

Caring for Widows: 1 Timothy 5:1-16
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We'll look at this passage in three parts. First of all, the church family in verses 1-2. Secondly, caring for widows in the family in verses 3-8. Then thirdly, caring for widows in the church family in verses 9-16.

The Church Family (verses 1-2)

What we see first in this passage are the family relationships that exist in the church. Those of us who are believers are part of the same family. We didn't grow up in the same homes or have the same parents, but we have all been adopted by the same Father. We are the household of God, as Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 3:14. We are a family. And we see in these two verses how we ought to relate to one another according to these family relationships. Paul tells Timothy, as a young leader in the Ephesian church, "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father." Paul knew that there were situations in which Timothy would need to rebuke older men. There were false teachers in the church. There were individuals devoted to myths and genealogies (1:4). There were men and women who had seared consciences and were promoting false asceticism (4:2-3). And because of these influences in the church, Timothy would have to be involved in a fair amount of confrontation and admonishment. Paul has already told Timothy that he will need to confront these things, and that he must command and teach and exhort. And now he is giving some advice on the manner in which he must do this.

The word for "rebuke" in verse 1 is used only here in the New Testament. It has the sense of a harsh rebuke, and other translations bring that out. "Do not rebuke an older man harshly" (NIV). "Do not sharply rebuke an older man" (NASB). "Do not speak harshly to an older man" (NRSV). Instead of rebuking harshly, Timothy should encourage the older man as he would a father. The word "encourage" here could be translated "exhort" or "urge." So the point is not that Timothy should refrain from exhorting older men. The point is simply that he should do so in a respectful way, treating them as he would his own father.

With younger men, the relationships will be different, and therefore the exhortations will be different. There doesn't need to be the same level of honor that would be shown to a father or mother. But there *is* the bond of brotherhood that should cause any interaction to be characterized by love, and it should be for the good of the brother and the good of the church.

Older women should be treated as mothers, and that respect and honor should be evident even when she needs to be admonished in some way. It is the folly of youth to think that we can speak to everyone in the same way, regardless of age. We must recognize that those who are older than us have experienced more than we have. They have insights and perspectives on life that we don't have, by the simple fact that they have lived longer. That doesn't absolve us from the responsibility to exhort and encourage individuals who need to be corrected, but it should certainly have an impact on the way we do that. It can't be in an arrogant, know-it-all kind of way. It must be humble, showing respect and honor to the older person, treating them as a father or mother.

Those in leadership, like Timothy, must certainly heed this instruction. And it's also something that we must all heed, as we help one another keep a close watch on our lives and doctrine, as we talked about last week. Keeping a close watch on ourselves is a community project, and that means we must offer to one another loving rebukes. And sometimes this will involve a younger person offering a loving rebuke to an older person. Paul's point in these two verses is that not every rebuke is going to look the same. The age and gender of the person will determine how we ought to relate to them, whether it's as a father or mother, brother or sister.

Lastly, he mentions younger women, and says that they should be treated as sisters, in all purity. Paul was a very perceptive man. He knew human nature. He was also inspired by the Holy Spirit as he wrote these things. He knew the temptations and the pitfalls that present themselves within the relationships of the church. He knew that young Timothy was there in Ephesus and that he would be interacting with, and sometimes admonishing and instructing young women in the congregation, and he tells Timothy to consider them as sisters and to interact with them in all purity. He must be absolutely above reproach in these relationships.

This is such a needed warning for all of us, and such a wonderful vision for the way we relate to one another in the church. We should consider one another as brothers and sisters in the faith. And those who are older are as fathers and mothers. If we truly view one another in these ways, it will foster an appropriate respect for one another and it will protect us from impurity.

Caring for Widows in the Family (verses 3-8)

The rest of this passage, verses 3-16, deals with the particular matter of widows who are part of the church family. Caring for those in need, and particularly caring for widows, is

something that God cares about, it's something that the early church cared about, and it's something that we should care about. Psalm 68:5 describes God as "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows." Jesus, as He was dying on the cross, showed his love and care for his widowed mother by assigning John to care for her. John 19:26-27 says, "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home."

Then, in the early church, in Acts 6, we see the church caring for widows. And deacons were appointed to help oversee those kinds of mercy ministries, so that the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. And then we read later in the New Testament, in James 1:27, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

Caring for those in need, and particularly caring for widows, is a necessary outworking of our faith. When God changes our hearts and gives us a genuine love for Him, one of the fruits of that will be a genuine love for others. This will play itself out in many different ways, in many different kinds of relationships, but one very clear evidence of this will be our desire to help those in need. And one of the first and primary ways that this will be seen is in our relationships with one another in the church. Jesus said in John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

In this passage in 1 Timothy 5, Paul is instructing Timothy and the Ephesian church in some of the specifics of how this ought to look. And he is confronting some delicate issues here, but with the purpose of helping the church to show love for one another and to do so in the most effective ways. Can you recognize how sensitive this situation is? And can you put yourself in Timothy's shoes for a moment and imagine the anxiety that may have arisen in his heart as he read this for the first time and realized that he needed to communicate this message to the church? Paul's instruction was going to involve telling some widows that they would no longer be supported by the church and telling some families that they needed to step up and care for the widows in their own family. There were going to be some people who would not be happy to hear these things.

But can you also see the wisdom and the fairness of this instruction? The goal is that all the widows associated with the church would seek to live godly lives and would have their basic needs met in one way or another. In verse 3 Paul gives the general

principle, “Honor widows who are truly widows.” And then he’s going to explain what he means by a “true widow,” and specific ways that we must “honor” true widows, namely, by providing for their basic needs. He has in mind a certain kind of widow whom the church should support, and there are two specific characteristics that he’s looking for. First, they should be women who are godly. And secondly, they should be women who are truly destitute and have no family members to care for them.

This matter of the physical family is what Paul addresses in verses 4-8. The church should care for widows. But the first means of support should be the family members. Verse 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.” That’s pretty clear. It might not be a message that we want to hear. But God’s Word is telling us clearly that we have a responsibility to care for widows in our own families. And the implications certainly reach farther to an ailing parent or grandparent in need. The rationale is basic. One, this is the godly thing to do. Two, this is the least we can do for those who invested so much in our lives as they raised us. And three, this is pleasing in the sight of God. Thus, the primary responsibility for the care of widows falls on the family members.

So in Paul’s mind, a widow who has family members who can care for her is not truly a widow. In other words, she is not the kind of widow who should be supported by the church. She should be supported by her family. Verse 5 goes on to give a further qualification. “She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.” She is a godly woman. She is a believer. She is a prayerful woman. She is a woman who hopes in God. She is like the widow Anna in Luke 2 who “did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.”

This comment in verse 5 gives us a good insight into prayer, because prayer demonstrates our dependence on God. The destitute widow is certainly in need, and she is very aware of her need. But the reality is that each and every one of us is in desperate need as well, even if we are not aware of it. And as the widow described in this verse, we need to put our hope in God. We must appeal to Him to meet our needs, physically and spiritually. We must pray to Him. Whatever it is we hope in, that is where we will turn when we become aware of a need in our lives. That’s the connection between prayer and hope. If we are really hoping in God, then we will turn to Him with our needs. And in this way the penniless and prayerful widow of this verse is

a great example for all of us. She is aware of her need, and she demonstrates her hope in God by turning to Him in prayer.

This godly widow is then contrasted with another kind of widow, one who is self-indulgent. Verse 6 says, “but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.” There are two implications that are clear in this contrast between the two widows. First of all, the godly widow should receive support from the church, and the self-indulgent widow should not. And secondly, the one who should receive support is a believer, and the self-indulgent widow is an unbeliever. She is dead even while she lives. What a powerful and terrifying description of those who merely exist in this world, but without true life. They are dead! Ephesians 4:18 says, “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.”

This contrast between the godly widow and the self-indulgent widow is characteristic of the difference between believers and unbelievers generally. The believer hopes in God. The unbeliever hopes in worldly pleasure. The believer has true life in Christ. The unbeliever is spiritually dead, even though there is physical life. There’s an irony here, too, because in the world’s eyes it’s the self-indulgent person who is really living. In the world’s eyes, that is what it means to live life to the fullest. Get all the stuff you can. Be as comfortable as you can. Have all the fun you can. It’s all about you. That’s the good life.

But the Bible reveals a very different picture. The Bible says that the self-indulgent life is, in reality, death. You may exist on this earth, and even appear to be having a lot of fun, but if you are not in Christ then you are actually dead. And you are dead in a way that is much more serious than if your heart were to stop beating. You may be alive physically, but you are dead spiritually. And since our physical lives on this earth are only as a vapor, only one drop in the ocean of eternity, it is the condition of our souls that really matters. This is what has eternal significance.

I plead with you this morning to recognize what true life is. Recognize that what this world calls life is really death. If you spend your existence in this world laboring to accumulate wealth and comfort and worldly pleasure, all you’re doing is digging your eternal grave. Don’t be deceived. Don’t be seduced by these things. Instead, recognize that no amount of money, no worldly pleasure, no earthly comfort, is going to satisfy the craving of your soul. We are needy, and the only One who can meet our needs ultimately and eternally, is God, Himself.

He has done this through the life and death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. On the cross Jesus paid the penalty for our sin, so that all who repent of their sin and turn to Him in faith

will be forgiven and will inherit the gift of eternal life in heaven. This is the free gift of the Gospel, and I pray that everyone here this morning, and all of our friends and family and neighbors and coworkers, will receive this free gift. I pray that God will work in our hearts, and hearts throughout this city and region, to open our eyes to the reality of what is really life. Only in Jesus Christ will we find true life.

In verses 7-8 Paul emphasizes the seriousness of what he is talking about here. He wants Timothy to give these instructions to the congregation so that the children and grandchildren of widows might be without reproach. They need to know what their responsibilities are so that they can fulfill these family obligations. The families should be the first means of support. Families should care for their own. When they don't, they deny the faith. We might wonder how this could be such a big deal. How could caring for one's relatives be of such importance that neglecting it is evidence that one has denied the faith? But that's exactly what verse 8 says, "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." Unbelievers know that one ought to care for their family members. Much more so, as believers, we should be committed to this. It is a clear command of God's Word, and if we reject this command we deny the faith. We show that we are not truly born again.

So if a relative is in need, we must be looking for ways to care for them. Obviously the situation is much different today than it was in Paul's day. There are various means of financial support through the government or retirement accounts. But there can still be many needs, financial and otherwise, and we must be attentive to those needs and working to meet those needs. As we strive to serve in this way we will become more like our Lord Jesus Christ, who showed us what it is to be a servant. We will emulate His example of humble service to others. If we refuse to serve in these ways, we will show that we have nothing to do with Jesus.

Caring for Widows in the Church Family (verses 9-16)

Qualified Widows (verses 9-10)

Paul gives some qualifications for the widows who are to be supported by the church. Some understand this group of widows to be distinct from the widows spoken of in the previous section. There were the destitute widows who needed financial support from the church, and then there was this group of qualified widows who served the church in various ways. It seems, though, that the two groups are probably the same, and that they were both

supported by the church and also involved in the ministries of the church as they were able.

The first qualification is that they be at least sixty years old. Paul gives an age requirement to include on the list only those widows who are most likely not going to remarry and who are increasingly unable to provide for themselves. The next qualification is that they must have been the wife of one husband. This, like the parallel qualification for elders and deacons to be the husband of one wife, refers to marital faithfulness and sexual purity. In the context of chapter 5 I think it's clear that it does not mean "only married once throughout one's lifetime." If a woman lost her husband while she was still young, she would have been encouraged to remarry, as Paul says in verse 14. And if she was widowed again later in life, surely she wouldn't be disqualified from this list, provided she had been a faithful wife. The qualification is about character. It's about marital faithfulness. She was also to have a reputation for good works, having brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, cared for the afflicted, and devoted herself to every good work. To summarize, the widows on this list are to be elderly, faithful, hospitable, have a servant's heart, and be characterized by godliness.

Presumably, the good works that these women had been accustomed to throughout their lives would continue to be used in the service of the church. It was a win-win situation. The women needed financial help, and they received it from the church. And the church needed the gifts and talents of these women to mentor younger women, to care for the afflicted, to help with children, to show hospitality, and to do a wide-range of good works that would bless the church and help the church be a light to the world.

Younger Widows (verses 11-15)

In verses 11-15 Paul addresses another group of widows. Godly, elderly widows should be put on the list. But younger widows should not be put on the list, and Paul gives two clear reasons why. The first problem with younger widows being enrolled on this list is that they will likely have the desire to be remarried and thus disqualify themselves. It's hard to know exactly what situation Paul has in mind. It may be that in verse 12 Paul is referring to a pledge that was taken by the widows who were placed on this list. In the ESV it says, "they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith." But the word there for faith, which is the normal word for faith in the New Testament, can also be used to mean pledge or solemn promise. There are examples in other Greek literature of it

being used in this way, and it's possible that it's used in that way here.

Another possibility is that this is referring to widows whose passions draw them away from Christ, meaning they want to marry an unbeliever, and in this way they incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. In either case, there are problems with younger widows being included in the group of church-supported widows, and the first problem has to do with their desire to get married again.

The second reason, in verse 13, is the concern that being supported by the church would give these younger, less mature, widows the opportunity to become idle, to be gossips and busybodies. To avoid this, Paul counsels younger widows in verse 14 to marry, bear children, and manage their households. This will keep them from being idle, and it will limit the opportunity to become a gossip or busybody.

And in this way there will be no occasion for slander. The second half of verse 14 says, "and give the adversary no occasion for slander." That is, Satan, and all who oppose the cause of Christ, will have no occasion to ridicule these women who bear the Name of Christ. This is an important biblical theme. We will be ridiculed for the Gospel, but we must not be ridiculed for laziness or gossip or self-indulgence or any kind of immorality. Verse 7 said that the families of these widows must be without reproach by caring for their family members rather than neglecting them. And the widows themselves are to be without reproach as well—they must give the adversary no occasion for slander.

Verse 15 says that some have already strayed after Satan. We're not told exactly what this entails, but most likely it's the idleness and gossip that has just been mentioned, and probably other sinful behavior as well.

Verse 16 summarizes the main principles of the passage. Widows are first of all to be cared for by those in their family. The church should not bear the responsibility of caring for widows who have family members who can do that. The responsibility of the church is to care for widows who are truly widows. That is, widows who have no family support.

Someone might object and say, Shouldn't we try to help all widows, and not just widows, but everyone? The Bible answers, Yes! But the Bible also gives us some priorities and very helpful guidelines as to how we should direct our time and energy and resources. Listen to Galatians 6:10, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." Yes, let's do good to everyone, as we have opportunity. But let's make sure we begin with doing good to those who are of the household of faith. And as we've

learned in our passage for this morning, we do this by caring for widows and needy relatives within our own families, and then as a church we care for the destitute and godly widows who are of the household of faith.

By God's grace, let's strive to be this kind of people, so that the world may look at us and know that we are Christ's disciples because they see our love and care for one another.