

Message #10

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1 Timothy

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WIDOWS

1 TIMOTHY 5:1-16

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

I looked at our church records this week and found that in the last two years we have had deaths in our congregation which have produced seven widows but no widowers. The national statistics also tend in this direction. According to government figures, in 2020 there were 11.27 million widows in the US and 3.48 million widowers. That is about a three to one ratio. One third of these widows lost their mates before age 60, one half by age 65. Women in our country tend to marry men who are older than they are. Also women tend to live longer than men do. So the average length of widowhood in the US is 14 years.

Death has economic consequences for these women. Household income drops an average of 40% for widows after the loss of their mates. For widows 65 and older, 51% live on \$22,000 a year or less. Looking at the figures in a different way, women 65 and older have a median annual income of \$17,000. (US Census Bureau, Social Security Administration)

Then there are the spiritual and emotional effects of widowhood, which are often more traumatizing than the economic loss. Psychologists use a test called the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory. On that scale loss of spouse is listed as the highest possible stress event.

Prime Minister David Lloyd-George, who introduced the Old Age Pension Act into the UK in 1906, once observed: **“The true test of a civilization is the way it treats its old people.”** Such is especially the case with widows. Widows are an important part of our congregation and of our extended families. We also have single moms in our midst. The Bible makes it clear that we have an obligation to all of our fellow Christians in the church. But the pages of the Scriptures describe a special concern which God has for widows. First Timothy spends only seven verses dealing with the subject of the overseers, or elders, of the church. In the passage before us this morning the Apostle Paul spends almost sixteen verses talking about widows.

The economic and social structure of the first century was such that losing a mate generally posed more difficulty for women than for men who lost their mates. That is why the focus is upon widows rather than widowers. But there are applications which we can make in regard to widowers. Let's see what God's Word has to say about widows and our responsibility to them.

I.

First, in vv. 1 & 2 of 1 Timothy #5 (which is p. 993 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs) the Apostle Paul describes THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHURCH LEADERS TO VARIOUS AGE GROUPS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHURCH LEADERS...) He says, **“Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.”** We have seen that Paul has been giving his young protégé Timothy instruction about how to deal with problems in the church in Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor. The main challenge is false teachers in the congregation. But that leads to a broader concern which is expressed in #3 v. 15, where Paul wrote, **“...if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God...”** So now the apostle is giving general instructions about how Timothy should relate to different age groups. In a moment he will focus upon widows.

The term translated here as “older man” is literally “elder,” the same word used to describe the church office in #3. But because Paul describes three other groups of people, it seems that Paul is simply talking about older men. The New Testament describes true Christians as being part of a big family. So it is that Timothy is encouraged to treat older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters.

An additional caution is made by the apostle in regard to Timothy's dealings with young women. Timothy is probably single. No reference is ever made in the New Testament to Timothy having a wife or kids. We saw in #4 v. 12 that specific mention was made of Timothy's youthfulness. So he tells this young minister to treat women with “all purity.” This is an area of temptation that messes up a lot of Christian leaders. It is way too often that we learn about pastors running off with a church staff member. That is not too much of an issue here, though, is it?

II.A.

(II. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHURCHES AND FAMILIES TO WIDOWS) In vv. 3-8 the author goes on to describe THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHURCHES AND FAMILIES TO WIDOWS. Paul first deals with THE CHURCH RESPONSIBILITY. (II.... A. THE CHURCH RESPONSIBILITY) He writes in v. 3, **“Honor widows who**

are truly widows.” This responsibility can be traced back to the Fifth Commandment, which instructs God’s people to honor their fathers and mothers. Now we are going to find out what honoring mothers in widowhood involves. In that Paul is addressing Timothy in his key role as a leader in the church, I take it that he is speaking now about the church’s responsibility.

Further along in this chapter, in v. 17, the apostle again uses this word “honor.” He writes, **“The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.”** In the next verse he indicates what kind of honor he is talking about. He says, **“For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’”** So Paul is not just talking about respect for elders who work hard at preaching and teaching. He is talking about financial support. So it also is for widows.

As a leader in the church in Ephesus, Timothy is charged with this responsibility to care for the widows in the Ephesian church. In the next few verses this responsibility is modified. The text says in v. 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.”**

So the church’s corporate responsibility applies to women who are not only without a husband but also without grown children or other family members who cannot support the widow. The concern is for women who are destitute. Far from being treated with contempt, they are to be treated with respect, which includes financial support.

God’s specific concern for widows can be traced back to the Old Testament. It was part of the Law of Moses that if a woman’s husband died without leaving a son, the dead husband’s brother had to marry his sister-in-law. Part of the purpose for that was to leave a male heir to carry on the dead man’s name and inheritance. But also it served to provide for the material needs of the widow.

If there were no brothers whom the widow could marry, her birth family was responsible to take back this woman into the family home. If that was not possible, the Jewish community was to support her. Every third year a tithe of everyone’s income was to be set aside for widows and orphans. (Deuteronomy 14:28) When farmers harvested grain, olives, and grapes, they were required to leave some of the produce behind for widows, orphans, and strangers to collect and use. (Leviticus 19:9-10) The Lord was, and is, concerned about the practical needs of widows.

When the church was first established in Jerusalem and Jews started becoming followers of Jesus, the Christians were expelled from the synagogues. Some Jewish Christian widows lost their former means of support. Acts #6 describes one of the first ministries established by the early church, which was providing food for widows. Acts #6 speaks of a dispute that arose because the Greek speaking widows from the Diaspora, from other parts of the Roman Empire, were being neglected in favor of native Hebrew women in Jerusalem. So the elders had to get involved and appoint men to make sure that all of the widows were being cared for fairly.

Why didn't the widows go out and get a job? Some widows had small children at home. Some were too old to work. Others may have had physical disabilities. Then also job opportunities for women were limited in that culture.

Paul says that there are two requirements which widows must meet in order to receive financial assistance from the church. First, as we have seen from v. 4, they must truly be in need. They must be without other means of support.

Second, v. 5 says that they must have demonstrated genuine Christian character: **"She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day..."** Verse 10 adds that this Christian character should include a reputation for good works. Churches, then and now, have limited resources. They can't give money or material support to everyone who comes along. So there need to be reasonable requirements.

The assumption is that Christian widows will have a genuine trust in God which is demonstrated by a commitment to prayer. The terminology of Paul in v. 5 suggests that he may have been thinking of Anna, the widow who was present in the temple in Jerusalem when Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus there.

(LUKE 2:37-38) In Luke #2 vv. 37 & 38 we are told that Anna lived **"...then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem."** In the early church we know from sources outside of the Bible that Anna was presented as a model for Christian widows.

In v. 6 (PROJECTOR OFF) Paul describes behavior undesirable for widows: “...**but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.**” Some women who lost their husbands did not turn to God. Instead they began to indulge their selfish, sinful desires. The implication is that this kind of woman should be excluded from financial aid. By supporting them the church is in danger of bringing a bad reputation upon the entire group of widows and upon the church as a whole. The church has responsibilities toward widows, but widows also have a responsibility toward the church, and toward God, in terms of their behavior.

B.

In this discussion of widows Paul also deals with THE FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. A. B. THE FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY) According to vv. 4 & 8 children and grandchildren have the first responsibility to meet the needs of a widowed mother or grandmother. This is part of what the Fifth Commandment means when it speaks of honoring mother and father.

Verse 4 speaks of a woman learning to show “godliness.” Godliness was the subject of our passage in #4 two weeks ago when we said that the priority that the Christian ought to choose is the pursuit of godliness. Paul says here that a Christian pursuing godliness will make sure that his parents and grandparents have their needs met. Paul’s focus here is on widows, but the broader reference to parents and grandparents in v. 4 implies a needed concern for fathers and grandfathers, too.

Taking care of a widowed mother or grandmother may not be especially glamorous or exciting. Preaching or teaching or singing in church or being a Sunday school teacher may bring more recognition and attention from people. But Paul says that if we want to please God, if our real motivation in life is to serve Him, we will see to it that the needs of widows in our family are met. This is only fair given the sacrifices that they have made in raising us.

In v. 8 the apostle implies that many unbelievers do this much for their families. He 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.**” For a Christian not to follow through in caring for his own family would be a terrible testimony. Such a Christian would not be living up to even pagan standards.

In our world today we have things like Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid and pensions and life insurance and investments. These are good things in many ways. Widows today are often more independent financially than were widows in the first century. But what a monthly check cannot provide

is a human touch. One of the burdens that comes from being a widow or widower is loneliness. A large part of honoring widows has to do with meeting their financial needs. But certainly honoring them is not limited to that. As family members and church members we all need to be concerned about providing the human touch that widows, and widowers, need, especially in this environment with the coronavirus.

So as families, we need to make sure that the basic needs of our parents and grandparents, especially widows, are met. Then as a church we need to be sensitive to financial burdens that the widows in our midst might be feeling. Also we need to provide that human touch that is so often needed.

III.

Verses 9 & 10 describe QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE WIDOWS' LIST. (III. QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE WIDOWS' LIST) Paul writes, **"Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 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."**

This doesn't mean that younger widows could not be helped financially by the church. Paul seems to be talking about a more permanent status for older widows whereby they would receive regular support. To qualify for this list women had to be not only widows who lacked another source of financial support, but also women who had demonstrated characteristics of godliness. By the fourth century this widows' list had become a more formal organization in many local churches. Widows who became part of it had certain responsibilities that they were expected to fulfill.

To be part of this first century group in Ephesus Paul says that a widow had to be at least sixty years old. That was the age generally recognized in much of the ancient world as the time when someone became old.

The second qualification was that the widow had to have been faithful to her husband. Literally the text says that an eligible widow had to have been "a one man woman." Back in #3 Paul said that an elder had to be "a one woman man." Here the expression is turned around. Again there is disagreement about the right interpretation of the phrase. Some think that it meant that the widow could only have been married once. It seems more logical to me that Paul is talking about a one man woman--- a widow who had been faithful to her husband, irrespective of how many times she had been married.

Then in v. 10 we are told that in order to qualify for this list, the widow had to have a reputation for good deeds. The kind of good deeds included things like raising children, although if those children were alive and available, they should have been caring for their mother. Good deeds also included hospitality and washing the feet of the saints. People wore sandals in that culture, and their feet were always getting dirty. A humble act of courtesy was to wash the feet of visitors who came to one's home. It was such a menial act that Jewish law said that a slave could not be forced to wash his or her master's feet.

Then generally these eligible widows were to have helped those who were afflicted in whatever way that might mean. They were also to have generally devoted themselves to every good work.

IV.

So far then, Paul has described the responsibility of churches and families to widows and the qualifications necessary for receiving financial support and for being put on the widows' list. In vv. 11-16 he speaks about THE RESPONSIBILITY OF YOUNG WIDOWS. (IV. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF YOUNG WIDOWS) Widowhood was not uncommon for young women at Ephesus. Disease and war took their toll on men. Ephesus was on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. No doubt there were men who had been lost in their pursuit of seafaring trades.

The early church recognized a responsibility to care for the needs of young widows who had no extended family to support them. But the text says that these younger women were not to be put on the widows' list. According to vv. 11 & 12, **“But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith.”**

The apostle earlier said that women qualifying for this list should be at least 60 years of age. The reason for this, he says, is that younger women have passions. These passions may take them away from staying on this widowhood list.

In so doing these women have abandoned their faith. Now many translations, such as the NIV and NASV, use the word “pledge” instead of “faith.” Using this translation many commentators have theorized that the problem at Ephesus is that younger widows in Ephesus had gone on this widows' list. In so doing they made certain promises, including perhaps a pledge not to remarry. But too often younger widows in the church had gone back on that pledge and remarried.

The original Greek word, *pistis*, can mean “pledge” But it is much more often used in the New Testament in the sense of “faith.” If that is the more accurate translation, how is it that younger widows were allowing their passions to draw them away from Christ and abandoning the faith? By marrying outside of the faith, by marrying men who were not followers of Jesus. I suspect that this was the problem at Ephesus.

It is still a problem today. It is a problem not just for younger widows but for all young people. Too often people who have grown up in the church become attracted to people who are not followers of Jesus. They find ways to justify these relationships. They may hope that their unbelieving partner may eventually become a Christian. But the Bible makes it clear that Christians should only marry fellow believers. Because of the behavior of young widows at Ephesus who may have too often been put on the list and gained church financial support, but then ended up marrying men outside of the faith, Paul wants to stop the practice altogether.

In v. 13 he identifies an additional problem that has happened with these young widows when the church has taken on their financial support: **“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.”** The original word for “learn” was often used to describe young men who were studying for a trade or a profession. In that sense this verse could be read to be saying that these young widows study hard to learn how to be idle. Perhaps Paul is being sarcastic. With the church providing their financial support, too many of these young widows had too much idle time on their hands. One commentator observes, **“Too much time with not enough to do is dangerous for anyone, except those too old to get into trouble.”** (Albert Barnes, 1 Timothy)

Perhaps one responsibility that widows who went on the list had was to do visitation, perhaps visiting other widows. Later in church history writers mention widows who cared for orphans. But this visitation of the younger widows at Ephesus too often involved gossip and being busybodies. Perhaps some of them were promoting the false teaching that was being promoted by some segments of the church.

So this is Paul’s conclusion in v. 14: **“So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.”** This doesn’t mean that it is wrong for married women to have a job outside of the home, especially in our day when we have many modern conveniences that make it somewhat easier to prepare meals and keep up a house. But Paul seems to envision the ideal situation where a younger wife’s primary responsibility is home-related. Within that domestic sphere of operation she is to be a manager. Other New Testament passages speak

about the responsibility of wives to be subject to their husbands, but they also have a realm of responsibility in which they should have freedom to operate, to manage.

The enemy who is mentioned in v. 14 is Satan, who is specifically referred to in v. 15: **“For some have already strayed after Satan.”** Some young widows who have been put on the church list in the past have gotten into trouble by gossiping and being busybodies. Gossiping and being busybodies leads to disunity and division in the church. It disrupts relationships. Such people, in effect, become instruments of Satan. Rather than furthering the cause of Christ, they hurt it. So the best solution is that young widows not be allowed to become part of this widows’ group which receives regular financial support and perhaps has some ministry responsibilities.

Verse 16 carries a special admonition for Christian women who have financial resources to care for widows in their extended family: **“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.”** These women may be married, single, or widowed themselves. Perhaps no obligation for men is mentioned because it would be understood in that culture that it would be the wife who would be the one dealing directly with other women. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There are applications then in this passage for all of us. For you who are widows or older unmarried ladies, there are two things that you can keep in mind. The **first** is that you can have a valuable ministry of prayer. Prayer is not a second class ministry. It is a first class ministry. It is often only when we get toward the latter part of our lives that we truly appreciate that things of eternal significance can be accomplished only through prayer. So, ladies, pray.

Second, as you have energy and opportunity, visit and encourage other widows--- as I know that many of you often do. Many of our deaconesses and members of our women’s committee are widows. Widows on these early church lists apparently ministered in this way. Be on the lookout for other widows and single moms and younger married moms whom you may be able to visit or encourage.

Bea Fitzgerald was a widow in our previous church who frequently came with me to visit widows from the congregation who were in nursing homes. She was also a prayer warrior. Her daughter finally convinced her to sell her house and stop cleaning her in-ground swimming pool. She was 93 when she stopped doing that. She kept doing visitation with me until shortly before she died, a little bit short of age 100.

Then there is an application for each of us as individuals. If there are widows, or widowers, in need in our family, and if we have the financial resources to help them, we need to do it. They are our first responsibility, not the government's, not the church's. We need to help them out in areas besides the financial also.

Then there is an application to us as a church. We need to be on the lookout for financial and physical needs that the widows and single moms in our congregation may have. They may need financial help. They may need practical help. They may need encouragement. We have a deacons' fund box in the foyer, which I usually forget to remind you about, where money can be put that goes to help in these kinds of cases.

(PROJECTOR ON--- JAMES 1:27) James #1 v. 27 admonishes us: **“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.”**

There are at least 18 different verses in the Old Testament in which specific reference is made to God's care and concern for widows. There are more in the New Testament. God has a special compassion for widows. If we are doing our jobs as individual Christians and as a church, we will be concerned about them also.