

1 Timothy 5:3-16

Introduction

1. In our passage today, Paul addresses a very specific topic: the care of widows
2. Often times when this subject of widows is discussed, it is suggested that widows during Old and New Testament times had no means of care and support, and that to lose a husband essentially made them destitute
3. However, during the first century, just as today, not all widows were left without a means to provide for themselves: contrary to what we often hear, wives did not automatically become destitute when their husbands died:
 - 1) They generally maintained their rights to family land and possessions
 - 2) They were able to work outside the home
 - 3) And, both Jewish law and Greek and Roman culture made provisions for caring for widows
 - 4) The Old Testament Law even mandated this:
 - a) When they harvested their crops, they had to leave some for those in need (READ Deuteronomy 24:19-22)
 - b) Every third year when they brought in their tithes, they were to deposit it the center of the city and share it with the Levites, widows, orphans, and the poor (READ Deuteronomy 26:12-14)
4. Even with all this, widows were often still some of the most vulnerable in society, and the same is often true today:
 - 1) Sometimes they were left without a means of support
 - 2) Sometimes they didn't have family to help care for them
5. Our passage today addresses this, and while it's primarily about the care of widows the principles we'll see here certainly extend to others

A. The first principle is that God expects us to care for widows who are truly in need (READ 5:3)

1. The Greek word translated "**honor**" here has a variety of meanings:
 - a. One is to assign a high value or status to someone:
 - 1) Jesus used it this way in Matthew 15:4 when He quoted Exodus 20:12, "**For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'he who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.'**"
 - 2) He used it his way again a few verses later when He quoted Isaiah 29:13, "**This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me.**"
 - b. A second meaning is to provide for someone's needs:
 - 1) Jesus used it this way in Matthew 15:4-5: "**But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, 'Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,' 6 he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition.'**" (explain)
 - 2) Paul also uses it this way in 1 Timothy 5:17: "**The elders who lead well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor at preaching the word**

and teaching.” (we know Paul is referring to monetary honor because he refers to it as wages in the next verse)

- c. Sometimes both these meanings—that of honor and respect as well as providing for someone’s needs—are found in the same passage (Acts 28:10): **“They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.”**
 - d. Here in 1 Timothy 5:3 Paul is referring to honoring widows in a financial sense by providing for their needs
2. There is a condition, however: they truly must be in need: **“who are widows indeed”** (lit. **“those who are truly widows”**):
- a. When we think of widows, we simply think of those who have lost their husbands; in a technical sense they are widows
 - b. However, Paul isn’t simply referring to widows, but widows who were truly in need
3. Takeaway:
- a. Paul is specifically referring to widows here but the underlying principle is that God expects us to provide for those within our midst who truly need help
 - b. This is something the Bible teaches:
 - 1) We’ve already seen how the OT Law mandated that portions of the fields and part of the tithes were to be used to provide for widows, orphans, the poor, and even aliens
 - 2) As we saw in our study of the book of Acts, the early church certainly understood the Biblical mandate to care for those in need:
 - a) Acts 2:42-45 (READ)
 - b) Acts 4:33-37 (READ)
 - c) Acts 6:1-7 (just reference care for widows)
 - d) James summarized what God thinks about this issue in James 1:27: **“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”**

B. The second principle is that the responsibility to care for widows in need falls first on the family (READ 5:4-8)

1. The local church is not to function as a dispensary, handing our provisions willy-nilly to all who ask
2. Notice that the Bible places the responsibility of caring for widows first and foremost on their own family (READ 5:4)
 - a. Paul refers to both **“children”** and **“grandchildren”** being responsible for widows within their own family; so the responsibility falls on the immediate family, and extends beyond the first generation when necessary
 - b. They are to **“first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family”** which means to fulfill one’s duties to the family
 - c. They should be made to **“return to their parents”**—the literal phrase is **“made to give back a return to their parents”**; in other words, they are to pay back their parents
 - d. Doing so is **“acceptable to God”**—which is Paul’s subtle way of saying God expects it

3. Lest we think Paul is making a suggestion or recommendation, he gives a start warning to those who refuse to care for widowed family members (READ 5:8):
 - a. They deny the faith: this means they reject the doctrines and practices of faith in Christ
 - b. They are worse than an unbeliever: this is interesting in light of the fact that Jewish, Roman and Greek culture all had expectations when it came to caring for widows; even the unsaved knew what was expected; how shameful for a believer to not do what is right!

4. You may have noticed that I jumped over vs. 5-7 and that's because Paul took a bit of a detour to define what he meant by widows who were "**widows indeed**" in v. 3 (READ 5:5-7):
 - a. A true widow was someone who was "**left alone**": this would certainly describe someone who had no immediate family, but it might just as easily refer to someone who had been abandoned by her family
 - b. A true widow was someone who had "**fixed her hope on God**" which means she was a believer
 - c. A true widow was someone who had devoted herself to "**petitions and prayers night and day**" (5); this speak to her spiritual maturity and devotion
 - d. A true widow was NOT someone who lived in "**self-indulgence**" seeing as she was "**dead even while she lives**"; James alluded to something similar when he wrote to the rich who oppressed the poor, "**You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter**" (James 5:5)

5. Takeaway:
 - a. The underlying principle here is that children, and even grandchildren, have an obligation to provide for their parents and grandparents if and when the time comes
 - b. We just read a few minutes ago that if we do not do this we deny the faith and are worse than unbelievers

Conversation with Greg about caring for his mom even though his relationship with her isn't good; Dustin caring for his grandmother (and even visiting his mother as she went through cancer, combined it resulted in him dropping out of college)

C. The third principle is that there are criteria that must be met before the church becomes responsible for widows (5:9-16)

1. The first principle has already been stated which is that they must truly be in need and "alone" (e.g. without family members who are willing to help)
2. Paul lists three additional requirements under which widows become the responsibility of the church (READ 5:9-10)
 - a. First, there's an AGE requirement: "**not less than sixty years old**"
 - b. Second, there's a MORAL requirement: "**wife of one man**":
 - 1) Some interpret this phrase to mean that a widow cannot have been married more than once, and certainly never divorced, or she cannot be cared for by the church
 - 2) The problem with this interpretation is that the phrase is literally "**a one-man woman**" which refers to faithfulness and devotion in marriage, which speak to her character rather than her status or state
 - 3) This is why the NIV translates this phrase as "**has been faithful to her husband**"

- 4) John MacArthur said it well in his commentary on this passage:

A “one-man woman” is a woman who was totally devoted to her husband. It speaks of purity in action and attitude, as in the case of the overseer in 3:2, who is to be a “one-woman man”; it does not refer to marital status. Such a woman lived in complete fidelity to her husband in a chaste, pure, unspotted marriage relationship.
 - 5) When it comes to widows who might have experienced divorce and remarriage prior to being widowed, the way I would address it would be to judge their character in regard to faithfulness and devotion to their husband based on their most recent marriage
- c. Finally, there’s a REPUTATION requirement: **“having a reputation for good works”**
- 1) Paul now provides some examples of good works:
 - a) **“if she has brought up children”**
 - b) **“if she has shown hospitality to strangers”**
 - c) **“if she has washed the feet of the saints”**
 - d) **“if she has assisted those in affliction”**
 - e) **“if she has devoted herself to every good work”**
 - 2) This list of good works isn’t meant as a checklist (e.g. she must have raised children) but rather serves as examples of what kinds of things make for a good reputation
3. When widows do not meet these requirements, the church is not obligated to care for them:
- a. This is especially true of younger widows (5:11-15)
 - b. Paul states two reasons for not putting younger widows on the list:
 - 1) The first is the temptation to remarry (READ 5:11-12):
 - a) It appears that when widows were put on the list, they made a vow or a pledge to serve Christ and the church as widows (see v. 5)
 - b) However, younger widows would be more prone to break this pledge and remarry, and therefore bring judgment upon themselves; NIV: **“For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. 12 Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge.”**
 - 2) The second is the temptation to become idle, busybodies, and gossips (READ 5:13)
 - c. For these reasons, instead of being put on the list and cared for by the church, younger widows should remarry (READ 5:14)
4. Takeaway:
- a. The church is obligated to care for those within the body who are in need, and we can only do this if we prioritize those who are truly in need
 - b. We see this in Paul final words in 5:16 where he summarizes everything in vs. 3-15 in a single statement (READ 5:16)
 - c. One of the things we’ve chosen to do here at Renew is use what God has given us through your generous giving is to help those in need, first and foremost those in our midst (e.g. Mahlins, Steve Mitchel’s wife and daughter, Jeremiah and Julie, Ginny)