

Instructions for Widows [Slide 1] 1 Timothy 5:1-16

What responsibility does a church have for the widows who are part of the church? The apostle Paul provides some instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:1-16. I invite you to turn to that passage. 1 Timothy is about three fourths of the way through the New Testament before you come to the big book of Hebrews. 1 Timothy 5:1-16. I'm going to begin with verses 1-2 where Paul tells us to treat your fellow Christians like members of your family. Read verses 1-2.

[Slide 2] Paul covers every conceivable group of people to which Timothy will relate: men older than him, men younger than him, women older than him, and women younger than him. The common theme is to treat them like your family. Treat the older men like your father. Treat the older women like your mother. Treat the younger men like your brother. Treat the younger women like your sister. We are to think of the church as our spiritual family: our brothers and sisters in Christ, our fathers and mothers in Christ.

One of the rewards or benefits of following Jesus is that you gain a spiritual family that covers the whole globe. Often this spiritual family becomes closer to you and is more encouraging and supportive than your physical family because in many cases they will share more in common with you than you do with your blood relatives. The disciples at one point noted that they had left everything to follow Jesus. This is the response they received from Jesus in Mark 10:28-30. Read. We truly are members of God's family. Family watches over and takes care of its own. That principle is going to lead Paul to talk about the special responsibilities the church has to its widows.

Before we move onto the care of widows I note that Paul adds some additional instruction for how Timothy is supposed to relate to older men and younger women. His additional instructions in both cases deal with the topic of respect. Timothy is not to sharply rebuke an older man but rather to appeal to him as if he were his father. I would suggest to you that the primary reason for this instruction is so that Timothy will treat the older men with respect. A sharp rebuke to an older man from a younger man would communicate disrespect to him whereas an appeal to him like a father to change something would communicate respect.

Likewise, one way to show respect to younger women is to treat them with all purity, not doing anything harassing, demeaning, or that would put them in a compromising situation. Refraining from coarse jesting or lewd comments or sexually suggestive innuendos are all ways of showing respect. Paul's guidelines are eminently practical. Treat younger women like sisters and older women like mothers. Don't do anything with a younger woman that you would not be willing to do with your sister. Don't do anything with an older woman that you would not be willing to do with your mother.

Let's move onto the widows. How should a church care for its widows? At the outset let me make clear that Paul does not exhaustively treat this topic in this passage. Paul is concerned in this passage with the financial and material needs of widows. We know that people need a lot more than a roof over their head, clothing, and food. Nevertheless they first need those things. This passage deals with the material needs of widows.

[Slide 3] Widows of godly character and no family are candidates for support. Let's look at verses 3-8. Read.

Honor widows who are truly widows. In this context the word honor refers to meeting the financial needs of widows because that is what the context is about. Paul makes a distinction

between widows who are widows indeed and those who are not. He makes the distinction because widows indeed are women who have no adult children to support them versus widows who have adult children. They all have lost their husband but some have a family support system and some do not.

Paul lays out the principle in verse 4 that the first responsibility for a widow lies with her children and grandchildren. It is acceptable or literally pleasing to God for children and grandchildren to take care of their mother or grandmother. Children are expected to provide a financial return to their parents. Their parents financially supported them when they were young. It is the responsibility of adult children to return the favor and financially support their parents when they are old.

In verse 8 Paul says that if anyone does not provide for his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Taking care of your family and particularly your parents is so essential a part of what it means to follow Jesus Christ, that if you fail to provide for your family, then you have essentially rejected what it means to follow Jesus and you are behaving worse than those who do not believe at all. Understand that Paul is talking about people who are capable of providing for their family. He is not speaking about people who, due to physical disability or health conditions simply cannot fulfill their responsibility. Nor is he speaking about people who have temporarily lost their job or through some momentary crisis cannot work for the moment. He is speaking about people who can provide for their family, but choose not to do so.

If you have elderly parents or grandparents, God holds you responsible for their provision. As a nation, we have become far too dependent on government doing what families and secondarily what the church should be doing. I think there is a role for government to play in supporting the elderly, but the government should be a safety net for when there is no family and no church. Government is terribly inefficient, wasteful and often lacks the ability to personally minister to people. You want government assistance to be the last resort rather than the first line of help.

Finally, in verse 16 Paul tells us that when family members care for their widows that frees the church to focus on those widows who have no family. Read verse 16. The commentaries suggest this verse is referring to a single woman, perhaps a widow herself, who has living with her servants or friends who are widows, since Paul has already made clear that we should support family members. Paul is therefore encouraging that woman to take care of those widows if she can so that the church can be free to take care of widows who have no one. In any case, Paul instructs the church to care for widows who have no one else to support them.

The other interesting thing that Paul does in this passage is to apply a character test to determine who qualifies for church assistance. Even if a widow has no family, she does not automatically qualify for assistance from the church. In verses 5-6 Paul says that a true widow or a widow indeed is one who hopes in God, maintains a prayer life, and does not give herself to wanton pleasures. The Greek word that is translated as wanton pleasure can mean either living luxuriously or sensually. The next clause saying that she is spiritually dead even while she lives indicates we are talking about sensual pleasures, some kind of immoral behavior. She has to be living a godly life and she has to contribute to the ministry of the church through her prayers.

I find that last requirement quite wise. Due to health issues it may not be realistic to require widows to serve in specific ministries of the church, but everyone can pray. God expects widows to contribute to the mission of the church. Losing one's spouse is not some kind of ticket to living selfish, self-centered lives. In this sense there is no such thing as retirement in

God's Kingdom. Old age may force you to slow down and not do as much, but as long as we live on this Earth we are expected to serve God, even if the only thing we physically can do is pray.

Paul tells Timothy in verse 7 to prescribe these things so that they, that is the widows, may be above reproach.

Now, you could never get away with a character test in government programs. People would call you heartless and cruel and all sorts of things if you suggested that financially helping people is contingent on their living upright lives. But the church is not the government. Character does matter and in the church you don't financially support people when it helps them maintain an ungodly, disobedient-to-God lifestyle. God's money cannot be used to support ungodly behavior.

Before we move on, let me say something about widowers since this passage is silent about them. Paul is concerned with materially providing for widows in their old age. I think the presumption here is that most widowers are financially able to provide for themselves, certainly when they are younger. For that reason I don't think Paul mentions them. However, one of the primary applications of the Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," was to take care of your elderly parents when they could no longer take care of themselves.

Therefore I would suggest that even though widowers are not mentioned in this passage, if a widower has no children to support him and he needs financial help, then I believe what Paul says here about widows also applies to widowers. Realistically, those who normally needed the help were widows mainly because the men died sooner than the women even as it is today. Looking at Hope Fellowship, for example, we have no widowers who are members or regularly attend our church, but we have, by my count, thirteen widows. That illustrates, I think, why Paul focuses on the widows.

[Slide 4] In verses 9-10 Paul says to support widows 60 years or older who have a history of good works. Let's read those verses. Read.

Put her on the list if she is not under 60 and if she is a one-man woman, meaning not having divorced and remarried. Presumably those under sixty can still support themselves. Also, put her on the list if she has a reputation for good works and Paul lists what some of those good works are. In the case of those physically unable to do these things, it is sufficient if they have a reputation of having done them in the past. I think the presumption is that if they are physically able to still do them, then they should continue in these good works.

Let's look at the list of good works in verse 10. She has brought up children. Certainly that would refer to her own, but it may be that it also refers to bringing up orphans. From historical records it appears that the early church took in a lot of orphans and it may have been the responsibility of the widows to provide a lot of the child-rearing of those orphans.

She has shown hospitality. Certainly that would include showing hospitality while she was married, but again it may have been that when traveling evangelists or Christian ministers came into town that the widows had the primary responsibility of taking care of them.

She has washed the feet of the saints. That's probably a figure of speech where washing the feet represents all the small, humble acts of service to one's brothers and sisters in Christ.

She has assisted those in distress, probably refers mainly to taking care of those who are sick or physically incapacitated.

She has devoted herself to every good work.

Everyone is expected to contribute to God's mission. Yes, losing one's spouse is very sad and there is an appropriate time for grief and self-care, but life goes on and we are all called to

serve rather than be served. You ought to assume that as long as God has you here on the Earth, that you have an assignment for his Kingdom. If you are confined to your bed and incapable of movement, you can still pray and intercede for God's mission.

[Slide 5] In verses 11-15 Paul says the younger widows should remarry, if they can, to avoid temptation. Let's read those verses. Read.

Verses 11-12 are tricky to interpret because there are a couple of ambiguous words and phrases, plus we're not exactly sure what was happening historically. The last word in verse 12 is the Greek word, *pistin*, which is normally translated as faith, but in rare occasions can mean pledge. So part of the problem is the tendency of the younger widows to lay aside either a pledge they made when they were put on the church's roll or it means they laid aside their Christian faith. The second ambiguous phrase is "in disregard of Christ" in verse 11. What does that mean?

Paul is making a recommendation based on what he has experienced in the past with the widows. There are two main interpretations. One, Paul is referring to a suspected practice that when the younger widows were put on the financial roll for support they made a pledge of chastity. However, because they were still young and subject to sexual passions many of the younger widows broke their pledge in disregard to Christ and brought shame on the church. The second option is that the younger widows, moved by passion married unbelievers in disregard of Christ and actually set aside their Christian faith and took on the pagan beliefs of their new husband.

I favor the second interpretation that they actually left the faith because they married unbelievers only because the normal translation of the Greek word, *pistin*, is faith. Both interpretations have to make assumptions that you can't really prove so I rate my confidence level slightly above fifty percent.

Fortunately, we don't have to have certainty about the problem to proceed with the application. There should be an age marker where those above that age are eligible for support and those below that age are still expected to support themselves. Is 60 still a reasonable age given that lifespans have increased since the first century? Is there even flexibility to change the age? I think the safe thing to do is stay at 60 as the marker. Age related problems have started to appear by that age and businesses start becoming more unwilling to hire at that age. There could be a fair number of widows who couldn't support themselves at that age, so I think we should keep it as it is.

Another problem with younger widows being supported financially is that they now have too much time on their hands. They don't have to work and so Paul mentions one of their temptations is to grow idle and become gossips and busybodies, meddling in other people's business and talking about inappropriate things in verse 13.

So, Paul's recommendation in verses 14-15 is for the younger widows to marry, if they can, have children, carry on their domestic responsibilities and this will protect them from Satan. This advice is very similar to what Paul said in chapter 2 where he urged the women to remain in their God-given roles as a means of protection from demonic deception.

[Slide 6] So, let me summarize what God's word teaches us in this passage. First, treat your fellow Christians like members of your own family. Second, you are responsible for the welfare of your parents and grandparents. You are supposed to ensure their care in their old age. You may not have to personally provide it, but you need to make sure it happens.

Third, the church is responsible for any widows 60 or over who have no family and who have lived godly lives. As far as I can tell, all our widows have adult children who are responsible for

their well-being. Fourth, younger widows should remarry if they can, but also support themselves. Fifth, widows are expected to serve the Lord like everyone else.

This passage has all been about economics. Paul has not addressed the unique emotional and spiritual needs of widows in this passage, so you should not consider this passage the last word on widows. In fact, the OT has much to say about them and there are a couple of other references in the NT.

I thought it would be very helpful for all of us if I were to interview some of our widows to better understand what some of their unique needs are and how we might better minister to them. I have asked Anna Bertheau and JoAnn Williams if they would answer some interview questions for us, so I would like to invite them to join me on the stage.