

Discerning Good and Evil in the Church

Paul's Instructions about Elders and Slaves

1Tim 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

²¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.

²² Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.

²³ (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.)

²⁴ The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later.

²⁵ So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

ESV 1 Timothy 6:1 Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.

^{2a} Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.

(1 Timothy 5:17-6:2a)

The Knowledge of Good and Evil

What do paying preachers, muzzling oxen, admitting charges against elders, elect angels, laying hands on people, drinking wine, hiding and revealing sins, and slaves and masters all have in common? If you've read today's passages, you will probably say, "They are all found within eleven verses of each other in 1 Timothy 5-6." And, this of course is true. However, what could possibly be the logic behind mentioning such a diverse kind of list, one that seemingly appears random and unrelated?

To answer this question, I want to spend some time looking at a passage that came up last week in our Sunday School class on Genesis 3. The question was, "What is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?" It is an excellent question, and one that has puzzled many people for centuries. The origin of the tree is found in Genesis 2:9. "And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*." A few verses later we find the tree again, this time it is the centerpiece of the commandment God gave to Adam. "But of the *tree of the knowledge of good and*

evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (17).

When we come to Genesis 3, we find the Nachash tempting Eve with the fruit of this tree. “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (3:1). Eve responds with words nearly the same as those given to Adam, but with a little extra added on, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die” (2-3). The crafty serpent replied back, “You will not surely die...” (4) and in many modern English translations continues, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be *like God, knowing good and evil*” (5).

Many people think that the temptation here is to be like God—the Creator God. After all, that’s how the translation reads. However, most older translations, including the LXX, VUL, the Targums, WYC, GNV, KJV, etc., do not say “God,” but rather “gods” or “angels,” those ideas being very similar.¹ Targum Jonathan give you the idea, “You will

¹ It is rather inexplicable to me why modern translations do this. Sarna is very clear about this. “*Like divine beings* Hebrew *’elohim* is a comprehensive term for supernatural beings and is often employed for angels. Any possible ambiguity inherent in the use of the same word for “God” and for “divine beings” is here removed by the plural form of the verb “know” (*yode ’ei*) and by verse 22 (“one of us”). As tractate Soferim 4:5(4) points out, “the first *’elohim* [in this

be as *the great angels*, who are wise to know between good and evil.” This is very similar to what we find in **2 Samuel 14:17**, “The word of my lord the king will set me at rest, for my lord the king is *like the Angel of God to discern good and evil.*”

Suddenly, rather than being tempted to be like God, which really makes no sense because as Scripture says, “**Who is like you, O LORD?**” (**Ex 5:11; cf. Ps 35:10; 71:19; 113:5; Isa 44:7; Jer 49:19**), and as if God is the only being who knows good and evil (can anyone say Satan?) ... rather than being tempted with the impossible, she is tempted with something much more manageable. **To be just like Satan.** “**Like Satan?**” you ask. “**Who would ever want to be like him?**” Yes, like Satan. At this moment, she did not think of the Nachash as that fallen wicked creature of darkness, but as the Shining One, full of wisdom and beauty (**Isa 14; Ezek 28**). That’s why she was talking to him, after all.

You see, it had been given to certain angels called “**the sons of God**” or “**Watchers**” at some point **to make legal, judicial decisions** over the affairs of the earth. She was being tempted with, as Satan would later do to Jesus in a parallel temptation in the wilderness—**ruling before the appointed**

verse] is sacred, the second non-sacred.” Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 25.

time.² God was the High King, and her job *at this point* was simply to obey him.

We see these heavenly beings in ruling, judicial, and courtroom affairs in many places. Two that are easy to see are Job 1-2 and Daniel 4. “There was a day when *the sons of God* came to present themselves before the LORD, and *Satan* also came among them” (Job 1:6). The scene is in heaven, not earth, so the sons of God are angels. From here, we find Satan and the LORD arguing over what to do about Job. A legal battle ensues. “You have put a hedge around him, you have blessed him. I can’t touch him,” Satan cries. He has no *legal* right to touch Job until the LORD permits it. Daniel is even clearer. The *Watchers* had come to *Nebuchadnezzar* with a judgment that he would be turned into a wild beast. We read, “The *sentence* is by the decree of the *watchers*, the *decision* by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men” (Dan 4:17). This is a large part of what it means to be on the divine council of heaven. It is a court of beings that rule and carry out judgments.

² “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”’” (Matt 4:8-10).

We saw this last time when looking at the first half of our chapter, which is also related to this idea when we saw that Psalm 82, a psalm about God going to “the divine council”(Ps 82:1) has him judging the “sons of God” (6), because they refused to carry out their duty and lead their people in just laws to take care of widows and orphans (2-4). Somehow, some of the widows of at the church at Ephesus were being like Eve in that they were “straying after Satan” (1Tim 5:15). In my opinion, this means they were giving into the same kind of temptation we are talking about here—they were making judicial pronouncements about doctrine—this one is good, this one is bad, and so on, not trusting God and his word on the matter.

Some people do not like the idea of supernatural beings heading up a heavenly court, and so they make Psalm 82 to be about *human rulers* making wicked judgments. While it is wrong to do that in this Psalm, the broader idea is not wrong, and this takes us back to the idea of knowing good and evil. As we have seen, the parallel to knowing good and evil is to discern good and evil. Knowing isn't brute knowledge of facts. Knowing is *discerning*. “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar” (Psalm 139:2), the Psalmist says of God. In Isaiah, it is

the opposite. God says, “They *know* not, nor do they *discern* ... No one considers, nor is there *knowledge* or *discernment*” (Isa 44:18).

So Satan tempted Eve with making a legal judgement over right and wrong. It *wasn't that she didn't know* right from wrong (she had been told, she had a conscience), it was that *she had not made a decision* about it yet for herself. Notice, “So when the woman *saw* that the tree was good for food, and that it was *a delight* to the eyes, and that the tree was *to be desired to make one wise*, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Gen 3:6). She looked at it. She beheld its beauty. She desired to be wise. She contemplated. She deliberated. She made her decision, and Adam along with her made his.

We've seen the parallel with the Angel of the LORD. But that parallel actually focuses on *the king*. It was the king's job to make these kinds of judicial judgments and thus be “*like the Angel of God.*” Thus, Solomon prays, “*Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?*” (1Kg 3:9). Like Father, like son; like High King, like lower king. In a paper covering this topic, William Wilder begins, “*According to*

Gen 1-2, Adam and Eve were created to be rulers—under God, over the world, and with each other.”³ He continues, “The tree is a tree of wisdom, because in the Bible ‘knowing good and evil’ (or some approximation of that phrase) refers to the kind of wise discernment and discrimination exercised by mature and capable adults”⁴ (see **Deut 1:39**; **2Sam 19:35**; **Isa 7:16**; **Heb 5:14**; etc.). As we have seen, those “adults” are especially kings or rulers in the OT.

In the NT, however, **this changes**. Hebrews, introducing the most basic of Christian doctrines, tells us, “Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their *powers of discernment* trained by constant practice to *distinguish good from evil*” (**Heb 5:14**). Paul tells the Thessalonians, “*Test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil*” (**1Th 5:21**). To the Romans he says, “I want you to be *wise as to what is good* and *innocent as to what is evil*” (**Rom 16:19**). So now, it isn’t the king, but *God’s people* who make these judgments. But even in the OT, this was the job of all God’s people, they just didn’t do it. God tells Jeremiah, “**My people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid**

³ **William N. Wilder**, “Illumination And Investiture: The Royal Significance Of The Tree Of Wisdom in Genesis 3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 68:1 (2006): 50. https://www.academia.edu/11702829/Illumination_and_Investiture_The_Royal_Significance_of_the_Tree_of_Wisdom_in_Genesis_3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

children; they have no understanding. They are ‘*wise*’—in doing *evil*! But how to do *good* they *know not*” (Jer 4:22).

Last time, we saw that the NT counterpart to the OT people of God is the church. More specifically, the OT people of God were a biological family, descending each and every one from one of the twelve sons of Jacob. The NT people of God are also a family, a spiritual family. To put it in the language of the divine council, we are now “sons of God,” brothers and sisters in the faith, calling God our Father.

It is important for you to connect this “sons of God” language of God’s human family with that of his heavenly family. In doing this, you will see that God is giving us the right to do the very thing that these angels of the divine council do. In fact, in a passage that I thought about opening with today instead of Genesis 3 because of how the Christians at Corinth were entering into evil judicial decisions against one another in secular courts, Paul begins by telling them that one day, “Do you know that we will judge angels?” (1Co 6:3). Humans once more will take dominion they were given, but only as they are “in Christ.”

The ironic thing about the whole sorted mess of the fall is that many have believed since the early church that had

Adam and Eve obeyed him, **he would later have given them the right to eat** from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.⁵ That's why I said the temptation was to become the king-judge *at the wrong time*. First you submit to the High King in obedience. *Then*, he grants the gift of eating of this great tree. This seems proven by the fact that God eventually does give this right to his people later in the Bible. But instead, Eve said, **“God is wrong to have given us such a law. I'm making my own judgment now.”** In making this judgment, she ironically carried out the very same duty she would have if she had made the judgment that God was right and told the serpent to go take a hike. Such is the subtlety of temptation.

1 Timothy 5:17-6:2 – Context and Structure

The passage today is **1 Timothy 5:17-6:2a**. This **ends a longer unit of thought** that began in **5:1-2** with Paul making **the family** of God front and center: **fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters**. It is not that they are *biologically* related, but rather that “old men” are to be treated *as* fathers, younger

⁵ “For had the serpent been rejected, along with the sin, they would have eaten of the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge would not have been withheld from them any longer.” Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise* 214. Also John Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 205.

men *as* brothers, older women *as* mothers, and younger women *as* sisters in this newly *adopted family* of Christ. From here, Paul went on to talk about widows, both *old* widows and *young* widows. This brings a nice parallel to the older and younger women of vs. 2.

The reason for seeing the unit go to 6:2a is because it is here that the parallel to “brothers” (5:1) is found in bondservants and masters. “Masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are *brothers...*” (1Tim 6:2a). That leaves only the fathers to be fleshed out more. This is exactly what we find in 5:17-25 where the word used in 5:1 for “old men” (*presbuteros*) returns but is now translated as “elders” (5:17, 19).

But why translate it with a different English word? The answer is the context. “Let the elders (*presbuteros*) who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in *preaching and teaching*” (5:17). Who are these “elders?” Are they merely “older men?” No. Like the widows, they are a *specific kind* of older person. Notice particularly how it says that they “rule.” Think “knowledge of good and evil.”

Now, we’ve seen in ch. 4 how there were elders in ancient Greece and Rome who led the society and politics. *Senate* comes from *senex*, “old, senior.” In Athens and other

cities like Ephesus, the semiofficial elders were called **Gerousia** (from Gk *geron*, “old man”). My guess is that there were men in the church at Ephesus who belonged to this group of elders. However, because the Apostle adds “... especially those who labor in preaching and teaching,” he must also have in mind the earlier discussion of church elders (see **1 Tim 3:1-7**). Therefore, it is appropriate to translate the word with more specificity here than something like “old men.”

So now we are ready to return to the original question. What do **paying preachers, muzzling oxen, admitting charges against elders, elect angels, laying hands on people, drinking wine, hiding and revealing sins, and slaves and masters** all have in common? The answer is, they all have making judicial kinds of decisions about right and wrong in common. It is to this that I want to now turn our attention.

Continuing Instructions ... About “Elders” (1Tim 5:17-25)

Paying Your Pastors

We begin with **one of those topics** that is uncomfortable for a pastor to preach. Unless you are a Health and Wealth

Prosperity charlatan, this topic is usually what he wants a guest speaker to talk about with the congregation! The subject is “[paying your pastors.](#)” We’ve just read the [vs. 17](#). Paul says that these ruling elders are to be considered worth of “[double honor.](#)”

[Honor played a very important role](#) in ancient Greece, and Paul is clearly aware of that, as he also tells the church to “honor” the widows ([5:3](#)). We see this in many ancient inscriptions. One to the citizens of Cardamylae reads,

It was resolved by the people and the city and the ephors [magistrates] to praise Poseidippos (the son) of Attalos on account of the aforesaid kindnesses and also to bring *never-ending gratitude* in recompense of (his bestowal) of benefits; and also to give him both *the front seats at the theatre* and *the first place in procession* and (the privilege of) *eating in the public festivals* which are celebrated amongst us and to offer willingly all (the) honour given to a good and fine man in return for the many (kindnesses) which he provided ... And (it was resolved) to *set up this decree on a stone stele* in the most conspicuous place in the gymnasium, while the ephors make the solemn procession to the building without hindrance, in order that those who confer benefits may receive favour in return for love of honour, and that those who have been benefited, returning honors, may have a reputation for

thankfulness before all people, never coming too late for the sake of recompense of those who wish to do kindly (acts).⁶

But the Apostle wants Timothy to command the people to do more, and not because it is merely something Greeks would respect. He cites the OT. *God* demands honor be given. “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and ‘The laborer deserves his wages’” (1Tim 5:18). “Muzzling the ox” is a fascinating proof-text from Deut 25:4, one that he uses also in 1 Corinthians 9:9. In some ways, it deserves an entire sermon by itself, because of how Paul is using the OT. But I’ll just summarize what I think is important.

We Reformed people generally break the laws of the OT into three categories: moral, ceremonial, and civil (see LBC 19.3-4). It is an ancient tradition that goes back to at

⁶ In J. R. Harrison, “Benefaction Ideology and Christian Responsibility for Widows,” *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published 1984-85*, vol. 8, ed. S. R. Llewelyn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 114.

Baugh cites another. “Titus Aelius Hadrian Antoninus Pius ... to the rulers, the council, and the people of the Ephesians, greetings. I did not learn about the generosity which Vedius Antoninus shows you from your letters but from his. Because, wishing to enlist my help for the adornment of the public works which he promised you, he showed me how many and what magnificent buildings he is adding to the city. But you do not appreciate him properly [i.e., you have not given him enough public honors]. I, for my part, have granted him all that he requested. I appreciated that he hopes to make the city more august in a manner (looking) to the (future?), not following the fashion of many public figures who expend their generosity on spectacles, on distributions, and on prizes for the games (only) for the sake of immediate popularity (IvE 1491).” S. M. Baugh, 1 Timothy,” Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon.*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 470.

least to Justin Martyr.⁷ If one were to use this scheme and categorize this particular law, I would think it would fit under the “civil” laws of Israel.

Many people think that we teach that all civil and ceremonial use of the law has passed away. This is not correct. The Confession says, “To Israel he also gave various judicial laws, which ceased at the same time their nation ended. These laws no longer obligate anyone as part of that institution. *Only their general principles of justice continue to have moral value*” (LBC 19.4 Modern English Version). Notice that it says their *general principles of justice continue* to have moral value. In other words, civil law is rooted in unending moral law that transcends cultures and centuries.

Paul sees in this seemingly *innocuous law about oxen* a great *moral principle*. He uses a *lesser to greater* logical (*argumentum a fortiori*) argument. As even the Rabbis had seen from this very same law (*b. B. Meṣi‘a* 88b; *b. Giṭ.* 62a; also Philo, *Virtues* 145), “*God’s concern for animals implied far greater concern for people ... oxen stand for all species of labor, including humans.*”⁸ If God cares that oxen eat food

⁷ Cf. **Ronald M. Rothenberg**, “Relation of the Tripartite Division of the Law and the Public/Private Distinction: Examining the Streams of Thought Behind Them,” *JETS* 61.4 (2018): 819. https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/61/61-4/JETS_61.4_805-823_Rothenberg.pdf.

⁸ **Philip H. Towner**, “1-2 Timothy and Titus,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 900.

while they work, **how much more** pastors who plough through the word of God that they might then plant and give its fruit to the people?

But Paul isn't done. He **adds something more**. It is interesting that the way the Complete Jewish Bible, translated by a Messianic Jew named David Stern, has it we read, “**You are not to muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,**’ *in other words*, “**The worker deserves his wages.**” (1Tim 5:18 CJB). This is a strange way of translating the Greek word “*kai*” (and/even/also). It assumes that the second saying is a rephrasing of the first. However, there is a much better option.

In **Luke 10:7**, in a chapter where Jesus sends out his 70 disciples, he tells them, “**Remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages.**” The Greek is identical. The implications are stunning. Paul is not quoting the OT here, but rather, he is quoting Jesus from Luke's Gospel. **He calls it “Scripture.”** Of course, the *meaning* of this saying is indeed what the CJB said, but that statement itself is Scripture.

So **both Testaments are grounded in the same basic moral law**. If a man works, he should be able to make a living at it. The interesting thing is that this is to be read in light of

the earlier teaching that an elder is not to be “a lover of money” (1Tim 3:3). As I said there, this doesn’t mean the pastor should be paid as little as possible. It means that the pastor doesn’t do it because of money, which is the reason, sadly, too many other jobs are done (and these days, pastors too!). Because Paul will spend a good deal of time on money in the last chapter, I’ll save more comment on this until then. For now, it is enough to say that the point here is that there are men outside and inside the church who “rule,” not in lording it over others, but in the sense of having to make judicial judgments about all kinds of matters, both secular and sacred. They should be compensated an honest, fair wage for their work and given “double honor” by the people because of their service. This pleases and honors God.

Charges Against Elders

Without changing the subject of elders, Paul now moves to a different topic that might concern them. “Do not admit a charge against an elder...” (1Tim 5:19). I suggest that these “elders” are the same secular, and especially Christian church elders, who were in view in the vv. 17-18. Admitting a charge means that someone is bringing a legal case against them (even if the “court” is just the church).

Again, we are dealing with the realm of making judicial judgments. Obviously, someone thinks they have done something ethically or morally irresponsible or wrong.

Like the first command, this one also goes back to the OT. “... except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Like the previous, this one is also from Deuteronomy. “*On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness*” (Deut 17:6). “*A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established*” (Deut 19:15). These same texts are used in Matthew in the context of church discipline (Matt 18:16, 20), which in that Corinthian passage I said I might have opened with, Paul directly speaks to when he chastises them for taking their grievances with one another to secular courts rather than dealing with them in-house (1Cor 6:3-8).

What kind of charge might Paul be thinking about as being brought against the elders? It is some kind of known sin. “As for those who persist in sin ...” 1Tim 5:24-25 further the idea. “The sins of some people are conspicuous

[that is, quite obvious], going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, even those that are not cannot remain hidden.” Notice, “*good*” works and *sins*. Again, the knowledge of good and evil. Again, the point is some kind of judicial activity, in this case, it is the Final Judgment of God on the Great Day. The point here is that sometimes it is easy to see when someone is sinning, sometimes not. But God will deal with all that fully. In the meantime, timothy is to continue in *good* works. But what kind of good works? I’ll give you five things.

The first is not admitting a charge against an elder. Timothy is to exercise his divinely given ruling authority and discern good from evil, in this case, the evil is someone bringing a charge against an elder with no one to back it up. This happens all the time. It is one thing to hear a charge and take it seriously. And this should always be done. But upon investigation, if they are the only witness, to admit a charge formally is a grave and dangerous sin that has allowed gossip, slander, vilification, and other sins to be taken seriously. It is not only pastors like Timothy who are to take this seriously, for Christians engage in those kinds of activities all the time in less formal ways. Your job is to listen,

investigate, and then absolutely refuse to entertain it if it is simply them hating on a brother. Few things in this world split churches and families and ruin more lives than this sin.

Rebuking Them Publicly

Second, he is to “rebuke” elders “who persist in sin” (20). This implies the whole Matthew 18 order of church discipline, which I won’t get into today. But the point of that order is that each step in the process is to bring about repentance of sin. If they refuse to repent after all that, then he is to *publicly* rebuke them (“in the presence of all”). This is “so that the rest may stand in fear.”

Two points here. First, didn’t Paul begin the chapter by saying not to rebuke an older man? Yes, but there are two answers to this. First, the English word “rebuke” in the ESV is actually two words in Greek. The word in 5:1 (*epiplēssō*) has more of a moral overtone, meaning “to strike out at” or “to beat upon.” The word here (*elegchō*) is more of a legal term, has more the meaning of “convict” or “expose.” Second, though it is the same word for older man/ elder (*presbuteros*), it is clear that this is a special kind of older man, a leader of the church. Because of that important office, it is vitally important that the office itself be kept holy. Whether

this means excommunication or something lesser, that is up to the church itself to discern good and evil in each case.

That brings me to **the second point**. It is also important that the people understand that **the man in office is not untouchable**. How many leaders do we see around us that even when everyone knows they are moral degenerates, they continue in their office, continue in their sin, and seemingly get away with it for eternity. The church must not be like this. But the people must fear, as they did in the OT, when the two highest priests of Israel (other than Aaron) were incinerated by God in the Tabernacle.

You Must Be Impartial

The **third** thing Timothy is to do is found in **vs. 21**. He is to “**keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.**” It is already an extremely difficult thing to confront a brother in sin, let alone at the level of church discipline, let alone an officer of the church or a highly prized member of the community. The **temptation is to show favoritism**, to look the other way when you know what someone has actually done, to not bring it forward, and so on. This has torn entire denominations, let alone churches, apart. But I think something should also be said

here about **innocent until proven guilty**. It can be just as easy to listen to **gossip**, especially of someone you are very close to, and to immediately believe them and to rush into discipline, ruining someone's life. So what we are talking about here is **fair and just courts**. God hates, *despises*, courts of injustice on either side of this equation. They are literally the opposite of who he is as a holy, just being.

Curiously, it is in this context that the strange reference to "**elect angels**," the only time that appears in the Bible, comes up. "**In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I charge you to keep these rules ...**" What's going on here? Remember our theme: *making judgments*.

Earlier we discussed the **angelic divine council** of *elohim* (gods) who rule over the affairs of the cosmos. Fuller writes, "**It seems likely, as virtually all commentators observe, that the inclusion of angels in 1 Tim 5:21 means that they will be involved in overseeing, and/or exercising judgment on the basis of, the fairness of the examination to which that verse refers.**"⁹ How do we deduce this? Notice, there are **three** mentioned: **God, Christ Jesus, elect angels**. *Two or three*

⁹ See **J. William Fuller**, "Of Elders and Triads in 1 Timothy 5.19-25," *NTS* 29.2 (April 1983): 261-62.

[file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/\[New%20Testament%20Studies%20vol.%2029%20Iss.%202\]%20Fuller,%20J.%20William%20-%20Of%20Elders%20and%20Triads%20in%201%20Timothy%205.%2019%20E2%80%9325%20\(1983\)%20\[10.1017_S0028688500010766\]%20-%20libgen.li.pdf](file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/[New%20Testament%20Studies%20vol.%2029%20Iss.%202]%20Fuller,%20J.%20William%20-%20Of%20Elders%20and%20Triads%20in%201%20Timothy%205.%2019%20E2%80%9325%20(1983)%20[10.1017_S0028688500010766]%20-%20libgen.li.pdf)

witnesses. Paul has not changed subjects, he has only moved to the heavenly realm to help the people understand the spiritual significance of what they are doing. He basically places Timothy under an oath (“*in the presence of...*”). Those who exercise church discipline had better do it in a godly, proper, biblical fashion, because they too will be judged.

Why are they “*elect*” angels? I believe this refers to the angels God has kept for himself, those whom he did not allow to follow the fallen watchers in the rebellion(s) of the OT. These are the angels Christ himself comes with in judgment (*Matt 13:41, 49; 16:27; 24:31*; etc.).

Do Not Be Hasty in the Laying On of Hands

Fourth, Timothy is *not to be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor to take part in the sins of others, but rather, he is to keep himself pure (1Tim 5:22)*. This one is pretty self-explanatory and we’ve already talked about it in a round about way. But the *laying on of hands* deserves a little comment. First, in the laying on of hands, something spiritual is transferred to the person. In Timothy’s own case, he was given a “*gift*” (*1Tim 4:14*). Sometimes it is healing. In a positive sense, it is always *a spiritual blessing*. Timothy

is being told to take this seriously, even if he doesn't see any kind of outward sign that anything has happened. As we are dealing with elders, it makes sense that Paul would give this directive here.

Second, Hebrews calls the laying on of hands one of the “**elementary doctrines of Christ**” (**Heb 6:1**) that people are to understand so that they can “**distinguish good from evil.**” So we are back to that thought yet again. Timothy is being told, “**Make sure you are judging wisely the elder you are about to receive. Make a good judgment for the sake of the church.**”

Drink a Little Wine

Fifth, out of seemingly nowhere, Paul tells Timothy, “**No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments**” (**1Tim 5:23**). But this isn't quite out of nowhere. In fact, it continues the same thought process of **discerning good and evil**.

Recall that one of the qualifications for elders was that he is “**not addicted to much wine**” (**3:8**). Then recall that the opponents of Paul were giving a false gospel that revolved around an ascetic life. Specifically, they “**require abstinence**

from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving” (4:3). It is not a far stretch, especially given what we saw with Apollonius, that this also included alcohol. While this is also another subject that could take up an entire sermon or book (and has), my point here is that I believe Paul is raising this point to help his protégé in the ministry make discern good from evil.

Evil: Being an out-of-control drunkard. **Good:** wine. Wine gladdens the heart of man (Ps 104:15). Jesus’ first miracle was to turn water into wine ... and his wine was the best! **Evil**, calling something God made good evil. **Evil**. Forcing something others do not want upon them against their conscience. **Good:** understanding how to discern these things. Too many people can’t, and they turn this entire judicial process into a legalistic or antinomian exercise in missing the point, to the harm of many.

Perhaps one other point is worth mentioning here. It is possible that Timothy didn’t really *want to drink this wine*, even if he knew it had medicinal value. We know a little something about the wine of Ephesus. It was horrid! One commentary explains, “The wine produced there was notoriously bad. The elder Pliny, who wrote a whole section of his *Natural History* ... on the different wines

around in the mid-first century A.D., says: “As for the vintage of Mesogis, it has been found to cause headaches, and that of Ephesus has also proved to be unwholesome, because sea-water and boiled must [grape juice before it has fermented] are employed to season it. Sea-water! It must have been wretched stuff, but Paul hopes that it will ward off Timothy’s ‘frequent illnesses.’”¹⁰

Slaves and Masters

The final thing to look at this morning is the most out of place of them all. It really can be treated on its own, but because of the relationship of “brothers” to 5:1, I’ll do it here. I believe it continues the same general line of thinking of discerning good and evil. “Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. Those who have believing masters must *not be disrespectful* on the ground that they are *brothers*; rather they must *serve all the better* since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved” (1Tim 6:1-2a). These are similar guidelines that Paul gives in other letters about the same subject.

¹⁰ Baugh, 469.

This is a difficult subject, especially in America where the word “**slavery**” is a four-letter word, and in many ways, rightly so. But people must understand that **slavery in America was rather different** from slavery in Greece and Rome, and especially Israel! While America and Greece share the idea that a slave was the owner’s chattel (property), the Greeks did not generally go around kidnapping people on other continents and putting them aboard ships headed to other worlds where they would lose even their identities. In Israel, **slaves were never even considered property**, but always as human beings possessing basic inalienable rights. Also, slavery had nothing to do with the color of one’s skin (though, often, different tribes would conquer a neighboring village and take many as slaves).

That still doesn’t explain **why Paul wouldn’t just say, “Hey, slavery is evil. I want all Christians to release all slaves, right now!”** The reason for this might just be that in the ANE, “**everyone who has a ‘lord’ is automatically a ‘slave’ of that lord.**”¹¹ And since nearly everyone was a serf or worshiped the gods, everyone was a slave in some sense or another. Thus, the maxim we find from Herodotus to

¹¹ **Dexter E. Callender**, “Servants of God(s) and Servants of Kings in Israel and the Ancient Near East,” ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, et al., *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 69.

Marx, “Everybody is someone’s slave.” Even Jesus is the “servant” of the LORD!

Rather than incite some kind of **revolution** in Ephesus, Paul instead insists that Christians learn to **think biblically** about slavery. Since we are all under a yoke of some kind, but especially in actual slave situations, slaves are to regard their masters as worthy of all honor. He says nothing one way or the other about seeking to be free; that’s simply a different matter. In the meantime, here is how you live as a slave. We’ve seen this theme of honor before with **widows and elders!** Why? So that the **Name of God and the teaching** of Christianity may not be reviled. Since slavery (or perhaps better, indentured servanthood) was not implicitly dehumanizing (it can become that), calling for a revolution would have been the opposite message as the gospel.

Likewise, **masters** must **not be disrespectful**, but rather **treat their slaves as brothers**. It is clear here that Paul views both **masters and slaves as part of one family** that has taken the name of Christ, and so he treats both as Christians. But the larger point for today is that **the people themselves** are now being taught to discern good from evil. Given how volatile this issue still is in America, it is fascinating to think through that point regarding this kind of slavery. I know

from personal experience in classrooms discussing this that to side with Paul here is to side with General Lee and the southern plantation owners. It is to put a Confederate Flag on your house. Rather than discern proper good and evil, they fly off the handle and demand that Paul was an outdated bigot who refused to do what was necessary to “free the people.” It’s ironic, because they are not discerning good and evil at all.

So, **what’s the point of all this today?** In my estimation, it is simple. God restricted access to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because we failed the test as humans to make godly decisions about it (all in God’s sovereign will of course). In that fall, all of humanity fell into sin and darkness and ever since it has had an impossible time truly understanding with wisdom the law of God, the holiness of God, the person of God, why he made certain things work certain ways, and why he gave us laws. We just can’t discern the real reasons. We have fallen short of the glory of God.

But in Christ, the one who is the Tree of Life, True Wisdom has shown itself perfect to do this very thing. When we read the life of our Lord and truly begin to contemplate the way he discerned good and evil, our breath is taken

away. Honestly, how much of what he did looks like we thought it should? But more importantly, that life and wisdom of God is offered to any who would take freely of the heavenly gift by faith. And in so doing, God restores to his family, through his Spirit, not only access to the tree of life in Christ, but to the [tree of the knowledge of good and evil](#). In such a way as we can handle.

Christ's church can now be the place where the whole world sees such knowledge and discernment come to fruition in ways that are [doctrinally true](#) and [ethically good and pure](#). But only if she learns how to make *right* judgments through use and practice. Those judgments begin with her leaders. Then, they transfer that knowledge to the people themselves, who go forth and learn to apply them wherever they go. Only in Christ is this truly possible, for he alone is that Life and Wisdom of God that is needed. Therefore, come to the source of all knowledge and truth by faith, empty of your own self-righteousness, trusting that God's Spirit in you will do everything you need to truly know good and evil.

Works Cited

- Baugh, S. M. "1 Timothy." Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon.*, vol. 3. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.
- Callender, Dexter E. "Servants of God(s) and Servants of Kings in Israel and the Ancient Near East." Ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, et al. *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 67-82.
- Ephrem the Syrian. *Hymns on Paradise.*
- Fuller, J. William "Of Elders and Triads in 1 Timothy 5.19-25." *New Testament Studies* 29.2 (April 1983): 258-63. [file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/\[New%20Testament%20Studies%20vol.%2029%20iss.%2021%20Fuller.%20J.%20William%20-%20Of%20Elders%20and%20Triads%20in%201%20Timothy%205.%2019%20-%20E2%80%9325%20\(1983\)%20\[10.1017_S00286885000107661%20-%20libgen.li.pdf](file:///Users/douglasvandorn/Downloads/[New%20Testament%20Studies%20vol.%2029%20iss.%2021%20Fuller.%20J.%20William%20-%20Of%20Elders%20and%20Triads%20in%201%20Timothy%205.%2019%20-%20E2%80%9325%20(1983)%20[10.1017_S00286885000107661%20-%20libgen.li.pdf)
- Harrison, J. R. "Benefaction Ideology and Christian Responsibility for Widows." *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published 1984-85*, vol. 8. Ed. S. R. Llewelyn. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Rothenberg, Ronald M. "Relation of the Tripartite Division of the Law and the Public/Private Distinction: Examining the Streams of Thought Behind Them." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61.4 (2018): 805-23. https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/61/61-4/JETS_61.4_805-823_Rothenberg.pdf.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Genesis*. The JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- Towner, Philip H. "1-2 Timothy and Titus." *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007.
- Walton, John. *Genesis*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.
- Wilder, William N. "Illumination And Investiture: The Royal Significance Of The Tree Of Wisdom in Genesis 3." *Westminster Theological Journal* 68:1 (2006): 50-69. https://www.academia.edu/11702829/Illumination_and_Investiture_The_Royal_Significance_of_the_Tree_of_Wisdom_in_Genesis_3.