

Taking Care of Widows

Let us turn to our Bibles, to 1st Timothy chapter 5. 1st Timothy chapter 5, verses 3 through 16. Let us listen attentively to the Word of God, 1st Timothy 5, 3 and following.

Honor widows who are really widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and repay their parents, for this is good and acceptable before God. Now she who is really a widow and left alone trusts in God and continues in supplications and in prayers night and day.

But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives, and these things command that they may be blameless. 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. Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, one reporter for good works, if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work.

Refuse the younger widows, for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith. And besides, they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not. Therefore, I desire that the younger widows marry their children, menace the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully, for some have already turned after Satan.

If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, but do not let the church be burdened that it may relieve those who are really widows. Let us pray. And in this passage, God, we see the pen of Paul explaining to the young pastor Timothy what the responsibility of the church and of the families are to widows, and that by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

It is a good and proper thing, Lord, and may we learn this lesson, especially in a day and age in which love and care and the like has been twisted into license and open-endedness in which people are allowed to do all kinds of things in the name of care and considerations. When clearly here, we see that is not the call of the church nor of Christians, but to take care of things in their proper order in their manner, God. The church takes care of the proper kind of widows, and the other kind of widows are taken care of by the family first and foremost.

Our Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to that end, help us to relearn this lesson if need be, to be strengthened in the truth therein. This is part of the holy calling of the church and of families to take care of their own and to do the best we can with what you've given us by the power of the Holy Spirit, always to the praise and the glory of your grace, we pray. Amen.

So clearly, Paul, in writing here to the young pastor Timothy, deals with a number of problems and concerns within the church as we run across in the prior chapters. Paul wrote about men and women in chapter two, as you recall, encouraging the women in particular

to persevere in motherhood, for the Lord turns the curse of the suffering therein into a blessing. Here he deals with other domestic matters, specifically widows.

Like before, the assumed background to this part of the letter is the great change between the Old and New Testament, wherein the Jewish form of the church is now done away with. Presumably this left the new converts, many of them Jewish converts early on, as we see in the book of Acts especially, probably confused about the responsibility within the church now, this renewed institution of the New Testament era, thinking that the removal of the ethnic Jewishness was therefore a removal of all natural bonds, like between parents and children. Rather, Paul reinforces these biological connections, these natural affections in bold, strong words, even warning that the denial of these responsibilities is akin to what? Denying the Christian faith.

So let us learn more carefully and look carefully into this text to see what it's about and how we ought to relate to the widows of the church.

Families Taking Care of Widows

The first point, families taking care of widows, verses 4 to 8 and 16. I put this connection here because Paul goes back and forth a little bit through these verses and says similar things but unpacks more detail in the second part.

And so here, 4, 8, and 16. The first thing of note, of course, you're all going to notice here, verse 3, honor widows who are real widows. Now what he means by that is not there are fake widows and then there are real widows.

He means the kind of widows in which the church ought to take care of, as opposed to other widows they ought not to take care of. It's implying at the get-go that there are two classes of widows, the truly needy and who are also holy, and those who are less needy, whether more or less holy. And it's a common church concern that we are dealing with here, and that's why Paul spends some time writing to Timothy, pastor in the church of God there.

And this concern of the widows, in fact of the needy in the community of God, is a common concern from the Old Testament onward. It's a class of the needy, often described together, the widows, the orphan, and the poor, and sometimes a stranger as well. We read that in Deuteronomy.

You're familiar probably with some of those texts as well. And again in James, James 1.27, for example, in the New Testament continues on this concern there described in the Old Testament, a number of passages, pure, James writes, and undefiled religion. Before God and the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

Although explicitly about widows here in this text, the implications, as I'll cover in another sermon, go beyond just simply widows as widows, because widows represent and are a subset of the broader category of the needy that the church ought to take care of. As James highlights, he says it's not just widows only, he mentions orphans as well, or anybody else

who falls in those categories. We would obviously put handicap in there, and they would too as well.

Any speaking, of course, one church alluded to another, and a reminder that the concern is, what do we do in the church? Which seems obvious to us, of course you know what to do in the church, but it wasn't as obvious then because so many things had radically changed from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Their whole life is upturned if you think about, as I mentioned before, America changing their constitution or something like that. The whole thing is just modified this way and that way, what's going on? It seems like chaos.

But a lot of things are pretty much the same, as you know. And so in 1 Timothy 3.15, to give us that context more clearly, Paul says, I write so that you, write Timothy, may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God. That was the question.

And here this expands upon how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God with respect to widows in particular, in the New Testament church. And so the widow issue, again, wasn't just mentioned in James, it was a practical matter that came up in the early part of the church in Acts chapter 6. In Acts chapter 6, as you recall, now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, they were expanding by the revival of God, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Okay, so you had this slight conflict going on here.

Why aren't you taking care of your widows? And we're taking care of our widows. There was a complaint amongst the Hebrews by the Hellenists, they mean Hellenist Jews, that is Jews that weren't local, part of the diaspora that spread out into Egypt and Rome and the like. They kind of looked at each other as subsets of the Jewish culture, and saying, you Hebrews aren't taking care of your widows, they're neglecting them.

That's a serious charge. And so the question is, what is that responsibility? And Paul's going to unpack this idea of honor, right? Honor widows who are really widows. And I obviously, by reading the rest of the verses, when he says honor, he doesn't mean just lip service.

Well, yes ma'am, no ma'am. Maybe people think of that. He means also practically and functionally.

What are you going to do in the concrete to help the widows? And note, the word honor is also used where? In the fifth commandment. Honor your father and your mother. This is a fifth commandment matter, as well as a third commandment, because the third commandment deals with the works of God, and the church is certainly one of his great works.

So it's the intersection of the fifth and the third commandment in these verses. The first thing he says besides honor the widows that ought to be properly honored by the church of God, he'll unpack that, put them on a roll or the number of the roll and take care of their material needs. But he immediately goes to this point, and he mentions this point three times, obviously, because it was a problem.

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. Let the families take care of the widows before the church ever does. Even down to the second generation, presumably others like siblings and relatives, this is a natural way of handling things.

We have many examples of that in the Old Testament. I mean, Abraham and Lot, what was the relationship? Uncle to nephew. It wasn't his grandson, but they were still family, close enough family that, well, when Lot was carried away by the battle of the kings, the kings in the plain there, Abraham goes after them to rescue his nephew.

And so, over and over again, we know historically, the family takes care of the family and ought to. That's to be expected. And the way he describes this here, to show piety at home, to show godliness, taking care of your family.

One way or the other, the parents to the children or adult children to their older parents, that's the vertical or the horizontal and the like, your sibling to sibling and the like, is showing piety. It is godliness before godliness. And to repay their parents, to repay their parents.

So, he's using a picture of a moral debt owed to those who took care of them, who woke up at midnight to feed you when you were helpless, who cleaned you, who protected you and gave you a house and guided you and picked you up because you were helpless for so many years. It's the least you can do to take care of your parents and their infirmity in their old age. It's a moral debt, a repayment of the parents.

And indeed, he describes it as a good work before god above. This is good and acceptable before god. This is a life of holiness.

And Sunday School class, someone gave the example of talking to a Roman Catholic friend or co-worker. And the Roman Catholic was just amazed to hear, what? You live your life, take care of your family, do a good job, take care of your neighbor, and that's a life of holiness? That sounds hard. Well, it is hard without the power of the Holy Spirit, indeed.

But it's also mundane and ordinary and nevertheless holy and sanctified and acceptable before god by the blood of Christ Jesus. Which is to say, this is another verse to remind us as well, that you can and do enact good works. Taking care of your family is a calling and is something you have done by the power of the Spirit within you.

And of course, it's not such that add to the merits of Christ, but as evidence of the work of the Spirit within you, and it glorifies god. So verses five through seven, widows indeed versus other kinds of widows. So here he gets more specific and he does that again in the next set of verses, but he unpacks it.

Churches Taking Care of Widows

Now, she who is really a widow and left alone, trust in god, continues in supplications and prayers night and day. So this is a short contrast between the godly widow and the ungodly

widow. Really a widow, again, she who is to be taken into the number of the church when she can't get help otherwise.

She depends upon god for mercy and help. She trusts in him. It's very explicit.

She is left alone. She doesn't have anything but god to take care of her and continues in supplications and prayers day in and day out. And of course, we should follow this example as well.

This text is about widows, yes, but number of things that widows are called to do, the rest of us are obviously called to do as well, or not to do, as the case may be. So there's much here that is immediately applicable for ourselves in our situation as well. Now, all of this is accordance to the Old Testament as well, Jeremiah 49.11, where god tells the prophet to his people, leave your fatherless children, the orphans, I will preserve them alive, God says, and let your widows trust in me.

Again, they were the most helpless of society. You lose that strong back of a man who is working on the farm. You don't have much.

All your kids, especially if you're older and are gone and away from you, it's just you. What are you going to do on a farm unless you happen to be middle class somehow? And middle class was more or less a modern phenomenon. You had lots of poor and very little rich back then, but God will take care of them anyways because the community is supposed to gather around them.

There's specific laws, as you know, in Old Testament, Deuteronomy, and even into the New Testament, because it's the same God who cares for the same widows and those in need. Verse six describes in short order, not very long, those who are not really a widow indeed, but she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. Living in pleasure, of course, is the opposite of the good work that he's going to unpack in the next few verses that the widow ought to be an example of, and indeed all of us should follow.

The unholy life here is presumably a public scandal as well. How else could he write about it? How else could the young pastor, Timothy, and the other church leaders acknowledge what's going on here, that this is a problem for this woman? And the command then in verse seven, in short order as he gives simply a short description of these two classes of widows, is to tell Timothy to tell them to instruct the churches and especially the families and the like in these matters to be blameless. And these things command, you make this distinction amongst the widows, and that the widows ought to be all the kind who trust in God and have supplications instead of those who fall into sin and live to their own pleasures and their desires, that they may be blameless.

Obviously not absolutely perfect, but holy and sanctified before God, following and endeavoring after him by the power of the Holy Spirit. And again a reminder that this is a public matter, a public problem that people can identify. This is an issue here, the leadership, and in fact the rest of us can.

It is, in other words, the church's business about other Christians' lives, especially when it's public. It's not our business insofar as private matters are private matters, and it's between you and your family and the like, and we're not supposed to pry into that as a general rule, but of course if you're behind closed doors murdering people, that's obviously a public sin, you're just hiding it. But this is clearly a public matter, and we're called to live with one another, to what? Admonish one another when things are serious enough or concerns enough, and to give advice and help one another.

So we have this duty and responsibility, which here in particular is put upon in a special manner for the church officers, because it's dealing with what? Bringing in widows under the church role, and so the church is taking care of them, as we'll see in the next verse, which has everything to do with the leadership of the church, to know who these women are and what they're doing or not doing. And then the warning in verse 8. So he hits it again, right? He says it in verse 4, and he says it differently in verse 8. 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. Those are strong words, brothers and sisters.

If we don't take care of our own, we are worse than an unbeliever. And why is that the case? He doesn't unpack it explicitly. The implication is what? Even the unbelievers take care of their own family.

What are you doing? And they do. We have that historically. They have laws about it, moral expectations.

Whether they do it all the time is different, just like Christians. Moral expectation, whether you do it or not, it's a different question, isn't it? They're acting worse than a pagan. That's shameful.

And again, that he's saying this to a public officer through a public letter tells you it was a public problem, and it's something that the rest of the church probably saw. He's not taking care, she's not taking care of her family, of the widow even in particular. Here, of course, is broader.

Just not provide for any of his own, not just the widow, within the family and the influence that he has. And note here that he says provide not for his own, especially for those of his household. There's that distinction, those who are immediately under his influence and those perhaps like Lot, a nephew, an uncle, and the like, who are not, but are still part of the family, and you are called nevertheless to help them in their time of need.

Families are supposed to take care of families. Verse 16, where he says this again and closes off this whole section here, verses 3 to 16. Family take care of family, says it almost in the middle.

Family take care of family, or you're worse than infidel, and at the end, families take care of families. That's what the number one priority and responsibility is before the church ever steps in. If any believing man or woman has a widow, verse 16, let them relieve them.

Relieve that poor helpless woman that's their mother, or their grandmother, or their aunt perhaps, in the case of Lot and Abraham on the male side, and do not let the church be burdened. Isn't that interesting? Well, I thought the burden of the church was to help people. Liberals taught that, and that's not the case.

They may be helping people, that is the church as an organization, because that's clearly what this is. Again, widows and the number thereof, church pastors, this is a church organized, not the church as an organism. You have private funds, as I mentioned before, you may help people in your neighbor, that's fine, but as a church pot, the church money is for church people first and foremost.

And not burden the church with these widows that other people can help, that is their families. It says that very explicitly here, that it may relieve those who are really widows, those who fulfill the qualifications, which we will get to now. All right, and verses 9 through 15.

Do not let a widow under 60 years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man and continues on to describe her as a godly woman, again with such acts that are known to others. Not that she does these things for her own praise, of course, but they happen naturally in the course of her living and taking care of her family and taking care of her friends and the like. So here we have again, widows indeed versus other widows, which he mentioned there in verses 5 and 6, and now he says, and expands upon this theme again in verses 9 and 10 for the widows indeed, and then 11 and following for those, the wrong kind of widows that shouldn't be taken into the number of the church.

So he's saying it again, but giving more detail here. The churches, now he explains what this looks like and what ought to be the qualifications to be brought into the number, and the first thing I want to point out here is that in this contrast here of support is there are two issues going on. Intertwined as often is the case, if you notice, I try to highlight this now and then, through the letters of the New Testament and even the Old Testament, multiple problems are being talked about at the same time, different references and the like, and so what we have here is answering the question, who can the church support, who's the kind of widow which the church ought to help, and of course under what qualifications, and at the same time admonishing other widows, not that they are widows as such, that's not the admonition, the admonition is they are wicked widows, or they're widows doing wrong things or going down the wrong path, and he's warning them.

So two things are going on here in this listing here. Now he says don't take them into the number, that's a semi-technical word there meaning a list, something official that the church says you are widows that need the kind of help that we're going to give you. The details of course are missing, and for a long time in the church there's all kinds of different answers exactly what does this look like to put them on a list, and how exactly you're going to help the widow, what does that look like in the details, and the fact that we don't have those details in this text or elsewhere tells us already that we use natural law common sense, and what works relatively to our situation, and the leadership that we have, the size of our church is to the extent that we're able to put them on a list, and organize it that proper way, and help them, and whatever other kind of details are involved in this matter.

So we have freedom in that sense as a church, of course not freedom not to help, but freedom to help in a certain particular way that works best for our local community, and it seems to me of course in this case that it was the kind of help that was material. The spiritual help of course is for all Christians, they should be preached to, instructed, and counseled and the like, it's not like oh we only do it when the when the widow is on our rolls that we're going to give them spiritual help, no clearly it means material, physical, or financial, some combination thereof the kind of help that they can that they need at their age, and so at that age over 60 anyone under 60 or not or not to be put on the list just right off just cuts it off right there boom an age limit. Why that age limit? Because it was typically expected that women under 60 would remarry, and also around that age onward that you were considered aged and infirmed.

So in other words it's very high on that level of age and life, because today of course 60 you're like well dude I'm riding my bike, I'm exercising, I'm what are you talking about, well brothers and sisters don't forget how much prosperity we have and the access to doctors and the like that they did not have. The mortality rate was astronomic, especially for infants, and if you did live you lived into your 50s and 60s. The old person was 70 or 80 at the most, that was rare, people today live into their 70s 80s quite often in comparison to back then.

And it continues on here in description a wife of one man of course what he's saying there is a sign of faithfulness well reported for good works and it looks like not only is that a general description uh of what she ought to be like but he gives some particulars here of this list of the kind of good works. And I'll remind you again it's not an exhaustive list any more than it is for the pastorate, the bishop in chapter 3 where you can imagine other kind of sins.

You wouldn't want in a pastor that's not in that list. He was dealing with those particular problems that he saw there at the local church and he continues on here to describe these things: brought up kids that as she had taken care of her family, presumably good kids, hospitable to non-family members because a stranger wasn't just as we think of the word today perhaps from another country or foreigner, the strangers typically was just anyone outside of your family or kinsmen class so they could be friends but they're not part of your family and then wash the feet of what the servants they are servants in the church wash the feet of the saints so not just servants of non-saints strangers who are friends or neighbors and the like. That's what that idea is not necessarily someone who's completely unknown to you and here in particular she has washed the saints feet. So you have both kinds of hospitality outside the church and within the church, but especially within the church. And washing of the feet as you know you may recall was a typical matter which coming in from a dusty world in which they were in and they had open feet sandals. That was their way of showing care for them: here let me give you a little basin, and the servant typically would wash the feet of the guests coming into the house.

We do different things today, we have less dirt, thankfully, and the like. But that she's there however that looks like in a culture being of assistance when needed and that's highlighted here especially if she has relieved the afflicted the needy the poor those who need help within her sphere of influence and the like.

And then lastly it says if she's diligently followed every good work. It wasn't just happenstance it's occasionally happened but that she was diligent and not slacking or lazy in this regard on the flip side you have the widows rejected but refused so it's not just don't put anybody under here he's more explicit refuse the younger widows for when they have begun to grow wanted against Christ they desire to marry having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith and learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house and gossip and busy bodies and the like why younger widows. Now elsewhere we read about false teachers in second timothy three six we read for this is the sort of those who creep into households and make captives of gullible, women loaded down with sins led away by various lusts. And so it seems to be the case that as I mentioned multiple things are going on in this admonition that they are being subverted by false teachers and so they've grown wanton against Christ, and the like, they have turned after Satan. Verse 15 false truths false teachings and lies and the like. Of course today this happens through religious TV shows, books, or the internet. That's much more prevalent in that regard. It's easy access for all of us in fact to be led astray and the like. And we ought to be careful in that regard, but this idea here as he continues on of wanton against Christ and goes after that description.

Desire to marry condemnation because they have cast off their first faith they learn to be idle and the like this list here is of course the opposite of the list for the widows indeed and then the widow's coming into the number and being taken into the number that is their material concerns are taken care of they don't have a husband they don't have a family to take care of their housing perhaps or the monies they need for their housing or the food they need back, then the church will take care of that.

When you have all your material needs met, what's going to happen? You're going to have idle time. And what is idle hands? but the devil's hands. What is the idle mind but the devil's playground. That's probably what's going on here hence the emphasis here. Again, two things are going on besides, they learn to be idle, wanted from house to house, because they don't have to work they don't have a job they don't have any kids. They don't have any grandkids apparently because nobody's there to take care of them. They're on the list and Paul's like, don't put them on the list, they're going to get in trouble. And again that's a lesson for all of us. You want to stay busy or the devil will use it to his advantage and when someone's taking care of everything for you there's a big temptation to be idle and to get in all kinds of problems like gossip and busybodies here as the case is in verse 13.

And so there are two issues here intertwined the widows following false teachings and young widows in particular. Because when you're younger you have a lot more energy as opposed to being what when you're 60 or older. Back then you're basically infirmed and old and helpless. And if they're in the number and the church is taking care of them and they're young, they're going to want to get probably married eventually because they're still young. Paul's like, that's another problem, that's another reason not to put them on the dole of the church. I mean the dole in the best sense of the word there, the assistance of the church because they're going to want to walk away from that and get married and what's the point of taking care of them. They're already getting married, that's a problem because he tells them to get married, right. Therefore I desire the younger widows, marry and bear children. But he said earlier but they're going to want to get married and be wanted against Christ. That's under the pretext or the assumption that they're on the list. If you're on the list it's

going to be a problem, Don't just stay off the list, get married, avoid all these problems stay busy, because you get married you have kids and especially as they've done for thousands of years, you have a lot of kids you're going to stay busy you're going to avoid the temptation of idle hands and an idle mind.

And so that's paul's admonition and concern in this regard the church, is another way of looking at it does not want a scandal on its hand, bringing in people who don't show proper and good character. This in this case, widows, and they're just troublemakers and the world's going to see this. It's like you guys just take any tom dick and harry into the church, look at their scandal. What's going on here? Look at all the problems they're causing. They're busy bodies and they're lying and they're doing this and that. No you got to have godly women on the list. It's another way of looking at it the church and family brothers and sisters here at the end each have their respective responsibilities.

The church as i mentioned before does not replace the family, it can't. It can do some good, it can help you to some extent, it can assist in a lot of ways, that's true. But ultimately, fundamentally, it can't. And we see this here, very good example it shouldn't in fact even if it could, he says, don't do it. The family takes care of the family first. Widows are members of both their family and of the church of god in this context, and they need serious help. The family steps in and, should step in. If the family cannot step in then the church steps in, but even then under certain high public qualifications with a high standard. Because, although we preach the gospel, ought to continue to preach the good news that jesus saves sinners, nevertheless, jesus also has the law of god and has a high standard of holiness that is the cross that we carry as Christians. And the church sees both of them in this divine example and explanation of paul as witnesses to god's holiness and the glories of jesus Christ. Let us pray.

Indeed father son of the holy spirit it can be hard and i can imagine i know i felt it myself to say we have to turn away widows. Paul's very clearly just simply refuse them if they are such a bad example and they are such poor sanctification in their life. God, and of course even the fact that they're young they should be turned away because they have enough energy to get a job and get married perhaps, lord or whatever the case is. But Father we ask that we would have an understanding and better appreciation of this truth that you take seriously, the call of the family and of the church, their respective domains and responsibilities, God, and that we would also and take these things to heart in our own lives.

Give us more strength, we pray, to follow you all the days of our life and to show mercy as appropriate as we see here, God, as a church collectively, and as individuals. Especially towards our family. Help us to that end, to do it to your glory. And to be thankful for your spirit that we have our eyes open to these truths. May your name be glorified in all that we do by the blood of Christ Jesus our Lord and savior, Amen.