

CHAPTER 5

“I want a principle within of watchful, godly fear,
a sensibility of sin, a pain to feel it near.
I want the first approach to feel of pride or wrong desire,
to catch the wandering of my will,
and quench the kindling fire.

From thee that I no more may stray,
no more thy goodness grieve, grant me the filial awe,
I pray, the tender conscience give.
Quick as the apple of an eye, O God, my conscience make;
awake my soul when sin is nigh, and keep it still awake.

Almighty God of truth and love, to me thy power impart;
the mountain from my soul remove,
the hardness from my heart.
O may the least omission pain my reawakened soul,
and drive me to that blood again,
which makes the wounded whole.”

5. THE ELDER'S ACCOUNTABILITY

"MORE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE SAME STANDARD"

A leader is a target. The office of Elder places the man who is qualified for ministry on a turret. A turret is a revolving armored structure with a gun mounted on it, usually situated on a towering structure. It is one of the most lethal weapons in battle and therefore it is the most targeted position of the enemy. In modern day warfare, the life expectancy of a gunner in the turret is about 8 seconds. Satan, the chief enemy of Christ and His church, concentrates his special forces on spiritual leaders, because to fell one Elder is to devastate an entire church. One man can undo his entire ministry in a single moment.

Elders are, because they are in spiritual leadership, objects of attack and criticism, both from without and from within. Their decisions will be contested, their words will get misconstrued, their motives will be distrusted, their direction will be resisted, their character will be assassinated, their progress will be halted, their enthusiasm will be squelched, their messages will be disregarded, their pleas will be unheard, their labors over some will be in vain, and their hearts will be broken. Anyone who aspires for Eldership must come with the sober reality of leadership's gravity and severity. An Elder is stepping into the turret with only his Bible and his conscience. He will learn almost immediately that he is forced to decide how he will live his life, conduct his ministry, and maintain his integrity.

How should an Elder handle the pressures that ministry bring to his heart and life? How should he react when he is criticized personally or publicly? What should he do with anonymous hate mail? What should he do with his alarmed conscience when he realizes that he is proclaiming a standard that he is not living? What should he do with people who speak behind his back about his character and his family? What should he do when someone targets his kids in Sunday School because he is an Elder?

To turn it around, what should you do if you disagree with an Elder's decision? Is an Elder impervious to correction? What if you see something in an Elder that concerns you? What if an Elder is in sin? When must an Elder step down from ministry? What should you do if you hear someone talking about an Elder in a negative way? How should you respond when someone tells you that he or she was taken advantage of by an Elder who misused his authority?

In answering these questions, we must understand the nature of an Elder's accountability. The previous chapter spoke about Elders in terms of the standard for their character qualifications. This chapter speaks about the accountability that enforces their compliance to this standard. *In specific, the Bible gives two levels of accountability to which all Elders are liable in the ministry.*

1. AN ELDER'S RESPONSIBILITY BEFORE GOD

This is the greatest and ultimate accountability, because it is the most comprehensive and scrutinizing, being meted out by the One whose eyes are a flame of fire with a gaze that not only sees all things in every place, but which also pierces into the thoughts and intents of men's heart motives. All other forms of accountability fail if they do not teach a person to live accountably at this level. If a

person will only avoid sin when others are looking or when others will find out, then his holiness is merely external. On the other hand, if a person is the same before others as he is alone before God, then he is truly a man of integrity.

At the outset, we must say that an Elder is not held to a higher standard than others; he is more accountable to the same standard. This principle appears in **James 3:1**, which says:

“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”

This passage includes a broader scope than Elders, but according to **1 Timothy 3:2**, anyone who aspires for Eldership will fulfill the role of a teacher, who then immediately comes into a higher level of accountability to God. The **“stricter judgment”** implies that he will be more accountable because his teaching has demonstrated a more thorough knowledge of Scripture than his hearers. He is more accountable than his hearers, because not only does his ability to communicate truth prove he understands it, his violation of the truth is with a fully informed conscience (**Romans 2:17-22**). The standard does not change. The teacher is simply without excuse.

The ultimate accountability that the Elder must wrestle with before God is the testimony of his own conscience in light of the coming day, about which the author of Hebrews wrote:

Hebrews 13:17, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls *as those who will give an account*. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (italics added).

A. Who are the leaders accountable to in v. 17?

B. For what will the leaders **“give an account”** according to this passage?

“Give an account” – means literally, “as those who will answer with a recompense.” The wording implies that spiritual leaders will be given a special summons before God as to how they cared for the souls of His flock and be called on to specifically answer Him. The ensuing evaluation will then result in the bestowing or demise of their eternal reward. Unsaved spiritual leaders of course will be immediately consigned to a special eternal judgment.

C. What does this **“account”** include, based on the following passages:

➤ **Ephesians 6:18 (1 Samuel 12:23)**

➤ Acts 20:26-27 (cf. Ezekiel 33:1-9)

➤ Acts 20:28-31 (cf. John 10:11-13)

- D. What did Paul say about this day in **2 Corinthians 5:10**, as a motive for his ministry?
- E. When maligned for his leadership, to what court did Paul appeal in **1 Corinthians 4:1-5** in speaking about his ministry accountability?
- F. Did Paul forsake accountability in the Corinthians' passage? Why or why not?

2. AN ELDER'S RESPONSIBILITY BEFORE MAN

Just because a man is ultimately answerable to God does not mean that he is not accountable to man. He should not live for the approval of man as the motive for practicing righteousness (**Matthew 6:1; Galatians 1:10**), but some spiritual leaders misuse that teaching to claim immunity from accountability in their lives. Some people reason that they are "accountable to the Lord and not men," therefore they see no reason to yield to inspection and scrutiny.

Biblically, *a leader who refuses to be accountable is disqualified from spiritual leadership*. Faithfulness to live accountable to people, before God, is something for which he is held liable by Scripture, according to certain and specific guidelines. Paul testified about himself and his integrity with these words in **Acts 24:16**, "In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men" (cf. **2 Corinthians 1:12; 4:2; 5:11**).

The most important text in the New Testament about the accountability of Elders, not to a different or higher standard but God's clear standard is **1 Timothy 5:19-22**:

¹⁹Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. ²⁰Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. ²¹I 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. ²²Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin."

“Do not receive” has very strong language in the Greek, **“do not”** meaning *never*. To **“receive”** means *to welcome or accept, to come to believe something as true, and the source as true also*. Put together, these terms mean literally *“never accept or believe an accusation (a charge) against an Elder, discount the source, do not even entertain it in your mind”* **“except”** in certain situations, which he is about to describe. This passage teaches the protection of an Elder from superfluous accusations; they are not to be investigated or believed – they are to be ignored.

- A. What does this imply about how Elders can expect to be treated?
- B. What does this command give to Elders?
- C. What does this command not give to Elders?
- D. What is the exception to this command?
- E. To what process does **“the basis of two or three witnesses”** refer?
- F. How is that process outlined?
- G. What should you do if an Elder does something that is not a sin, but you do not agree with?
- H. What should you do if a person criticizes the leadership to you or in your hearing?
- I. What should you do if you see an Elder in sin?
- J. What should you do if he repents of a sin that does not exclude him from Eldership?
- K. What if he repents of a sin that does disqualify him from Eldership?

- L. What should you do if he does not repent, according to v. 20?
- M. Why is an Elder to be handled like this, based on v. 20?
- N. What safeguard does Paul put in place to prevent such a scandal in v. 22?
- O. Paul warns against partiality in handling all Elders in v. 21. Why would this command be necessary?
- P. Why does Paul mention the accountability of God, Jesus, and the holy angels in handling this without partiality?

CONCLUSION

The Elders who serve the church must be men of God, and yet they are imperfect, sinful, fallen men, who have been changed, are being changed, and are engaged in the same spiritual conflict as the rest of the church. The standard for the church and its leaders is the same. The leaders are simply more accountable to that standard because of their position, and therefore should not enter into their role lightly. As a response, the congregation should cultivate an attitude of help and support, not complaint and criticism. Thus in reaction to this standard, the whole body should labor on behalf of their leaders in the following ways.

- 1. Intercede
 - **Romans 15:30-32**
 - **2 Corinthians 13:7-8**
- 2. Protect
 - **2 Thessalonians 3:1-2**
 - **2 Timothy 4:9-18**