

## "Taking Care of the Family" - 1 Timothy 5:1-16

In the New Testament, there are a number of metaphors used to describe the Church of Jesus Christ. We see her as a building constructed on the foundation of the prophets and Apostles with Jesus being the chief cornerstone. (Ephesians 2:20) We see her as a living body, of which we are all parts with different but equally important roles to play. (1 Corinthians 12) We see her as the bride of Christ, being prepared for a glorious wedding. (John 3:29; Revelation 21:2;9) We see her as branches of a vine, connected to Christ. (John 15:5) We see her as an assembly of priests. (1 Peter 2:9) And there are others, but in many ways, I think I like the metaphor of the Church as a family the best. In Jesus Christ, we have become the family of God and we truly are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Timothy was a young pastor who was given the responsibility of leading the church at Ephesus. Paul left him there to deal with some very specific issues: false teachers spouting false doctrine, certain men and women acting inappropriately in worship, the need to appoint godly elders and deacons and the inevitability of apostasy among some who were in the church. But, much like a Village Missionary, the overarching duty Timothy had was to preach the word and love the people. He had to take his congregation from where they were, with all their faults and by remaining faithful to the word of God, teach them so that they could move farther down the road to sanctification. It was no easy task, which is exactly why Paul wrote this letter. Timothy needed to be encouraged to stay the course, to persevere.

At certain times during his ministry, he would need to confront problems. He would have to point out faults in people's lifestyle. He would have to address sin. That's not easy, and I think it is one of the reasons Paul directed Timothy to "*Let no one despise your youth,*" (1 Timothy 4:12a) Timothy was to serve as an example to the Christians entrusted to his care.

So, continuing with his sage advice, Paul continues at the beginning of Chapter 5. He is giving direction on how all of us should treat our brothers and sisters in Christ, how we should take care of the family of God.

*Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity. (1 Timothy 5:1-2)*

Isn't it interesting that Paul, shortly after he told Timothy to let nobody despise his youth, says, "Do not rebuke an older man."? The word translated "older man" is *presbuteros* (*πρεσβύτερος*). It is exactly the same word that is translated "elder" in many Biblical passages, and if you have an Old King James translation, that's how it is rendered. But in context, Paul is not talking about the church office of elder. He is speaking in a more general sense. So, "older man" captures the sense of what Paul is saying.

Timothy is not to rebuke an older man. We are not to rebuke an older man.

Rebuke is a strong term. The word in the Greek is *epiplēssō* (*ἐπιπλήσσω*) which comes from a word that means "to pound". So, when an older man stumbles into some sort of sin, we are not to beat him up. We are not to rebuke him harshly. But we must not ignore the problem either. We are to exhort him as a father. How would you exhort your father? Well, you should do so with the utmost deference and respect.

The Bible gives us example of this in Galatians. Paul confronted Peter about his sinful and hypocritical Jewish legalism. Paul writes,

*“Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed;” (Galatians 2:11)*

Paul certainly didn't ignore the problem. In fact he confronted it head-on. But a little later, we read:

*But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? (Galatians 2:14)*

Paul was direct, but he was also respectful of Peter's status as the older Apostle. So, he pointed out the problem in the form of a question, which would lead Peter to examine his own actions. That's a good technique. The Bible is consistent and clear that we need to be respectful of those who are older than we are.

And we are to treat younger men as brothers. In other words, we are not to pull rank on them. When you approach a brother or a sister who is caught in some sort of sin, you need to do so with humility, understanding that you could easily be pulled into the trap of spiritual pride. So, we are to exhort others respectfully, especially older men, and we are to exhort humbly.

When we exhort older women, we should do so as if they were our mother. The Bible is very clear that we are to honor our mothers, but when they err, we still need to correct them. When necessary, we need to do so gently, tenderly. We do so graciously.

And when we exhort younger women, we do so as if they were our sisters. The phrase "with all purity" certainly includes sexual purity, but it goes beyond that. There must not be even the appearance of inappropriate behavior. One thing that is important for a pastor, or an elder, or just a brother in Christ is that you avoid even the appearance of an inappropriate sexual relationship. It's why I try very hard to avoid meeting with a woman by myself. I take Kris along, or perhaps one of our deaconesses. But if our sisters in Christ fall into some sort of sin, we can't just ignore it because that would not be loving.

herever we confront sin, we need to do so with the utmost respect, humility, grace and purity.

*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)*

Moving on, Paul turns to a very specific issue: the treatment of widows in the church.

*Honor widows who are really widows. (1 Timothy 5:3)*

Here is a place in scripture where we really need to understand the cultural and historical context. In First Century Jewish and Greek/Roman culture, financial opportunities for women were few and far between. Women were generally dependent on either their fathers or their husbands for all of their financial support. If they had no father or husband, the next best thing was to be taken care of by a son. But if they didn't even have a son, they would most likely become destitute.

We read in Luke, chapter 7, how Jesus had compassion on a woman from the town of Nain.

*And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. (Luke 7:12)*

This widow, who had also lost her only son, was in a very bad way because there would be nobody else to provide for her needs. She would be absolutely condemned to a life of abject poverty and that is why Jesus restoring her son to life was such a gracious act. So, there is the first thing to remember: It was absolutely tragic for a woman to be widowed without a son.

Then, we also need to examine the word translated “widow”. To us, a widow is a woman whose husband has died. But the Greek word is a bit broader in scope. It refers to a woman who lacks a husband. He might have died, or he might have abandoned her. Or perhaps her father died before she had married. All of these were considered widows. And Paul says that we are to honor widows who are truly widows. The word for “honor” means to value, or by implication, to provide for her financial support. But this was to be limited to those women who were widows indeed. In other words, they had no other options. Some women were left in a pretty good financial position by their husbands or fathers. Some women had a good family support system. Paul is limiting the scope of this command to those women who had nowhere else to turn.

Now, in our culture, we have some pretty good safety nets set up. There are government programs that will provide much of the financial support our widows might need. And by the way, these programs were set up as a direct result of Christian influence. We often forget that as we think about welfare abuse.

Where Christianity has not taken hold, you don’t find welfare programs. If you are destitute, too bad, so sad!

But even though we have these government-funded social programs, it does not relieve the Church of our obligation to provide for them, to honor them because our widows need much more than just financial support. And remember what James says:

*Pure 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. (James 1:27)*

God has a tender heart toward widows and orphans. As a church, we need to have the same attitude.

*But 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. (1 Timothy 5:4)*

Here is an important truth: Our first obligation is to take care of those within our own family. So, if we have a mother or a grandmother who is suffering financially, it is our God-given duty as children to take care of them. Your parents brought you into the world. Without them, you would have no life at all and it doesn’t matter if they were the best parents in the world (like mine) or if they were absolutely derelict in their parental responsibilities. God wants you to repay your parents with kindness and support.

I have seen situations where older folks are living in absolute, abject poverty while one or more of their children are living the good life: the big house, lots of toys, not even thinking about the people who brought them into the world. That is an abomination in the sight of Almighty God!

*Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. (1 Timothy 5:5)*

Paul is saying that the true widow has no other options! Her refuge is the living God, because on earth, there is nobody she can turn to. She has been left all alone and continues in that condition. She cries out to God, because there are no other options.

*But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. (1 Timothy 5:6)*

Paul draws a contrast with another sort of woman. (I admit, the transition is a bit abrupt.) What he is saying is that some women have plenty of resources and rather than using those resources to glorify God. This sort of woman has turned to earthly pleasures and has turned her back on God. Paul is saying, whatever you do, don't support this sort of woman. She doesn't need it, and giving her more resources would only enable inappropriate behavior.

*And these things command, that they may be blameless. (1 Timothy 5:7)*

Timothy is to urge the Ephesians to be obedient to these commands: The church needs to support dependent and deserving widows. We should know how to distinguish between those who should be supported and those who should not be supported. And we are to urge children and grandchildren to do their duty in this regard ... because ...

*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. (1 Timothy 5:8)*

That's a strong statement! But scripture is absolutely consistent. Remember:

*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, (James 1:27)*

Verses 9-16 refer to a different, and perhaps special class of women within the church at Ephesus. It is a bit difficult to nail down who these women were, but they are clearly a slightly different set of women than those addressed in verse 3-8. Verses 3-8 focused on widows in need ... widows in general. Verses 9-16 seem to focus on women who were enrolled or placed on a special list. I think they were given specific jobs to do within the church. Were they deaconesses? Were they responsible for specific ministries? We don't know, but it seems like maybe, the church even compensated them for their work.

*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, well reported 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. (1 Timothy 5:9-10)*

In other words, these were women of strong moral character. They were exemplary Christians. And whatever this "number" of women did, it was supporting the church and glorifying God. In contrast, there were women who simply were not qualified for this ministry, and Paul speaks of them next:

*But 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, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not. Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no*

*opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some have already turned aside after Satan. (1 Timothy 5:11-15)*

In the interest of time, I'm going to breeze over this pretty quickly. Apparently, there was a problem in the ranks of these enrolled widows in Ephesus and it was related to younger women who failed in this ministry, whatever it was. The reason they failed is that they were not wholly devoted to it. Their attention was divided.

But understand this: A younger woman who finds herself without a husband for whatever reason can and should be encouraged to marry. If the Lord leads, it is perfectly okay. It is way better than to be consumed by bitterness and to engage in a lifestyle that dishonors Christ. That, I'm convinced, is what Paul means by some turning aside after Satan, learning to be idle, wandering around, becoming idle gossips.

Finally, in verse 16, Paul sums up:

*If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows. (1 Timothy 5:16)*

This is all about taking care of the family, the family of God. We are to hold one another accountable, older men, younger men, older women, younger women. And we are to support those among us who have fallen on hard times. This passage focused on widows, unmarried women, because that group was an extremely needy group in Ephesus but we all need to take care of one another because when you love your brother, when you love your sister, in reality, you are loving Jesus Christ.