

Instructions Concerning Widows, Part I

Call to Worship: Psalm 75

Hymn Insert- *Blessed Be Your Name*

1st Scripture: Acts 6:1-7

Hymn Insert- *You Are My All in All*

2nd Scripture: 1 Timothy 5:3-8

Hymn #400- *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*

Introduction:

Last time, we found Paul exhorting Timothy to embrace a familial respect for all who are in the church, so as to maintain a proper, God-honoring attitude, while dealing with the poisonous infiltration of false doctrine and reproofing those who needed to be corrected. This would urge Timothy to maintain a biblical balance, while seeking to take aim at getting the church at Ephesus back onto the gospel track.

Moving forward then, Paul will continue to deal with the topic of "relating to others," in different spheres within the church. He has already dealt with the general way in which Timothy ought to correct all; those men who are older (as fathers), younger men (as brothers), older women (as mothers), and younger women (as sisters) with all purity. In the next three major sections of this letter, Paul will deal with three other types of relationships, specifically addressing the way in which certain people ought to be "honored." First, he'll address the treatment of widows (vs. 3-16). You'll notice, beginning in verse 3, Paul states, "*Honor* widows who are really widows...". Then he'll address the treatment of elders (vs. 17-25). You'll notice, beginning in verse 17, Paul states, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double *honor*...". And then, finally, he'll address the treatment of masters by their bondservants (chapter 6:1-2). And you'll notice there, beginning in verse 1, Paul states, "Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all *honor*." And so, all three of these types of people are to receive a particular type of *honor*, which Paul highlights in this latter portion of his letter.

This morning then (and probably into at least the next one or two Sundays), we will address the first of these people groups, namely, "widows." It is interesting to note that Paul spends such a large portion of this *urgent* letter (14 verses), giving Timothy instructions that deal with the identity and treatment of true widows. And while some of these instructions, may be

unique to the time, I believe that there are very relevant applications that we can (and ought) to take from them. Needless to say, if God deemed it so important to include this section in the volume of His Holy Word (along with many other texts that address the topic of widows - in both Testaments), then we ought to search out that importance and embrace it with both hands.

I. Important Prefatory Notes

Our text begins, "Honor widows who are really widows." And you'll notice that it ends (in verse 16) with an appropriate conclusion, "If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and *do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.*"

And so, just by looking at the bookends of this lengthy text, we see that Paul's main concern here, is, in large part, to identify those who are *really widows*, so that the leadership can limit the financial/material burden that is placed on the church, prohibiting the unnecessary extension of its circle of regular support, too far and wide. There needed to be parameters set, in the church, to determine, the extent of responsibility (particularly financial) that should be placed on the church, in maintaining the needs of those who were expressing financial dependence, in any regular and consistent sense.

To be sure, when dealing with finances (in all ages), many hands will be outstretched toward the church, and there needs to be a proper, biblical determination, concerning whose hands, the church ought to fill. Our government's initiation and use of the "welfare system," is a key example of how difficult it is to properly determine, who should receive regular support, and who shouldn't. Sadly, many successfully milk the system, and ought to receive nothing, while others, who would be better suited to receive some aid, are neglected. And so, Paul wants to set some parameters, concerning who should receive regular financial/material help, and who should not. Remember, the kingdom of God is fueled by finances (and material resources), and so, the people of God must strive to be good stewards of the monies that God provides for her advancement.

All of that said, let me leave you with a handful of prefatory notes that will better help us enter the context of Paul's detailed instructions here:

1) Most obvious, and at the very foundation, we can say that God has a particular concern for, and compassion toward the poor. I could easily spend several sermons, walking through the Scriptures, surveying both testaments, proving this point alone, but I don't believe that I have to. There are numerous instances in the Scriptures where we find God commanding His people to show compassion toward those who are truly poor, and condemning those who oppress the poor. Indeed, the great sin of the rich man, in the parable that Jesus told of the "rich man and Lazarus," was his utter neglect of poor Lazarus (who was laid at his gate, daily), and his over indulging of his own fleshly appetites.

2) More often than not, the poorest of the people were those who were widows and orphans, because, particularly in a culture where men were the "bread winners" of the home, the lack of a man in the home (be it a father or a husband, or even an older son) could lead to the women and children lacking even the very basic necessities of life. Unlike what we are used to today, women were generally keepers of the home, and the work force, therefore, was not so welcoming to them (1 Tim. 2:15). Understanding this, is important, when considering the contextual background of all that Paul states here, in our main text. That is why James can define pure and undefiled religion as "caring for the widows and the orphans," as well as keeping one's self unspotted from the world. In essence, James was saying that true religion (heart religion) looks out for the poor and strives for purity. Widows and orphans, by and large, made up the poorest of the people, because of their dependence upon others to provide for them.

3) It has always been a customary practice for the people of God to care for widows, in both covenants. [See Deuteronomy 14:29; 16:11; 24:17&19] [See Acts 6:1-7]

4) Apparently, in the early church, there were a number of widows amongst the local congregations, who were added to a list, who received regular, continuous aid from the church. [Read verse 9]. Again, keeping in mind that many of the "government offered benefits" that exist in our country were not available (SSI, Medicaid, Medicare, welfare...etc), and that, it was not nearly as common for women to work outside the home, the dependence of certain types of widows (especially older ones) was great. And so, there were a select group, who received regular, consistent funding and aid, as in the case described here by Paul.

I note this also, to affirm that Paul is not saying that the church *cannot* ever offer financial or material help to others in the church, who are not widows, or who are not classified as true widows, here in the text. This is not speaking about issues related to helping those who suffer occasional setbacks for various reasons (job loss, help with medical bills, temporary setbacks...etc). This is specifically addressing a group of individuals, who would be receiving regular, constant aid from the church. They are "taken into the number." That said, there are general principles that we can still take from this, as we will see, when we work through the text.

5) As in the case of all time periods, people were sinners then, and some saw the opportunity of getting on this list, as a means of unnecessarily taking advantage of the generosity of the church. And so, Paul had to set up biblical parameters for Timothy (and for all of the local churches) to determine who were true widows, or widows who ought to have been eligible to be added to the list, to receive constant aid from the church. For example, some widows had family members, who ought to have helped them, rather than burden the church with their expenses, so that widows who had no family members could receive that aid. Funds were limited, and there were many other expenses related to the work of the kingdom, and so, those who would constantly draw from the church's funds, must be those who truly needed to do so (What Paul calls "true widows," not in the sense, of having lost a husband, but rather, in the sense of truly warranting the constant aid of the church). Another example, which we will find here, is women who might have saw this as an opportunity to get out of an unwanted marriage (for unbiblical reasons). If this fund had no parameters, it could easily serve as a motivation for some to leave their husbands, so that, they could attempt to get on this list, and absorb the support of the church to now meet their needs. [Ex: the single "Octo-mom's artificial insemination...etc]

And so, Paul highlights this class of "true widows" as a means of setting up parameters, limiting the burden that would be placed on the church, to those who ought to have been legitimately eligible for regular, ongoing, financial/material support.

6) Finally, as we work through the whole of this text, we will find that those who were added to this list, were very actively involved in the church (vs. 10). In fact, some commentators believe that they were employed by the church in certain respects, filling various positions as a

means of providing for the body in other ways, even as they were financially drawing from the body themselves.

Having these background prefatory notes in mind, let us then begin our journey into this text.

II. Instructions Concerning Widows

And so, when Paul begins by stating, "Honor widows who are really widows," what he is saying then is, "Allow the widows, who are truly alone/desolate (and who meet the following qualifications) to be added to the number of those who receive regular financial assistance from the church.

Verse four begins to clarify this, as Paul presents a contrast, defining those who would not be classified as true widows, in the sense, of being added to the number to be supported.

"But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God."

And so, the first principle that Paul gives here, is that widows who have older children or grandchildren ought not to be added to the number, because their own offspring, whom the widow once cared for, ought to reciprocate the care that they once received from their own mother/grandmother. For this is good and acceptable in God's sight. It is honorable and pious for children to care for their aged parents, even as their aged parents once cared for them. And it is, therefore, dishonorable and impious for children to neglect the needs of their aged parents, especially their widowed mother, who no longer has the support of her husband.

The severity of this principle is especially seen, when Paul concludes the whole of his first point in verse 8. Notice, he states there, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." And so, according to Paul, to neglect to care for your own household, and especially your widowed mother, is to deny the faith and to be worse than an unbeliever. Why can Paul make such a sobering statement? Because the sincerity of our faith is proven by the sacrificial concern that we have toward others. And to neglect the needs of your own family is to evidence the shallowness of your faith, at the very basic level. How can one, for whom Christ truly died, be

so inconsiderate toward a needy mother, let alone the needy, in general. Even unbelievers, generally, have a moral compass that recognizes this much. And so, those who profess to be in the light, while exhibiting such darkness, are worse than those who live in the darkness, making no profession of having come to the light.

And so, widows who have family, ought to be provided for, by their own families, and especially, if their own families profess faith in Christ. This is good, honorable, right, proper and acceptable in God's sight.

Before closing then, let me leave you with one other relevant principle that Paul gives, in verses 5-7: "Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. And these things command, that they may be blameless."

Again, singling out those who ought to be numbered among the widows (who are to receive regular financial assistance), Paul brings forth another contrast. And this contrast involves those who love and trust the Lord, as opposed to those who love and live in pleasure. Or, in even simpler terms, those who are committed to the Lord, as opposed to those who are given over to the world. The church is to ultimately invest (especially on any regular basis) in those who have a sincere and vested interest in Christ. Both, by her life and her actions, the true widow, having no filial responsibility to a husband, evidences a filial responsibility to Christ, her spiritual husband. To this end, she is committed to communing with her heavenly husband in prayer, day and night, evidencing her sincere trust in and commitment to God. She makes continual supplications/requests before God, laboring especially on behalf of the church, and is given over to a life of consistent prayer.

In contrast, Paul moves on to state that those who live in pleasure; those given over to worldly pursuits and pleasures, actually exhibit the fact that they are really dead (spiritually), even though they live (physically). It is the exact opposite of the type of conclusion that the world would draw. Observing the widow, the world would see a wasted life, missing out on all the fun and action that it provides. But observing its own; those who "live it up," it would declare such individuals to have true life. But, we know the general principle of Scripture, don't

we, which states, God doesn't think as the world thinks. God knows that true life is found in knowing, loving and serving Him.

And so, Paul exhorts Timothy to command this type of a lifestyle to all of the widows, so that, in observing this command, they may be found blameless, especially, as those who would be absorbing the resources of the church, in any sense. As God invests in them, they ought to bring a faithful return on His investment, avoiding a pursuit of worldly lusts and pleasures, while drawing nigh to Him.

Leaving you with a final illustration, Brethren, we might consider two female examples, who could help us materialize what Paul means by this second principle. The first, though not having been a widow, suits the purpose well. We recall Lot's wife, who evidenced that her heart was truly in the wicked world of Sodom, and who, although living (even with such a righteous man as Lot), was spiritually dead. And when did the evidence come out? When she violated the command of the angels, to leave Sodom without looking back. She turned, and looked to that city, which enraptured her heart, and by that glance (the outward motion, which spoke volumes about her inward disposition), she was destroyed and turned into a pillar of salt.

And as a positive example, we think of the prophetess, Anna, who was indeed a widow of many years, and who exhibited the type of heart, here described by Paul. [Read Luke 2:36-38].

We will continue on with this theme, next time, Lord willing, but for now, let me leave you with a few closing thoughts and applications, before we conclude our time together, this morning, brethren.

III. Closing Thoughts and Applications

1) While we live in a different time, and while we live in a different context, where women are much more received in the work force (and where our government does provide some access to funds for those in need), there is certainly an appropriate place to provide assistance (even ongoing assistance) to individuals, who would fit into the description of a "true widow," as presented here by Paul. To be sure, there are cases where a husband is prematurely lost, leaving his wife with a financial burden that is beyond her abilities to bear. There are also cases where husbands abandon their wives and children, again, leaving a financial burden that is

beyond the wife's ability to bear. And so, I just want to note that the general principles, given here by Paul, would find legitimate application for us, today, even if the situations are not identical. One of the blessings of having a good Deacon board (which we have), is that they can assess the needs of the body on a case by case basis.

2) That said, see the importance of maintaining a good stewardship over the funds, collected by the church and for the church. While all of our resources ultimately belong to God, the tithes are especially important, because they have been given as an offering to God, set apart for His service. And so, to that end, pray that we would be good stewards over the resources that belong to God, exercising great care in the use of His funds. This is one way, you can especially pray for the deacons, who generally, oversee all of the finances of the church.

3) See again, the natural correctness, of grown children, taking the responsibility of caring for their needy parents. It is good and acceptable in the sight of God for those who have been raised by parents, to reciprocate the blessing, if and when their parents are in need, and especially, when dealing with a widowed mother. May it never be, Brethren, that we, as the people of God, come to consider our parents as burdens (financial or otherwise), when they are in their latter years. We live in a time when some would think it proper to simply euthanize the older generation, so that, they don't interfere with our comfortable lifestyles. Embracing such thinking as a Christian is a denial of the faith, itself. And so, may we keep a compassionate and focused eye on our loved ones, as they move into their latter years, even as they had so carefully done for us, when we were dependent upon them, in our younger years.

4) Recognize the trap of worldly pleasures, and how they pull our hearts away from the Lord. You cannot love God and wealth. You can pretend to do so, but in reality, to love the world is to turn away from the Lord. This principle, which Paul lays down for widows, is universal in its scope. And so, let us ever guard our hearts, brethren, which tend to gradually drift away from God, and toward the world. Even if we are in Christ, there are still magnetic fragments in our hearts, from the old man, which would constantly seek to draw us back to the world. You must fight to maintain a daily walk with Christ, or you will not finish the race.

[Note: The unique advantage and commitment of singleness..]

Amen!!!

Benediction: Ephesians 3:14-21