

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Accusations: True and False

Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. (1 Timothy 5:19–20, KJV 1900)

These verses have been subjected to extensive scrutiny and debate. Who is the "elder" in the verse, an older member of the church, an officer of the church who is respected for his spiritual maturity, or a minister of the gospel? What is the sin that requires public rebuke "...before all..."? Given the context of the verses, it is my view that an "elder" in this context refers to a minister of the gospel. He labors in the "...word and doctrine," and he is to be compensated for his labors (See the two prior verses).

In the broken world in which we live, any number of less-than-ideal situations may arise that require our attention and action. Personal interaction between two individuals may convince one of the two to distance himself from his fellow because of that person's errant attitudes, beliefs, conduct, or teachings. We have all engaged others in personal conversation that revealed unhappy surprises, often of such gravity that our respect for and trust of that person was severely shaken. Since the event was private, just between that person and you, does this passage require you to pretend it never occurred? No, I do not believe it does. However, the passage before us does direct the manner in which we deal with this situation. The passage does not require us to ignore the first-hand events that broke our respect for the person. It may well require that we avoid a public accusation against the person because we cannot produce the "...two or three witnesses..." required in the text.

Let's try to look at a broad array of scenarios that many of us have personally experienced over the years.

1. No doubt many times false and wholly groundless accusations arise against people in the church, particularly preachers or pastors. "Criticism of leaders is a favorite spectator sport."¹ We possess a deeply entrenched and flawed nature that looks for the worst possible explanation, not the best. Whether in politics, family, business, or church, when we observe someone saying or doing things that we do not especially like, we are liable to jump to

the wrong conclusion and speak our thoughts as if they were ironclad truth. Our opinion is our opinion, but opinion is not fact and should not be regarded as fact by anyone, even by ourselves. Beware the person who makes a habit—or self-indulgent and "entertaining" hobby—of spreading false rumors. Any time a group of people form a collective body, as in a local church or group of churches, we must work to avoid rumors and false accusations. Constable goes on; "Where there's smoke, there's fire' may be a good slogan for a volunteer fire department, but it does not apply to local churches. 'Where there's smoke, there's fire' could possibly mean that somebody's tongue has been 'set on fire of hell!'" (James 3:6).^{199 2}

2. You or I may well have personal, first-hand knowledge of another person's error, knowledge that requires us to impose distance, if not absolute separation, between that person and us. Personal knowledge is not groundless "smoke;" it is fact. How do we manage this factual information regarding someone, albeit we may not have the required two or three witnesses to the specific actions that violate Scripture? Scripture quite clearly addresses this problem.

Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. (Luke 17:3 KJV)

Notice that Jesus began this lesson with "Take heed to yourselves." It is so very easy, especially when dealing with someone that we have held in high regard, to dismiss sinful or offensive conduct as unintentional or misguided ignorance. Perhaps that is sometimes the case, but often it is clearly not. I suggest that Jesus is warning the disciples—and us—to be careful that we do not allow personal

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, 1 Ti 5:19 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

¹⁹⁹ 199. Wiersbe, p. 78.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, 1 Ti 5:19 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

emotions or wishful thinking to blind us to the sinfulness of someone's actions, particularly someone who is close to us. Jesus follows this caution with very direct and specific instructions. First, "...rebuke him..." Let this person know how objectionable and sinful you perceive their actions to be. The next step is that person's. "...if he repent, forgive him." Repentance is not shaking hands, saying you are sorry for the offense, while continuing to practice the same behavior that caused the problem in the first place. Repentance begins with a mental process, sincere acknowledgement of the sin and regret—indeed, grief—that you have so sinned. But repentance does not in fact occur till you have applied your mental grief over the sin to your feet. Repentance means that you cease the sinful action, a clear change in behavior. In our broken world, Adam's and Eve's "artful dodge" with God³ predicts the response of many people when confronted with their sinful actions. They far prefer to blame someone else and pretend to be the innocent victim than to honestly confront their own sin and to accept personal responsibility for the sin. If you see evidence of repentance, you should forgive the sinner. However, void any indication of repentance, Jesus does not in any way indicate that we should simply forgive the sinner anyway.

3. There is no doubt that the rebuke of those who sin is to be a public rebuke in the church gathering. I suggest that the verse dealing with accusations against an elder likewise deal with the church's public handling of such matters. Let's recreate a typical scenario. You and I are members of the same local church. On a particular day you come to me with "Did you hear what our pastor said/or did?" I respond, "No." Then you start talking about some dicey comment or action that the pastor

³ In Genesis 3:12, Adam blames the woman "...whom thou gavest to be with me..." In Genesis 3:13, Eve blamed the serpent, whom God had made, for her problem. Ever since this time, sinful people demonstrate their broken sinfulness by trying to blame others for their own sins. It is far easier to pass blame than to accept responsibility for one's sins. Repentance, true Biblical repentance, is the mirror opposite of this blame-game attitude. The repentant person will fully accept responsibility for his/her sin and take clear and immediate steps to ensure that the sinful action does not continue. Anything short of altered behavior fails to qualify as Biblical repentance, and, absent that repentance, Scripture does not require that we forgive the sinner.

supposedly committed. How should I react? The verse quite clearly instructs my action. I should immediately ask you for witnesses, reliable, faithful witnesses who can verify your statements. If you cannot provide such witnesses, you violated this passage by so much as raising the issue at all. And I, should I receive and accept your accusation, have joined in the violation.

If we would consistently practice this rather simple and straightforward attitude, we'd put an immediate end to no small number of gossipy rumors that have little or no existence in fact. Juicy rumors are tantalizing to our broken, sinful disposition, but Scripture rebukes their being spread to others.

This brings us to the second question.

Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.

The word "sin" in this verse is not qualified by other adjectives or words that might give us a clue as to the specific sin that Paul has in mind. What is that sin? Absent a qualifier in the sentence, our next logical and sensible step is to look in the immediate context of the passage for clues. I suggest that the prior verse has just described a sinful behavior that is to be rejected. What better way to round out the lesson that to direct that folks who ignore this Scriptural directive are to be rebuked in the public gathering of the church for their sin in either receiving or spreading a false or unverified accusation against an elder. Absent the witnesses, we need to remain very silent on the question within the public culture of the church.

The New Testament methodically and precisely develops a culture of acceptable—and unacceptable—conduct in a New Testament church. Do not forget; our present study began with First Timothy 3:15.

But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15, KJV 1900)

If Paul tells Timothy that he is writing to inform Timothy regarding proper behavior in the church, should we not expect to find specific instructions in the letter to answer that need? Indeed we should, and I offer that a reasonable reading of the letter will answer our question and inform our need for godly behavior in the "...house of God...the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." A wise strategy for a leader is to tell the audience what you are going to teach them, teach it to them, remind them that you taught them, and end your speaking or, in this case, writing. Paul did just that. He gives us detailed counsel regarding godly, acceptable behavior in the Lord's church.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor