

## BEING RESPONSIBLE

1 Timothy 5:1-8, 17-21

Sometimes we jokingly say, “This world would be a good place to live if it wasn’t for the people who are here.” In work environments, people sometimes conclude, “I could get my job done if these people would just quit coming to my office.” What we fail to realize is that life is about *interacting and dealing with others*. It is impractical to think we can be really independent and not need anyone else. The truth is that we are interdependent and these relationships are essential to a healthy society. If we try to be totally independent or totally dependent, then we have dysfunctional relationships and a breakdown in the social fabric.

If interactions and relationships with others are such critical considerations of daily living, then we should invest in learning how to relate to each other. We realize the importance of this on a national level. Our government makes alliances with certain other governments and we impose sanctions on some others. We treat some with “favored nation” status and we put others in a “not recognized” status. The same thing happens in the business world. Companies have interactions with each other and these vary from company to company. Criteria are established and protocols are set up that define the relationships. It is not surprising that the First Century Church leaders would need to define the criteria and protocols for relationships between members in the church. The precepts Paul passed on to Timothy and to the church at Ephesus involved basic truths, attitudes, and actions.

### Respect All – 5:1-2

<sup>1</sup>Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father, *to* the younger men as brothers, <sup>2</sup>the older women as mothers, *and* the younger women as sisters, in all purity. 1 Timothy 5:1-2 (NASB95)

The generation gap was “alive and well” two millennia ago. Timothy was the pastor of the church at Ephesus. Because he was relatively young, he was not readily accepted by all. Paul had addressed this general concern earlier in the letter when he said “Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.” Paul recognized that each of us is perceived by others in different ways. The ways we are perceived influence how we are heard. As a consequence of this reality, we must adjust the approach we use in addressing various people IF we want to be effective in what we do. Communication can be complicated because it is not only what we say but it depends on the tone of our voice and our posture (body language). Timothy would need to be aware of the total message he would communicate as he went about his pastoral duties.

How comfortable are we with the idea of the pastor reprimanding members of the congregation? Apparently, Paul thought the duties of a pastor included giving correction. His main concern was not IF but HOW such admonishments were to be given. I find it interesting that Paul used examples from a family situation as a model or a way to pattern all our interactions with church members. Based on the dysfunctional conditions of some families today, we might need to think of a different model. Many people treat perfect strangers with more respect and dignity than they do family members. We may have arrived at that unenviable situation that Paul predicted would happen – some will be without natural affection. Paul’s appeal to Timothy was the same as Jesus’ command to His followers: We are to love one another even as He loved us.

If we were to summarize this teaching of Paul and apply it to any situation in life it would simply be to “treat everyone with respect and dignity regardless of the situation.” Just think how such an attitude would transform the world if we put this simple idea to work in the family, our schools, in business, politics and especially in international relationships.

### Care for Widows – 5:3-8

<sup>3</sup> Honor widows who are widows indeed; <sup>4</sup> but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. <sup>5</sup> Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. <sup>6</sup> But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. <sup>7</sup> Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. <sup>8</sup> But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. 1 Timothy 5:3-8 (NASB95)

From the early days of the church in Jerusalem, concerns among the people went beyond spiritual needs. Why is it important for the church (or we as individuals) to get involved in lives and needs of people at the physical and emotional level? One of the basic principles is that it is difficult for a person to focus on the higher calling of a life devoted to God if he is concerned about hunger pains and threats on his life.

The role of the deacon was instituted to deal with practical ministry needs among the members. The idea of a state or a federally run welfare program was absent in the first century. Providing financial support for a household was usually a man's role. The business-industrial-government infrastructure that has built up over the past century was nonexistent. Much of the work was agriculture based with some artisan and craft jobs interspersed and these were almost exclusively done by men. Most women were not trained in the arts and crafts and were disadvantaged with regard to financially supporting themselves or their families. Women whose husbands had died were vulnerable. If a widow's extended family could or would not provide for her, then she might find that her only means of sustenance would be to beg. The church at Ephesus had widows among the members and the church needed direction in how to care for their needs.

Paul left no doubt that the main function of responsibility for caring for those who cannot support themselves belongs to the family of the person. Churches have limited financial resources and priorities must be established so that the most critical needs can be addressed. Children and grandchildren have an obligation to care for family members.

Some church members may not want to hear such teaching about taking care of their parents. They cannot remember their helpless condition when they were infants and their very survival depended on the selfless love and care provided by parents and grandparents. This is really a case where we can say we **owe** it to our parents and grandparents to provide for them when they are in need.

Responsibility is a two-way street. Not only do families and churches have responsibility for their members, the members who are on the receiving end of help from their church also have certain expectations which they are to fulfill. All of us have heard about or may personally know of situations where unscrupulous people will take advantage of the benevolence of others. We have no obligation to help those who would behave in such a manner.

There are occasions where our church is asked to help members who are struggling financially because of loss of a job or something like a fire destroyed their home. Generally, most requests come from people who are not members of our church. It is not always a widow who needs help but that would not be unusual to have an elderly person who needs help to pay their electricity bill or who may need groceries. In situations involving people we do not know, it is difficult to determine the real extent of the need.

What should a church body do if a member who was a widow needed help with her water and power bill and we knew that her son lived in the community and was fairly prosperous and could easily afford to help her but showed no interest in doing so? Such situations need wisdom in approaching the way to help. Should the church initiate a discussion with the woman's son to

make sure he was aware of the need? If that doesn't work, then one might conclude that the son had abandoned his mother which is not an option for church. You don't have much choice except to treat her as a "widow indeed."

It is also clear from this passage that when a local body of believers is going to provide assistance to anyone, then those involved in administering such relief have an obligation to verify that the person is really in need and that they are trying to make good (appropriate) use of the resources they do have. For example, should a church provide help for anyone who spends their resources on beer, cigarettes, fast foods, and lottery tickets? Is it reasonable to require some evidence of responsible behavior before providing help? In order to accomplish that would mean getting closely involved so as to learn of the real needs the person has. We cannot effectively minister to people by just throwing money at the problem. It is difficult to do this since it requires time and commitment on the part of those who are in ministry roles in a church. Also, most of us would not feel comfortable in asking the necessary questions regarding how the person receiving help actually uses the aid that is provided. Consequently, we don't have a lot of continuity in the help we provide. It is typically a one-time "give them some money" and move on to the next problem.

Timothy needed to teach these principles in the church at Ephesus and to define specific criteria and consequences concerning such matters. Paul had already addressed the general ideal of a family's responsibility to care for widows. The consequence of not meeting these obligations could be church disciplinary action. In the early church, those who denied the faith had to answer to the church for their actions.

#### Care for Pastors – 5:17-21

<sup>17</sup> The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. <sup>18</sup> For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." <sup>19</sup> Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. <sup>20</sup> Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. <sup>21</sup> I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. 1 Timothy 5:17-21 (NASB95)

Paul began this discourse with the responsibility of pastors to church members. If responsibility is a two-way street, then the church members have responsibility to the pastors. All the elders were expected to lead, supervise, manage, and/or teach. Not all could carry out these duties equally well. Some may spend more of their time in a role of preacher and teacher while others devote themselves to more mundane duties. Those who did well and especially those who concentrated on communicating the word of God to the church were to receive not only the recognition of respect due the office but also adequate financial remuneration.

The character criteria that we require for elders or pastors should minimize the probability of our church leaders doing something that would result in legitimate accusations being made by someone against a leader. However, we do know of situations involving church leaders when there had been conduct by a pastor that was a clear breach of the expected character standards.

What is the appropriate action for a local church body to take when something of this nature happens to one of the pastors or ministers in that church? Is it possible, in a present-day local church environment, to "restore" an elder who has committed a serious moral character breach? Can trust in that person ever return to a "normal" relationship? Paul had addressed a similar issue in his letter to the church at Galatia. In Galatians 6:1 he wrote "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself,

or you also may be tempted.” Most of us would find that “restoration” becomes a much more difficult task for those in recognized positions of leadership.

(Note that if this breach involved a “crime,” then the options available to a church become severely limited. However, what would be the stance of the church regarding this person even if crimes were involved?)

After our deliberations on such questions, I don’t think that we really resolved anything with regard to what we, as a church, might do. A lot would depend on the specific situation of the sin. However, we do realize that such situations are very serious and that mistakes would be easy to make and lives can be significantly impacted when something like this happens in a church. For this reason, if an accusation against an elder were to be made, then it is incumbent upon all of us to make sure that we have the facts right and not act in haste. Should such inquiries be done in open forums or in a more limited environment so that “others” are not hurt? This calls for much wisdom.

After the truth has been discovered and if the accusations are false, then the accusers have to be addressed and appropriate “restorations” started. On the other hand, if the accusations are true, then the guilty elder or pastor must be confronted. He would then have a choice to make. Ideally, we might like to see a process of “confession, repentance, and restoration.” Another choice that the elder might make could be “denial.” A third option might be “confession without repentance.” If either of these options is chosen, then the church would certainly need to follow Paul’s instructions given in verse twenty. The route to take at that point would be a formal rebuke before all.

In the various translations available to us, we see a variety of possible interpretations of what Paul was really writing to Timothy. A superficial reading of verse twenty would tell us that if an accusation was determined to be true then a “rebuke before all” would be appropriate. A close examination of the verb “sin” shows us that the contextual use means “continues to go on sinning.” That would raise the question of whether a “rebuke before all” would be warranted for a pastor who “confessed, repented, and was open to restoration.” As mentioned earlier, denial and lack of repentance would obviously call for rebuke. Since this rebuke comes about as a result of the elder continuing in the sin that prompted the accusation, then that raises the question of continued fellowship or not which raises more complicated questions.

Another question that the wording of verse twenty raises is who is included in the word “all” before whom the elder is to be rebuked. It seems that some commentators favor “all” to mean “the rest of the elders” and others think that the intent is that “all” means “the entire local church body.”

The issue of treating people fairly should extend to all with whom we relate and should not be done with partiality whether the person who sins is an elder or a deacon or a member of the church. The subject of “care for others” is obviously broader than just physical needs as Paul addressed with regard to widows and how the church is to support the leaders, it involves how leaders in the church are to properly relate to all members in spiritual matters and extends to how leaders are to interact with each others in discipline questions. Fairness in all such interactions is essential if the perception of the church is to be positive among those who are living in a lost world.