

Christian Life Builders' Class
 Sunday School Lesson 8-23-2026

Respecting Each other in the Church 1 Timothy 5

Introduction:

By the time 1 Timothy was written, the church at Ephesus was most likely a conglomerate of several interconnected house churches. It had planted other churches in the area, probably all of them included in those referenced in Revelation plus others, including those at Colosse which had been destroyed by an earthquake before Revelation was written. It is difficult to estimate how many people may have attended any one of the house churches, because of the difference in sizes.

In chapter 5 of 1 Timothy, it appears that Paul is getting into the “nitty-gritties” of how to handle potentially inappropriate behaviors between members of the congregations or less-than-expected behaviors affecting their witness outside the church. Paul begins by defining the different groups of people in the church by gender and age in relationship to Timothy’s, with verbiage hinting that he’s still single. The first thing that Paul does in this chapter is divide the congregation into older men, younger men, older women, and younger women. Here, at the beginning of the chapter, Paul does not use the language of honor, because honor had a special meaning in that society. But his voicing is clearly that of respect in relationship to all four groups. The older persons are to be treated as you would your own parents or grandparents; the younger persons are to be treated as though they were your brothers and sisters from the same parents, and the young women with the particular respect and, I would add, protection that you would offer your own sister.

From that introduction, Paul deals with specific interpersonal relationships in the church where difficulties may arise. The first group he references is that of widows, where he distinguishes between widows who have family members, widows who don’t have close family members, and young widows. It is a given that the call to treating the women with respect, regardless of age carries through here. He gives instructions as to who should be included on the church’s registry of widows. This is one of the items that caused early critical scholars to say that this particular letter described a structure of church polity which would have been established after Paul’s death. That conclusion raises some issues:

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How early in church history does there appear to be a situation regarding the care of widows?
2. What in that situation may have indicated that there was some kind of widows registry?
3. When was that in relation to Paul’s church planting ministry?
4. What was the difference between the problem in Jerusalem and what might have been happening in Ephesus?
5. How would we, in this class, categorize the age groups in our church, and what kind of respect should we afford them?

After dealing with the potential problems that could arise from the care of widows, Paul turns to negative evaluations of church leaders which may be voiced by members of the congregation. Once again, respect toward both the leader and the person offering the comment is expected. Before Paul goes much further into how Timothy should handle that potential situation, he reminds him that church leaders are due a “double honor.” As far as we can tell, double honor means just what you might think, two different ways of giving honor. The first would be honor as earned in Greek society: a cultural status level of worth with non-monetary value. The other is some form of remuneration for what they do. That would not have been obvious except for the Scripture passages that Paul chose, one a maxim, the other clear statement. The Old Testament system of tithing was designed specifically so priests could have food to eat (pay in kind), because they weren’t allowed to own land.

The potential situation presented is that of a leader being accused of doing something inappropriate as a regular behavior or character trait. The respect to be used in dealing with the situation needs to take into account the two forms of honor of which the leader is worthy.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What does verse 19 say regarding the first way to respond to this kind of accusation?
2. What would be the wisest way to handle that in order to maintain respect and honor?

NOTE: The original grammar has the words “before everyone” in between “those who are sinning” and “rebuke.” Thus, the reading is literally, “those who are sinning before everyone rebuke.” To reconstruct the language into a word order closer to our language, it should read, “rebuke those who are sinning before everyone.” In other words, to respect and maintain honor to the recognized leaders, if the complaint is about something private, let it be handled in private. However, for the best public witness for the church, when the problem is quite public, make the rebuke public. In that case the honor attached to the truth of the gospel supersedes any honor recognized in relation to the leader’s ascribed status in society.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION:

Do you think the church today tends to cover things up or expose everything? What is more harmful to the church’s witness?

II. Private advice for all leaders. 1 Timothy 5:21-25

In these and in the following verses, Paul lists other points involved in maintaining respect and honor for everyone: for leaders, for himself, for other members, and, in particular, for slaves. (We’ll look at the word about slaves separately.)

Paul opens these verses in the form of a ‘charge’: a call to a specific task with instructions on how to perform it. This charge is made before a three-fold divine tribunal—God, Christ, and a body of certain angels. How much contact there had been between Paul and the other apostles regarding theological development of the faith since he began his missionary journeys is uncertain. Some Jewish understanding of a divine council comes from the Old

Testament—times when God discusses thoughts using “us”—and understood God to be consulting with a select group of angels. Early Christian teaching understood Jesus both as God and as somehow independent of the Father. It does not appear that by the time of the death of Paul, he would have included the Holy Spirit in a similar category as Jesus, in the way we see it in the gospels which were written a couple of decades after Paul’s death. One of the difficulties on this point is that the Spirit of God was a character in the Old Testament, but it is difficult to find him treated there as both personal and separate from God, with a will or prescribed function of his own the same way we see Jesus described. Paul calls this divine council to be witnesses to this charge.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What does this aspect of calling witnesses to this charge do to the charge itself?
2. What does that charge say about partiality or favoritism in relation to both respect for others and discipline in the church?

David Ackerman gives us a picture of the underside of favoritism by speaking about “giving special praise or attention to certain people to win their favor or gain more acceptance or privilege.” Many of us have seen occasions of this kind of manipulation in churches, some of which may be innocent, whereas some of it is quite harmful.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How should we handle such occurrences when we see them?
2. What does v. 23 have to do with any of this?
3. Vv. 24 & 25 appear to be in the form of proverbs, something I hadn’t seen before in this letter thanks to our lessons. The first deals with the various kinds of sins and/or inappropriate behaviors of leaders, reflecting the different ways Paul suggests for handling them. How does v. 25 speak to the discussion at hand here, and what might that say to us as to our role in the church?

III. What do slaves have to do with it? 1 Timothy 6:1-2

I opened this section with the question, “What do slaves have to do with this?” It is a reasonable question in the context of Ephesus. Historians have calculated that more or less 1/5 of the population of Ephesus were slaves. If the little letter to Philemon has anything to do with it, and I’m very sure it does, the designation of “slave” meant absolutely nothing in the mind of Paul as to any hierarchy in relationships among believers. Ministry roles in the church were determined by the Holy Spirit’s gifting, and social status or economic situations were irrelevant to what the Holy Spirit gave to each member of the congregation. Leadership was often based on both character and spiritual maturity, which would have had nothing to do with social or economic status.

It’s good to know that information, but what does it have to do with us today?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What relationships today appear to be similar to the slave/master relationship? How different might that relationship be? Is giving honor any easier, or harder in this situation?
2. How does being retired transform that dynamic?
3. In many cultures, older people are given special honor, and their words are accepted as wisdom. What is our role in the giving or receiving of honor?

Conclusion:

For our conclusion, I would like to work with a sentence that our lesson writer, Bill Malas, says near the end of the printed lesson. He writes, "Who we honor on earth says a great deal about the One we worship in heaven." I would like to suggest an additional thought to that, "How we honor one another says a great deal about the One we worship when we're together." It is natural and even follows the practices of Jesus to have friends in the church with whom we are closer than others. However, every human being is worthy of respect as both a creation of God and as an object of His love. The better we are acquainted with other people and their unique situations and stories, the easier it becomes to respect those with whom we are not yet acquainted. The more we respect the people around us, the more our witness can be appreciated and believed. After all, Jesus said that we would be known by the love we have for one another.

