paul cites makes clear false accusers were rebuked for persistently sinning as well. Therefore, “*those who persist in sin*” refers to any congregation member entangled in a besetting sin, but especially elders.

² Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 311–12.

What does “*rebuke*” mean? Some, even today, have public censures in which the sinning party is paraded through the congregation and harshly rebuked before his family and the congregation. That humiliating concept is founded upon church tradition, not Scripture. Mounce states, “The word means ‘to show someone his sin and to summon him to repentance . . . to point away from sin to repentance.’”³ That is different from public shaming. When Paul used the word in Titus 1:9, Mounce further notes, “[C]onfrontation is remedial, done with an eye to encouraging proper behavior.”⁴ This aligns perfectly with Jesus’s instructions on restoring wayward sinners in Matthew 18:15–20. The three-step process is a loving, one on one confrontation; if no restoration occurs, then a loving confrontation with two or three witnesses; if no restoration occurs, then the matter should be brought to the congregation to encourage repentance and restoration. In other words, the ultimate purpose is restoration, not humiliation or excommunication.

Public censure/shaming began to be more prevalent under Constantine’s reign in the 4th century when the church and state penalties overlapped. Heretics were publicly shamed with civil penalties. This became more formalized in the Roman Catholic Church councils. Eventually, it was codified into canon law at the Council of Nicaea as public penance. Canon 11, specifically, details graded penitential stages: (1) weepers (stand outside church doors asking for prayers); (2) hearers (present in church but not allowed the Eucharist); (3) kneelers (present in church, prayed for, but still no Eucharist); and, (4) standers (remained for entire service, but still no Eucharist). Penitential manuals were developed with a concept called *exomologesis*. For instance, Tertullian wrote in a treatise titled, “On Repentance:”

And thus *exomologesis* is a discipline for man’s prostration and humiliation, enjoining a demeanor calculated to move mercy. With regard also to the very dress and food, it commands (the penitent) to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to cover his body in mourning, to lay his spirit low in sorrows, to exchange for severe treatment the sins which he has committed; moreover, to know no food and drink but such as is plain,—not for the stomach’s sake, to wit, but the soul’s; for the most part, however, to feed prayers on

³ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 313—citing F. Büschel and TDNT.

⁴ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 313.

fastings, to groan, to weep and make outcries unto the Lord your God; to bow before the feet of the presbyters, and kneel to God's dear ones; to enjoin on all the brethren to be ambassadors to bear his deprecatory supplication (before God). All this *exomologesis* (does), that it may enhance repentance.⁵

From there, public censure/shaming carried over into the Puritan mindsets, which ultimately led to the scarlett letter, "A," marking an adulteress and later the burning of witches for both spiritual and civil crimes. The word Paul used for "**rebuke**" meant none of those things. He sought restoration, not humiliation, identification (of a sinner), or excommunication.

Who are the "all?" Some think the "**all**" are the other elders. The natural reading, in light of Jesus's commands in Matthew 18, makes the entire congregation the more likely meaning.

Who are the "rest?" Even Mounce suggests the "**rest**" refers to the other elders—partly because he interprets this verse as pertaining to sinning elders. The more inclusive reading—again—is that the rest of the congregation have a healthy respect when they witness sin in the camp being held accountable.

1 Timothy 5:21. Dealing with Impartiality. Verse 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.*** Paul prefaces this with a sobering charge, calling God and the righteous angels as witnesses. The key words are "**prejudging**" and "**partiality**." The word, "**prejudging**," only is used here in the NT, but it clearly carries a presumption of innocence—something lacking severely in a social media-driven society today. The word, "**partiality**," also is used only here. Obviously, it refers not to granting the benefit of the doubt, but rather to showing favoritism or preference. Timothy was to look at the evidence, and follow it wherever it led.

In the early years of my pastorate, everyone was new to me. I didn't know who to

⁵ Tertullian, "On Repentance," in chapter 9, "Concerning the Outward Manifestation by Which This Second Repentance is to be Accompanied," available online. See similar penitential manuals by Theodore of Canterbury, *Paenitentiale Theodora* (ca. 700 A.D.) and another compilation called, *Paenitentiale Umbrense* (ca. 750 A.D.).

trust. A lot of fur was flying. I remember telling someone, “I have only one friend. His name is, ‘Truth.’” That sums up Paul’s impetus here.

Timeless Principle

Address sin responsibly, no matter who it is.

Present Use

Sometimes, even elders fall into sin. God grants them a measure of protection from false accusations by requiring two or three witnesses. If either the elder’s sin or the false accuser’s sin is proven without question, then the sin should be brought to light when the congregation meets. The purpose should not be to shame or humiliate the erring sinner. Rather, the rebuke should be seasoned with grace and an eye toward restoration of fellowship, not excommunication or shaming. How does that look in practice?

Delicate care must be taken to share enough about the sinful behavior to know it was sinful. However, all the salacious details are unnecessary, and oftentimes, make matters worse and unrestorable. Again, the goal is restoration. Jesus’s Golden Rule certainly applies, “Do unto others as you would have done unto you” —were you to find yourself in a similar situation. We don’t make light of the sin, we don’t hide sin, we don’t smooth out the edges of sin . . . but don’t belabor sin, either. Let the entire congregation come together to point an elder caught up in sin away from that sin, to pray for him genuinely, and to seek healing for him in his heart-soul. Perhaps James 5:19–20 has the best advice, and with it I conclude:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.