



MINEFIELD!

A couple of weeks back, I got chatting to a mum whose daughter has just started attending Wildfire. And she let on that she used to belong to a church in the town, was part of the worship team, heavily involved, but then ... something went badly wrong. And she hasn't been back. In 20 years.

Sadly, it's a regular occurrence. And today's passage touches on this subject, along with 2 of my all-time favourite topics: paying leaders and firing them! (I'm kidding, of course.)

Are you ready to enter that minefield? Let's go!

1 Timothy 5:17-25

Paul here is discussing elders, the 'older men' of vs1, but specifically, those who lead the church. Understand that *presbyteroi* can refer to those who are both older in years but also, like Timothy, older in faith (remember too that the average life expectancy at the poorer levels of society was 40, so you could be hitting elder status in your 30s!).

In this passage Paul is challenging 2 assumptions:

- That full-time leaders are above reward.
- That full-time leaders are above rebuke.

Paul's responses to these assumptions are these:

1) Reward where you should. Paul kicks off in vs17 by saying, "Those who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, particularly those whose work is preaching and teaching."

OK, so leaders who serve full-time, sharing the gospel and teaching the flock, are worthy of this 'double honour.' But what is 'double honour'? Some people have assumed it means 'double pay' (wishful thinking on the part of certain televangelists there, I think). But no church in the ancient world would have been capable of such a thing (or would today), and I'm not convinced Paul would have expected that, anyway. What he means is: recognise the time and effort that a leader pours into leading a church, in 2, equally important, ways:

- **Acknowledge them financially** – because leaders can't live on nothing. You want a leader to meet their potential? You've got to be willing to pay them.
- **Acknowledge them respectfully** – because leaders should be looked up to. You want a leader to meet their potential? You've got to be willing to follow them.

He uses 2 sources to back himself up: the 'don't muzzle the ox' one, from Moses (Deuteronomy 25:4); the 'worker is worth his wages' one, from Jesus Himself (Luke 10:7).

Paul is coming at this as a leader who often had to take a bi-vocational approach to things: working as a tentmaker while sharing the gospel. This was because of the nature of his mission (working with not-yet Christians), but he certainly didn't expect every leader to do that. In fact, he makes it clear both here and in 1 Corinthians 9:14 that full-time leaders should be able to make a living from it. And even Paul himself received funding for his mission, some of it from churches he had set up personally.

The first point is that it's the duty of a church to reward a *good* leader. Not as sycophants, but as those who care about their leaders. And their church. But what do you do with the *bad* ones?

2) Rebuke where you should. "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by 2 or 3 witnesses." Which is Bible for 'unless there's impartial reliable evidence' (Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16).

We can't be 100% certain what the context is here, but Paul's encouragement to Timothy to "drink a little wine for your stomach" is perhaps a clue. It suggests there were leaders in Ephesus who were taking all those passages about enjoying wine as a license to drink themselves horizontal. Publicly. "Even so," he says, "don't be afraid to drink a small amount yourself, to combat the IBS."

Now again, there are 2 sides to Paul's instructions here:

- **Protect those who have been wronged.** Look out for those leaders who are being unjustly accused, for whatever reason. Can such things happen? Yes, they can.

- **Punish those who have done wrong.** Publicly deal with those who have been justly accused, as an example to others. Should such things happen? Yes, they should.

He also charges him to “keep these instructions without partiality ...” I.e. don’t assume all church leaders are as pure as the driven snow. But don’t assume all church members are, either.

Paul is concerned that nit-pickers might use matters of personal conscience to bring down a leader they don’t like – whether that’s enjoying the occasional pint or bingeing a Netflix series or being a Taylor Swift fan (no, this is not a confession). But if a leader is somehow damaging the reputation of the gospel, or the church itself, then that leader must be challenged – and perhaps even fired.

Now, there’s something I need to make clear: this talk of ‘witnesses’ should never be used as an excuse to ignore alleged abuses, or to sweep them under the carpet. Paul here is discussing sins which are committed in *public*. The problem with abuse, particularly sexual, is it tends to be committed in *private*. So, ‘witnesses’ in the sense Paul means it here might not apply. Safeguarding matters.

What *does* apply is the need to publicly rebuke, but also not to be “hasty in the laying on of hands”, i.e. don’t fast-track someone into leadership.

You might regret it.

Work In Progress

As I said at the beginning, this is a hugely difficult passage to preach on, in part because it mentions paying pastors, but also because I know I’m a flawed one (just ask Kellie!). But my one consolation is: you’re flawed, too! Lovely, of course, but flawed. And so is everyone else.

But I regularly meet people, like that mum, who will tell me how they used to go to church but ended up leaving because of how they were treated. And I also read the stats of how many pastors are giving up on ministry each year, because of treatment by their churches. And yes, there are 2 sides to every story. But there are also genuine abuses of power, and that can come from either direction. I’ve seen it. And experienced it, too.

But praise God, we are a work in progress. All of us. But part of that means being willing to call it when we see wrongdoing. And admit it when we’ve got it wrong.

It’s essential, in fact. To everyone involved.

For the sake of the church. And of the gospel.