

The Church's Responsibility to Widows

1 TIMOTHY 5:3-16

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
June 16, 2019**



This morning, we return to our series of lessons from the book of 1 Timothy, an inspired letter written from the apostle Paul to a young preacher serving the Lord's church in the ancient city of Ephesus. And today, we come to 1 Timothy 5:3-16, a passage where Paul addresses the church's responsibility to the widows of the congregation. I'd like to get a handout started around the room. And if you have lost a husband yourself, I would invite you to take an extra one of these, and I have a huge favor to ask. On the back of this sheet, I am asking for your advice, for your help in communicating with the rest of the congregation. If you have lost a husband, what do we need to know? As your brothers and sisters, what have we done that's good? What could we have done better? What do we need to know going forward? But I would love to hear from you. Some of you might remember that I asked this of my own sister when she lost her husband a while back, and she had some very good advice that was based on a very difficult time in her life. But I would welcome your input as well. And we will actually wrap up this lesson on July 7. We have a guest speaker next Sunday, then we have our 5th Sunday song service on June 30, so we'll be taking a bit of a break from our series on 1 Timothy. Today, though, we start with the text itself and a lesson on the church's responsibility to widows.

For most, if not all, of human history, women have lived longer than men. Perhaps you have seen some of the memes explaining why. Of course, these are completely anecdotal. We are not looking at cold hard research here, but obviously, ladders are involved! And there is certainly a chance that men, on average, take different risks than many women do. And of course, it's not just ladders! We could add all of these as reasons why women live longer than men. But then, we should also check in with Dwight, because Dwight reminds us of another truth, that men do have some unique health challenges as well. As I understand it, career choices play a role in this, war plays a role in this, there are other variables, and so it is a complicated issue. But the truth remains, that women, on average, continue to live longer than men. Right now (in the United States), men can expect to live to the age of 76.1 (on average), and women can expect to live to the age of 81.1. On average, then, women will live around 5 years longer than men.

So, when the Bible addresses how we as God's people need to be caring for widows, we realize that this gap between men and women has existed for many years, and it will most likely continue. By looking at the statistics, we also realize that as we live longer, this need for care and concern will only increase. In an article released just a few months ago (in September 2018), the US Census Bureau reminds us that all of us are living longer. In fact, the year 2030 will mark an "important demographic turning point in U.S. history," because by

2030, all of the baby boomers will be older than age 65, which means that 1 in every 5 residents in the U.S. will be retirement age. And not only that, but five years later (by 2035) those over the age of 65 will outnumber all of those under the age of 18 for the first time in U.S. history. So, here in the U.S., we are living longer, but we are having fewer children, which will put a much greater burden on all of us when it comes to caring for those who are older. I hope we understand the graphic up here. In the recent past, the stats were shaped like a pyramid, but as the baby boomers move through these figures, and as all of us are living longer, the pyramid is shifted to something of a pillar. And it is great that we are living longer, but it does present a challenge.

Concerning widowhood in particular, there are roughly 13.6 million widows in the U.S. right now, with about 700,000 women becoming widows every year, and on average, they live about 14 years after their husband's death (<https://www.creators.com/read/positive-aging/08/17/widow-facts>). Perhaps some of you are familiar with the various "stress indexes," where therapists and researchers rank life events according to the level of stress. Losing a spouse is consistently ranked as the most stressful event that anybody can ever experience. And then, in addition to the emotional toll, when a spouse dies, an average American widow sees a 37 percent decrease in her household income. And although the numbers might vary a bit through the years, the stress and the financial strain are realities that we've seen going all the way back to Bible times.

And we understand why God is concerned. In Psalm 68:5, King David describes God as, "**A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows.**" In the Law of Moses (in Deuteronomy 27:19) there is a curse on anyone, "**...who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.**" And in the prophets, God's consistent message is summarized in Isaiah 1:17, where he commands his people, "**Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.**" And as we are about to discover this morning, God's concern for widows continues right into the New Covenant. We had James 1:27 as our scripture reading today, but in 1 Timothy 5 we have the details. Let us all look together at 1 Timothy 5:3-16, and let's keep our Bibles open as we study - 1 Timothy 5:3-16,

³ Honor widows who are widows indeed; ⁴ but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. ⁵ Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. ⁶ But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. 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. ⁹ A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, ¹⁰ having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work. ¹¹ But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, ¹² thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. ¹³ At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. ¹⁴ Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; ¹⁵ for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. ¹⁶ If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.

As we look at these fourteen verses, I want us to notice six categories or scenarios, and then I want us to close three weeks from now with some very practical lessons, the “So what?” in this passage. But we start this morning with a summary of the SCENARIOS Paul addresses here. As he gives some inspired advice to the young preacher, as he gets Timothy to try to make sense of what is going on and how to serve these women, he tries to summarize some of the scenarios by describing a number of categories.

I. And first of all, in verse 3, we start with those women who are “WIDOWS INDEED.”

When Paul tells Timothy to *“honor”* these women, he uses a word that sometimes involved financial support. It’s the same word the Bible uses when children are told to *“honor”* their parents. It’s the idea of putting “value” on somebody. We treat them as if they are worth something to us. And sometimes that might involve making a financial decision, a financial sacrifice. We think of how Jesus was upset that some of the Scribes and Pharisees had invalidated God’s command to *“honor”* their parents by making certain funds unavailable (in Matthew 15). They were dishonoring their parents by not supporting them financially. So, there is the possibility of money involved here, if that is what is needed. And in verse 5, it seems that we are talking about CHRISTIAN widows here. These are women who have, “.... ***fixed [their] hope on God and continue[s] in entreaties and prayers night and day.***” In other words, we focus on our own. We also note (in verse 5) that these are widows who have been *“left alone”* - they do not have families who can take care of them (and we will get to more of that in just a moment). But as to this first scenario (this first category), those who are to be honored are those who are *“widows indeed.”* Some translations might refer to *“true widows,”* or to those who are *“really in need.”* And this idea of *“widows indeed”* is found in verse 3, verse 5, and in verse 16. Timothy is to make sure the church cares for and honors those women who are legitimately destitute, in need, and alone, because of the loss they have suffered.

II. The second scenario involves those who are widows, but these women have children and grandchildren who are willing and able to help - so, these are WIDOWS WITH FAMILIES - these are widows who are NOT alone.

And Paul’s instruction here is for the women in this scenario to be cared for by their own families. As parents, we take care of our children for (at least) the first two decades of life, and when we are old and unable to care for ourselves, Paul basically says that it is now time for our children to repay the favor! In verse 4, they are to *“make some return to their parents.”* Old age is to be payback time! We owe our parents something. Paul refers to this as practicing *“piety.”* Some translations might say, *“this is godliness,”* or *“this is true religion.”* This goes back to our scripture reading this morning from James 1:27. Pure religion means taking care of widows. Sometimes the word “religion” gets a bad rap. Sometimes we might hear people say, “I love Jesus, but I hate religion.” But, Biblically speaking, “religion” is what happens when we do what God tells us to do! Pure religion is taking care of widows and orphans. So, in verse 4, Paul explains that children have a religious obligation to take care of their elderly parents, and when we do what he is commanding here, he says (at the end of verse 4) that, *“this is acceptable in the sight of God.”* I don’t know about you, but I’m thinking it is a good thing to be *“acceptable in the sight of God.”*

But, Paul doesn’t leave it with a simple command; instead, he continues, and in verse 8 we have one of the most severe warnings anywhere in Scripture. He says (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.”* Even most unbelievers understand that adult children are responsible for taking care of their elderly parents.

So, Paul explains here that if we as Christians neglect this duty, we are worse than unbelievers. We hope to look at this in greater detail in three weeks.

But as to the scenario or the category, we are talking here about widows with children or grandchildren. Before the church takes on the care and support of a widow, this woman's own flesh and blood need to step up. So, Paul is explaining to Timothy that the church is not obligated to take care of every widow; but instead, if a widow has family who can help, they need to get involved. This, of course, frees up the church to help those who are ***"widows indeed."*** But we could also think about it this way: If the church steps in to help widows in this scenario, we have (in a sense) robbed this woman's family of the privilege of practicing ***"piety."*** We have taken away an opportunity for them to be seen as ***"acceptable in the sight of God."*** So, we have true widows in desperate need with no family to help, and now we have widows who can be cared for by their families.

III. In verse 6, we seem to have a third category, and I will describe these women as WANTON WIDOWS - not "won-ton" (like the Chinese food), but "wanton."

Other translations refer to women in this category as being ***"self-indulgent"*** or ***"living for pleasure."*** It's the idea of ***"living in luxury."*** This is one of the reasons why God condemned Sodom in Ezekiel 16:49, ***"...she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."*** So, we have the idea of a woman living in luxury with no thought for others. Obviously, those in this category do not NEED the church's help, and certainly the church should not be subsidizing that behavior. In fact, Paul says that women like this are ***"dead,"*** even while living. They seem to be alive on the outside, but they are spiritually dead. So, this is not the kind of widow we need to be helping.

IV. We now come to another category that I have described on the wall up here as "THE ENLISTED."

And I put it that way because Paul refers to putting these women on a list (in verse 9). Some translations might refer to them as being ***"enrolled"*** And there has been some discussion on this. On one side, some have suggested that this "list" (in verse 9) is the list of those who will be receiving the benevolent help, that this is a ***"list"*** of the ***"widows indeed."*** And I understand the thought, "Those who receive help must meet these criteria." However, let us think about what that means. What if a woman is only 59-½ and loses her husband? She is destitute and in desperate need of food and clothing. Are we as a congregation to turn her down or to tell her to come back in six months? And we could ask the same thing about the other guidelines given here. And to me, that just doesn't sound right. But there is another way of looking at it, and it goes back to the word Paul uses. He wants certain women to be put on the ***"list."*** Literally, he wants them to be ***"enlisted."*** I think of the military, don't you?

And then we look at the criteria. To me, the qualities Paul gives to us in verses 9-10 seem to be at least somewhat similar to the qualifications given for elders and deacons. And what I mean is: Paul seems to be establishing not minimum standards for helping somebody in desperate need; but instead, he seems to be establishing qualifications for taking on the special responsibility of serving in this area. He seems to be regulating something that the church in Ephesus was probably already doing. But he was bringing some structure to it, perhaps in an effort to fix some abuses, to fix some problems. And so we have some qualifications for serving in this way. In other words, if you are at least 60, if you are a one-man kind of woman, if you have raised children, if you have a reputation of good works, if you have shown hospitality to strangers, if you have washed the saints' feet, if you have assisted those in distress, and if you have devoted

your life up to this point to every good work, then you are someone we want to take on the role of serving the other widows in the congregation. And so to me, it seems that Paul literally wants Timothy to **“enlist”** some of the more mature Christian widows to make sure that the other widows get taken care of appropriately. And we will get to this in just a moment, but it also seems that the women in this particular ministry probably took some kind of vow or made a pledge to remain single, to devote themselves full-time (without the distraction of a husband) to the care of the other widows.

And personally, I look at these qualifications, and I realize that we have widows here at this congregation who are doing this and have done this for many years! In a sense, you have been enlisted. Or, more accurately, you have enlisted yourselves. You put yourselves on the list before we had a list! You have signed up, you have taken on the responsibility of helping others - through the clothing give-away, through those times when you get together for sewing, by providing food, by taking care of others as they get out of the hospital, and on and on and on. To me, this seems to be what Paul is encouraging here. As a young preacher, Timothy needs these older women to take care of the other widows so that he can continue with the teaching and preaching. So, this “list” doesn’t seem to be a list of widows needing support - it doesn’t seem like Paul is trying to cut down the church’s obligation to help certain people; but instead, it seems to be a list of those who perhaps take some kind of a leading role in taking care of the other widows. I say this because of the word he uses (he wants them to be “enlisted”), and I also say this because of the qualifications that are given.

V. As we continue, we find another category as we come to the YOUNGER WIDOWS.

And starting in verse 11, Paul says that the younger widows are NOT to be put on this list (the list of widows heading up this widows ministry, as I understand it). And the reason he gives is that they basically need to get back out there! And so, if you are in your 20’s or 30’s or whatever, as you are perhaps just starting to work through the grief of losing your husband, don’t just immediately make a rash vow of celibacy. If I could paraphrase Paul, it seems that he is saying to the young women, “Don’t be too quick to jump onto the widow squad!” And there are at least two issues here. First of all, some of these young women may decide after a while that they really want to get remarried. And Paul allows that. In fact, Paul encourages this. But he certainly doesn’t want them taking some kind of vow of chastity (at least not yet); otherwise, they are put in the position of **“incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge”** (in verse 12). So, instead of going full time with this widow ministry, Paul’s advice is for these younger widows to get remarried and to have children (verse 14). Besides the issue of breaking their pledge, the second issue here is that some of these younger women, through their work with other widows, were actually causing some damage to the church, with the things they were saying. As I see it, they weren’t quite mature enough spiritually to handle this assignment of going from house to house on behalf of the congregation. They were doing it, but they were causing trouble. These are young women who were not yet 60, they had perhaps not yet raised children, they had not yet built a reputation of good works, they hadn’t been around long enough to have established a record of showing hospitality to strangers, and washing the saints’ feet, and assisting those in distress, and so on. These young women hadn’t really lived yet! So again, instead of jumping into this pledge of celibacy, Paul encourages the younger widows to get remarried.

Like some of you, I catch Dave Ramsey on the radio here and there. And if you don’t know, Dave Ramsey is a financial advisor who gives advice from a Christian perspective. And I’ve heard him give some interesting advice to those who lose a spouse. People will call in, “I lost my husband last week! What do I do financially?” And I’ve heard him suggest not doing anything. If I remember correctly, his advice in those situations is often, “Wait at least a year before making any big changes.” And if that is true financially, it also seems to be true

here as Paul is clearly suggesting that these younger widows not make any rash decisions. Slow down and grieve, and make some better decisions a little later on.

VI. There is one more category that is pretty easy for us to overlook, but down in verse 16 we have one more scenario that I don't want us to miss - I have described it here as LONE RANGER WIDOWS.

In verse 16, ***"If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed."*** I didn't pay much attention to verse 16 the first few times I read through this. In fact, most of the resources I consulted for today's lesson just completely skipped over verse 16. But it seems that there were perhaps some women in the congregation who were perhaps taking care of some widows on their own, outside the "official" ministry of the church. They are not even described as being widows. These women were not "enlisted." Nobody tapped them on the shoulder and said, "Hey, we need you to sign up on the bulletin board for something," but instead, these were women who were perhaps well-off financially, and they were getting it done on their own.

And my understanding is that here at the end of this passage, Paul anticipates a possible issue here. As he gives some structure to the widow ministry, he wants to make sure that these other women keep on doing what they are doing. And so the idea is, "If you are already taking care of widows on your own, don't let this program get in your way!" And so, if you are only 59 (or whatever) and you are already feeding widows on your own, just keep on doing what you are doing! I've been preaching for more than 25 years, and I think I can see what Paul is seeing here. There is the danger that when you come in and give some structure to an existing program, some who are already working hard in that area might be tempted to say, "Fine! You want to come in here and change what I'm doing? You can do it!" So, Paul seems to anticipate this, and he basically says here: Do not get mad and back out and dump that responsibility into the program, but keep up the good work!

In the Bible, I think of a woman like Tabitha (or Dorcas) at the end of Acts 9. We don't know whether she was a widow herself. We do know that no "Mr. Dorcas" is ever mentioned. But apparently on her own, this woman took it on herself to make clothing for the poor, and for the widows in particular. And so, in my mind, Paul is telling Timothy to make it clear to the church in Ephesus: We need some structure to correct some abuses in the way the church serves widows, but if anyone is out there doing good on their own, do not let this program get in the way.

Conclusion:

So, today we have looked at some categories - these are the various scenarios that the widows in Ephesus might have found themselves in. And we've looked at Paul's instructions for the women in each of these categories. Hopefully we can get back to this in three weeks at look at some very practical applications based on what we've learned here. And hopefully we'll also be able to learn from the feedback if any of you are willing to help in that way.

As we close, we would like to give everybody here an invitation to obey the gospel, to respond to the grace of God and to the sacrifice of his Son. In response to his death, burial, and resurrection, we turn away from our sins, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the

forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will get in touch. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com