

Join with me in 1 Timothy 5:1-16. Let the word of God be spoken into your hearts and minds. Paul gives this counsel to Timothy.

*(5:1) “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, (5:2) older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.*

*(5:3) “Honor widows who are truly widows. (5:4) But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. (5:5) She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, (5:6) but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. (5:7) Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. (5:8) But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

*(5:9) “ Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, “ (5:10) and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. (5:11) But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry (5:12) and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. (5:13) Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. (5:14) So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. (5:15) For some have already strayed after Satan. (5:16) If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.*

We begin, as I mentioned, with elders. Pastoral ministry is called shepherding. Elders are called to shepherd the flock. In past times this was called the care of souls. If you reflect a little bit upon that you would realize this is what you might call people work. Paul has said that God’s word is given as a stewardship of faith. It is a treasury of truth for the good of those served. It could equally well be said that the body of believers is also a stewardship, a treasury, for God Himself has given His Spirit to all of us and furthermore has gifted all who are in fact His children by faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore God has already poured into the lives of every person I am looking at right now, if you are a believer personally in Jesus Christ, He has already poured the riches of His grace into your lives. It is the responsibility therefore of elders or pastors to be stewards of that wealth in order that that wealth would become active in serving the purposes of God. It is essential for us to remember that relationship. Indeed the elders are to cherish the saints as much as the Lord cherishes the saints. This stands whether they are saintly or not. Let me ask a very bold question: how many were saintly all week? Now you know why you pray for the elders. We pray for the elders because the sheep...

So this is the way Peter puts it. Peter is talking to elders – remember the first topic today is elders. This is the way Peter puts it in 1 Peter 5:1-3.

*“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight – what I would do is circle that word!—exercising oversight,*

*not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”*

Stepping back and reflecting on the relationship between the letter to Timothy and the larger body of teaching in the New Testament we should be misled by Paul having addressed this letter to Timothy alone. Timothy is perhaps the first among equals in the sense that he was mentored by Paul and possibly he was appointed to the leadership of the elders as the pastor-teacher of the church at Ephesus and so in that sense he has something of a different standing. But it is important for us to recognize that the range of his responsibilities does not put him in a different category than the other elders of the church. In other words right now I could have all the men in this congregation who are elders stand and say that everything that I am now saying from the Word of God applies to every one of us equally. That should be kept in mind as we interact as the Body of Christ over time.

It is significant that in Acts 20 when we are told that Paul travels to the island of Miletus and he calls the elders from the church in Ephesus specifically and he is giving them the last farewell – he knows he is going to go on down to Jerusalem and eventually, though he doesn’t know how, he is going to end up in Rome – he says, I am not going to be back. When he calls the elders to him in Miletus no mention is made of Timothy in particular. You would think if Timothy was the “stand-up” guy, the big and most important one that he would have been named. But he is not. He is just one of the elders. That is important in our day to keep that very clearly in mind.

As we take up Paul’s instructions here in 1 Timothy 5, he is continuing in light of what he told us in chapter three, he is continuing to give practical advice if you go back to chapter 3 verse 14, he says, advice as to, “... *how one should behave in the household of God which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*” In 1 Timothy 4 you will recall, Paul’s concern was with Timothy in particular. The first care of an elder is for his own walk of faith and his growth as a servant. It would be appropriate for anyone in this congregation to come to any one of the men who are elders, me of course, and anyone else, and say, “Tell me, what is your area of personal study in the Word of God these days? Tell me, what are your areas of prayer? Tell me, as you are shepherding this flock, can I pray for you? Are there specific areas that you would like me to uphold you in prayer?” The reason I mention this, beloved, is because if elders are going to exercise oversight, they must be in an accountable relationship with the rest of the body. In other words, shepherding the sheep is a dialogue. It must be a back and forth conversation. I am going to be starting a men’s study group in my home as I do each year this coming Thursday and I hope that a number of you men are interested in studying Acts. It wasn’t my choice; one of the guys who comes to the study said to me point blank: “Do Acts!” I am delighted. It is a great study. But in that situation the men who come are in a position to interact with me talk with me and find what is going on and pray with me. That is a great thing to do. Anyone in this congregation should covet that opportunity – not to come this Thursday night, but rather to be in a situation face to face, person to person relationship with one of the elders of the church, partly so you could hold them to account because they are going to exercise oversight over you and it needs to be an equal kind of relationship. We have adopted odd perceptions of the nature of authority and its exercise. It has come to us from the world and we need to be amending it.

An elder needs to know how to deal with people of all ages, young to old. One of the things [regarding which] God captured my attention – many of you I was pursuing graduate studies in history and

philosophy and a bunch of stuff like that. This was during the Vietnam era: how many remember the Vietnam era. It is good to forget! At that time I was going to the university and one of the things I noticed was that everybody came up with new schemes for social reform and as they came up with new schemes for social reform, in order to straighten out and improve society I watched them move in and out of relationships. I said, “Something is really wrong with what I am seeing here.” I said, “If something is true it needs to be true for people who are eight years old as well as eighty. It has to be true for the whole spectrum of humanity.” Elders need to understand they are called by God to deal with everyone...I am not sure eight works! But from the child all the way up to the most senior citizen.

There is something else that we must do: an elder must know how to handle those who oppose him. This is beautifully given to us in 2 Timothy 2:22-26. We have looked at this before and it is just worth putting our eyes on once again. This is the second letter Paul writes to Timothy and he continues to write how he is to behave in the household of God. Beginning at v. 22:

*“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”*

What a job description! An elder needs to know the word. He needs to understand the word of God, and he needs to understand it and have a handle on it so that he knows how to deal with someone opposing either himself as an elder or the doctrines of the faith. It is part of the calling that God has given.

In 1 Timothy 5 the instructions are more general. At one time or another, you and I need to know and I suspect that we do know, that all of us need a word of advice or caution, perhaps as Paul says even a word of rebuke. Notice again what he says in the first verse: *“Do not rebuke an older man, but encourage him as you would a father...”* That’s part of the territory.

The need for rebuke along with the other forms of correction is spelled out in a scripture that many of us have memorized from 2 Timothy 3:16-17. You could probably say it: *“All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”* If I wasn’t rushing along it would be worth it to stop and pause on each of those terms: teaching, reproof, correction and when is the last time someone reproved you? We do not like this. We want everything in our spiritual lives to be positive. Right! I was reflecting about this. Notice that Paul goes on and he says in 3:10-15 of 2 Timothy leading up to those statements about the word,

*“You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”*

What is he talking about here? He is saying, Timothy you are an elder and I want you to know that an elder needs to be solidly grounded in the word of God. Understand the relationship that is spelled out here in those verses: Timothy is a man who was raised and nurtured on the Old Testament. There was no New Testament when he was raised. What Paul is saying is that a sound knowledge of all that God has done for God’s people written down in the Old Testament is what is needed for you to realize the fullness of salvation through Jesus Christ. What we have done is we have said is, “Believe in Jesus; don’t worry about the Old Testament” which is a absolute denial of what the scripture tells us.

An elder needs to be solidly grounded in God’s word both for their own assurance of salvation and for the needs of the ongoing growth in godliness and the renewing of the minds of the people. This is what Paul says in Romans 12:2, *“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”* That was his instruction to the Romans. Hebrews 4:12 describes the word of God and its power in these terms. *“The word of God is living and sharper than any two-edged sword...piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* There is a very simple way of silencing the word of God. What is that way? Don’t read it. “Had it on my coffee table all week long. (holding the closed Bible up to an ear) Ain’t talking: I must be doing all right!” Elder, what is your current course of study in the Word of God?

We read and we reread the word of God. Beloved, it is not so much that we haven’t understood it the first time – although nobody understands the word of God fully! But one of the things I think you will notice, I certainly have over the course of time, is that the word of God speaks to us in different ways according to our need and condition. I am sure almost every person in this room has done this: you have gone to a passage you have read a hundred and ninety two times before, you open it up and you say, “For heaven’s sake, it never said that before! How did that get in there? I am amazed! Somebody failed to teach me.” Actually you just probably failed to notice, or more likely the Holy Spirit now just wants you to see and put to action that particular truth from the word. So if you don’t ever go back [to the word] how many times are you going to have that happy occasion? None: you are not going to have it and you will not be thereby strengthened to serve God’s people if you are an elder, or to receive the instructions that come from others through the word.

It is first of all, therefore, through a knowledge of God’s word that a man is prepared to rightly handle or divide the word of truth for others. Included in that good will be 1 Timothy 5:1. Go back again to that and [we see] rebuke. What does it mean to rebuke? To rebuke is to express sharp, stern disapproval. It is a reproof or a reprimand. Timothy was a relatively young man. You can be sure there were older men there in the congregation in Ephesus. Whether young or old, all of us need pastoral care. But you need to exercise discretion. If I go and speak to someone who is a lot older than I am, like [our head elder], the counsel that is given by Paul to Timothy is that you want to speak gently, you want to speak words of encouragement, like, “I’m so glad to see that you are working out at the gym again.” [This is] an encouragement to move along a positive path. You might remember that when you are talking to the elders and you are wanting to hold them to account. So you might say, “You know, you are one of the most godly men I know. I am sure it must be because of your constant time in the Word of God. Where have you most recently been gathering the riches of God’s word into your life?” You want to encourage, you want to exhort.

But it is important to recognize and I think all of us do recognize that a rebuke, even if it is gently stated, is still a rebuke. Young or old there are times when we need to be pulled up short, as it were, in order that we would be spared worse consequences from being left without restraint. What am I talking about? I am talking about the fact that we don't, a lot of times, talk about the facts of our spiritual lives. [I am talking about the fact] that the cohesion of the body of Christ is often a social cohesion, not a spiritual one. The evidence for that is probably open to anybody who looks around this room. We are almost all of us from the same socio-economic strata of society. We are comfortable with each other. But being comfortable on the social level is not the same thing as being integrated spiritually. We should ask ourselves the question, “Why is this, and can we overcome it?”

I am going to shift slightly to the family. This overlaps, so realize that. Through the entirety of the Bible in fact, emphasis is placed on respect for age, even deference. As Timothy was to be discrete, thoughtful, kind, gracious, generous, gentle with anyone who was older than he, so that is a general pattern. Indeed, most of us know this, in the scriptures when the elder walked into a room, the young were supposed to stand, and when the elder spoke, I don't mean an elder in the formal sense, just older people, the young were to fall silent. These are standards of behavior which are absolutely and totally gone from our culture and I suspect they are largely gone from the church. We need to reflect on that. Paul not only says Timothy is to treat an older gentleman, an older believer with gentleness, exhortation, encouragement, but older women are in the same status with younger women. It is part of how the church was supposed to function. I thought about this – I raised five children in case... Well my wife raised five children while I watched! Watching is one of my gifts! I reflect on this: of the various ways in which modernity displays its arrogance, the assumption that only with us have we finally learned how to have loving homes and effectively raise our children is one of the most misplaced. One of my favorite psalms which I recite to myself quite often is 103. In the midst of that Psalm the psalmist says in order to capture a sense of the marvelous grace of God, “*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him.*” If compassionate or tenderhearted fatherhood was a rarity in the ancient world, David's words would have made no sense. But it wasn't. Indeed my suspicion is very strong that there are more dysfunctional families today and there is a greater level of abuse in homes today than there was in biblical times. We should be very cautious before we judge the ancient times as deficient as compared to our own. The Word of God is rich in its counsel and we should seek to gain it for ourselves.

Paul told Timothy to treat his peers as brothers and sisters. Family relations, you see, are the model. The family I think we see if you are familiar with scripture, the family was understood by the Jews to be sacred. It was instituted by God and the family was the basic means for transmitting the covenant and its promises from generation to generation. There is a lot of implication that flows out of that observation. I have finished a book called “*Visionary Marriage*” by a man named Rienow, who has written about some other things. He talks about our need to approach family life in the light of God's purposes. There is a Bible Study or class [built on the same book] that I may offer in the Spring. This is what the Rienows say, “We are married because we are Christians and we believe God has called us to be married. So – this is what they adopt as their purposes as being a married couple – we are committed, we think God wants us to help each other become more like Christ. [That is the first purpose.] Furthermore this will give us the opportunity to impress the hearts of our children with love for God. [Beyond that] God has given us the shared mission of equipping the next generation to make a difference in this world for Christ. [Lastly, we believe that we are married because God wants us to be

married, wants us to help each other to become more like Christ, wants us to impress the love of God upon our children, wants us to equip the next generation and] lastly want us to impress our grandchildren to know and love Jesus Christ.” How about that, how about a purposeful approach to married life?

Biblically we are joined to our siblings by a sacred bond. This becomes the model for relationships in the church. What Paul talks about to Timothy [is that] when you are dealing with people in the church, there is a high need for purity. I tell no secrets when I say that purity is probably one of the major difficulties and problems facing us today. The need for purity in dealing with young women is obvious to us. That is why we have windows in our offices; I never meet with women alone: it is simply foolishness. So we get that. But I think perhaps there is a broader range of application that we need to be conscious of. The need for purity was no less in dealing with anyone. In Ephesians 5:3-5 Paul writes, *“...sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you –think “television”, think R rated movies, think almost every form of entertainment – “...sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you as is proper amongst saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater) has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”* How much inheritance is there? None!

A moment’s reflection is enough to remind us all that the danger of a drift to such conversation is no less real with older men than with younger as well as with older and younger women. Being a pastor has certain sources of amusement. Here is one of them: I love walking into a company of guys – I almost always have a tie on because godly people wear ties, so that always puts them on edge but they don’t know I am a pastor yet. Then they will be talking like they talk. Then it will come around and [I will say] I’m a pastor. Immediately there is silence and abnormal conversation: “Well, nice to have you here and just forget everything we said!” I don’t do it often but I do it often enough so that I am amused. But there is a rider on this. I find it perplexing that people consider the restraint of both topic and choice of language as hypocrisy. It is as if goodness of heart and purity of speech is either spontaneous, or it is a lie. But if that is true, what is the point of self-control? I am as fleshly a creature as any, and have been as deeply and troublesomely imprinted by the fallenness of creation and humanity as any, and there are many times when I have to self-censor my words and my thoughts, of course! I spoke with someone the other day who made the comment, which I did not explore – he was older and I was gentle – he spoke of getting apart with other men who were in ministry. Getting away from people and all the need to present and project a certain persona so they could let their hair down and really be their own selves. My inner thought was, who are you: are the one who you are when you let your hair down – I don’t know if you know what that means [in its original usage]; it isn’t good. It talks about women being prepared to engage in certain activities, not with their spouse – So is that when you are who you really are, or is it when you have put on the armor of God so that that which is sinful and fleshly and fallen in you is repressed by the presence of His Holy Spirit. Who do you want to be? If that is hypocrisy, sign me up; I am a hypocrite.

Now we are going to talk about widows. At verse 3 Paul moves from the general to the specific. Having mention older and younger women Paul now zeroes in on widows. What he says is that widows are to be honored. Amen! Paul distinguishes between those who are truly widows and those who are not. He

has a purpose in mind. To understand Paul’s concern we need to know that to honor included material or financial benefits. You will see that again if you turn over to 1 Timothy 5:17. There Paul says, *“Let elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor hard at preaching and teaching.”* What he is talking about is providing them financial support. Because honoring someone included material or financial support it was important that such support was actually needed. In the case of those called to full-time ministry the need was obvious even if supplying full support was not in fact universal. All you have to do is go to 1 Corinthians 9:14 where Paul gives the brief defense of the fact that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel. We spoke of this last week. He actually makes the case stronger if you turn to 2 Timothy 2:4. I am not going to spend time there. What he says is, *“No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.”* What he is saying is the guy who has been called to be a pastor and teacher and be an elder isn’t going to go out and get a job someplace else. Rather he is going to be devoted totally to what he has been called to do. Paul is clear that it is the Lord who enlists men to serve as elders or under-shepherds of the flock, a task generally demanding the full attention of the one who would undertake it and therefore he needs financial support.

In the case of widows, which is the main topic here, he talks about true widow. What is a true widow? If we look to verses 4 and 5, Paul says that the woman actually needs to have no one from her family to support her. She is without other means of any kind of support. Then Paul goes on verse 4 to say they are *first to learn to show godliness to their own household and make some return to the parents for this is pleasing in the sight of God.* If any of us in this room have an older woman who is a widow in our family, our responsibility is to take care of her. That is a non-negotiable item in the word of God. We should respond to that. As some of you know that is what my wife is doing presently with her mother. But fortunately as is true with many she has adequate financial means. We simply have to spend a lot of time taking care of other matters for her.

What we see here again is the primacy of the family. This is a primacy in the eyes of God. Generally speaking, this is the principle again, God works His will amongst the saved and the unsaved through the bonds of the family. The family was instituted by God before the church. That is why, by the way, culturally it is worth us fighting for the family in our culture. The practical realities of the love of family Paul says demonstrate or show godliness. One of the most effective ways that the enemy of our souls has of attacking the church is to destroy families. We have to understand that. You cannot reject what God loves and at the same time claim to love God. God loves the family, He created it as the instrument for accomplishing His purposes. One of Jesus’ most scathing judgments against the Pharisees was their traditional practices of “corban”. What this practice was said that a man could declare that all of his property and assets were devoted to God. Because they were devoted to God, he didn’t have to take care of his parents. Wasn’t that clever! Not only was this a rejection of the family bond, it was also a direct violation of the fifth commandment: *“Honor your father and mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”* How long will our country last if we continue to rip apart the family? That is an honest question.

What Paul wants us to understand is that this principle of honoring our parents, even grandparents, is applicable through the church to more than just parents. Now go back again from our time with the family to the widow again. According to a Paul a true widow, that means a widow qualifying to be honored by the church means she qualifies for material support. He says that this is one who is left all

alone and has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. He contrasts that with “she who is self-indulgent” who is dead even while she lives. In our day, as already mentioned, not all but I would say the majority of widows and widowers for that matter have financial resources and various assets in addition to family members to assist and support them in their later years. May I say candidly that this church is entirely unprepared to support any widow. I would mention that the times are changing. We may find within the next twenty years and we may find there are widows who have no resource at all other than the care the church might give them. We are used so long to having been so prosperous and having such peace that we don’t yet understand. How many widows do we think there are in Syria, beloved? How many widows... That is enough!

This does not mean however that if they have financial support that they can live in any manner they wish, but it does mean they can meet their own basic needs. In the early days of the church, however, lots of widows had no support. Consequently many were in pressing need and the church was faced with being overwhelmed facing these kinds of needs. If you are familiar with this you know I am talking about Acts 6. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians he stated a fundamental principle This is the principle that he articulated to the Thessalonians: *“If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”* I have a comment here. I am going to get in trouble with the widows: I may as well get in trouble with everybody else too! This principle, if a man will not willing to work, let him not eat, I think places an obligation on us a the body of Christ to provide work. Not the government: us! We need to think seriously about the matter. God says that if you are not willing to work, starve to death. We say, here’s work. I think this is worth praying about and talking about. Too long the church has floated on the edge of social reality. VBS is fine, but it does not necessarily touch the essential needs and demands of a culture that is increasingly out of control. Talk to Ian Carlisle. What do those broken lives being recovered by God’s grace need? [They need] a place to live and a job. That is another sermon! Let’s go on with the one I am preaching.

Age alone does not remove this principle, but the application varies. In the case of true widows, that is who have no family to support them, if they want the church to support them instead they must be willing to become servants in the life of the church and prayer warriors. Paul says they are to pray how often? [They are to pray] night and day. He says they are not to be self-indulgent. The truth of the matter is that we all have the same number of hours to live every day. How many hours do we have to live every day? [It is] 24. I have told you before, I had a lady in a church I served in Denver and every time she prayed for me she prayed, “Lord, stretch his hours!” I thought to myself, how many hours, how many minutes, how many seconds? She wanted me to get more done in the available time. I understood that. I also understand that prayer is hard work. A group of us pray, a very small group which I would like to see triple in size, before the service. It is hard work. This is worth thinking about. Watching television is easy. Going to the movies is easy; prayer is hard work. Going to the mall and shopping is easy; I am talking about women! But prayer is hard work. I know this.

I want all of us to understand that it is not wrong on occasion to do what is easy: obviously. Even the most dedicated soul needs a time to relax, step away from the press of responsibility. I understand that. I also know we live in a culture that constantly says, “Have a good time. Have a good time. Have a good time. You deserve a break today!” But if the church is going to support you in your old age, it will need to hold you to account for your perseverance in the life of service and prayer. Is that different? That is different.



We don't understand prayer, that is, we don't understand how it works as the means by which God works. But over and over again we are called to a life of prayer. We have made an idol out of short prayers. It is inconceivable to us that we would pray night and day. Short prayers play to our impatience and our self-important busyness, as if we either already know everything needs doing or that God is somehow obligated to give us midcourse directions because we are too busy to take time out and listen. Who do we think we are that we will not wait upon God until He speaks? Tic toc, time to go and we are gone.

All of this is an introduction to the rest of the message: God's high calling for widows. Join me in verse 9 of 1 Timothy 5 and let these words go into your understanding:

*(5:9) “ Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, (5:10) and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. (5:11) But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry (5:12) and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. (5:13) Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. (5:14) So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. (5:15) For some have already strayed after Satan. (5:16) If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.*

There is a huge amount that could and perhaps should be said about that passage. There are just a couple of things I want to say and then I will let us go. The first is simply this: you cannot read that passage and fail to sense the high expectation and deep seriousness which the early church placed on women as an aspect of the core values of the early church and what value it placed on families. This is a huge emphasis. Let me reference again “Visionary Marriage” as an excellent resource for thinking and understanding about family life. Knowing the realities of family life, the authors point to the critical place of having the right purpose. Having a clear sense of purpose enables us to deal with hard times and annoyances and problems at work. In the same way if we embrace a clear sense of purpose for our family we have the strength to face hard times. What is a wife supposed to be like? If she is going to end up being a widow who meets Paul's requirements. Do we follow? This is what he has said. She is to be faithful to her husband. Beyond that if she thinks in terms of being involved in a prayer ministry in the church to receive support she must have a reputation of good works, that is she needs to help others outside of her family. She is to have raised her children. She is to have shown hospitality, which would to people needing a place to stay and not just to friends and extended family. Further, she is to have given generous acts of service even at the most incidental level: small kindnesses behind the scenes. She is to have cared for people struggling with sickness and other adversities. Who is that woman? The Rienows make an interesting statement at the beginning of their book. It is interesting that you can hear many sermons today that pinpoint the failure of husbands, but you rarely hear a sermon that points to women and says, who are you and what are you doing? Paul has just done that. Paul has said, “Woman, wife, widow, who are you and what are you doing? Are you a person devoted to prayer? Are you a person devoted to the works God has called all of us to do? Are you letting your life be frittered away with self-indulgent practices?

Let us pray: Father in heaven, we know our culture is struggling badly and in particular it is the collapse of the family. And we know that that collapse has more than likely touched the church. We grieve, You grieve. I know, Father, there are many excellent families in this congregation. I know, and You even more than I, that there are excellent women in this congregation and they are a great strength to this body. Father, may we hear the counsel of Your word, honor them, encourage them and encourage others to follow after. That we, Father, would increasingly by Your grace be an example of something different, something that reveals the grace, wisdom and righteousness of our God. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.