



### 1 Timothy 5:1-16

If you were here last Sunday, we all witnessed the tragedy that unfolded before us. The Sheriff's deputy walked in during the sermon and broke the horrible news to Andy and Julie about their brother-in-law's accident. In addition to the loss of their brother-in-law, a widow and 3 orphans were created—Debra, Aleda, Elizabeth and Christina. They are now without their husband and father.

Today's passage is from 1 Timothy 5 and the topic is Gospel-driven Compassion, especially in regard to widows. Thankfully, Debra and her daughters are involved in a good church and will receive some of the support they need. God has compassion on all kinds of downtrodden and suffering people in the Bible but widows seem to have a special place in the heart of God.

*1 Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, 2 older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.*

*3 Honor widows who are truly widows. 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. 5 She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, 6 but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. 7 Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. 8 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.*

*9 Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 10 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. 11 But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry 12 and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. 13 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. 14 So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. 15 For some have already strayed after Satan. 16 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.*

The key verse comes right away in verse three—*Honor widows who are truly widows*. Paul gave a lot of specific instruction to the church in Ephesus but before we get to those details, first we need to understand the broader scope of Scripture

1. God has a special compassion for the widow and orphan.

I want to walk us through several passages that reveal the heart of God.

Deuteronomy 10:17-18—*For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.*

We see that care for widows, orphans and the poor are part of God's very character. We sing the song that matches this passage: Our God is an awesome God, and the very essence of his awesome nature is his care for the weak and needy of all kinds.

Jeremiah 22:3—*Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.*

This passage is nearly identical to the one in Deuteronomy but it was given nearly 900 years later and a mere decade before the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. Which is why the next verse came with a stern warning. *But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.*<sup>1</sup>

Compassion was necessary for God's people because it was part of obedience to the Lord. It revealed the attitudes of their heart and whether or not they had real faith. Compassion for the poor and downcast has never been an option for God's people.

Psalms 68:5—*Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.*

The fatherless need a father and God, the Almighty Father, takes on that divine role such that the psalmist said that this was his holy habitation. God lives with and dwells with the fatherless and widows.

We see this played out so powerfully in the book of Ruth. The entire book is dedicated to the story of three widows: Ruth, Orpah and Naomi. The major point of the story comes at the end when we read that the great grandson of Ruth is none other than King David and David is the forerunner of Christ. But this grand ending to Ruth's story does not detract from the story of God's care for widows. If the story was merely about God's care for the widows, it would have been important and powerful by itself, but the story is about God's care for the widows which has its completion in the greatest of all Israel's kings and eventually in the king of kings. Do you see that the care for the widows, while not the main point of the story is actually accentuated precisely because the story ends with David and Christ?

God's care for the widows and orphans certainly does end in the Old Testament.

Luke 4:25-26—*But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.* Jesus emphasized God's care for the widow in Zarephath but also emphasized the fact that she was a Gentile. This demonstrates both God's universal care for widows but also is a clear message that the gospel itself is not limited in any way but is also for the Gentiles—for all people.

Luke 7:12-13—*As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep."*

Like the widow at Zarephath and most widows in these cultures, without a husband to care for her and now a dead son, this woman would have suffered greatly and perhaps also died herself. Jesus went on to raise her son from the dead, so the main point of the story is that Christ held the power of life and death in his hand but embedded in the larger story is the fact that by causing this, miraculous resurrection, the son would again be able to care for his mother.

John 19:26-27—*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.*

You would be hard pressed to find a more significant story in the Bible about care for widows than this one. With one of his final breaths and his last conversation on the cross, Jesus literally gave over care of his mother to the apostle John. Once again, the most important part of the narrative is Jesus' agony on the cross, but it is precisely his agony on the cross which accentuated his care for his own mother.

There are many clear commands to care for orphans and widows but I find it interesting—I had never noticed this before—that most of the care for widows is described within the context of larger stories. Naomi and Ruth; the widow at Zarephath, Jesus' raising the widow's son and now Jesus' care for his mother from on the cross. In each case, the part about caring for widows is not the key element in the story but also in each case, the larger idea of the story serve gave greater emphasis to the care for widows. For example, if Jesus had asked John to care for his mother, let's say, right before the last supper, that would have been meaningful but the fact that he did it while hanging on this wooden instrument of execution made it all the more powerful and significant. But each of these stories were ultimately gospel stories and the care for widows comes smack dab in the middle of the gospel stories. This increases, not decreases their significance.

Finally, we can't leave out one of the better known verses in the NT.

James 1:27—*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 is no doubt that God has a special compassion for the widow and orphan but also the sojourner, the poor and the day laborer who desperately needed his daily wages for survival. God has a special kind of compassion for the downtrodden. He seeks them out to care for them and promises to punish anyone who would dare oppress them. Therefore, we ought to have the same kind of compassion, not merely as an imitation of God, but because the gospel has already transformed us. If we are nice because it's nice to be nice, that can become a form of good works. But the transforming power of the gospel changes us from the inside out and compassion naturally flows from there.

The next four principles all come directly from chapter five of 1 Timothy.

The immediate context of all of these principles the care for widows, but all of the passages we have looked at so far as well as these instructions in chapter five all have application far beyond widows. The principles would apply to anyone with a great and obvious need who is our midst. Widows were emphasized here because they were generally the most needy people in any culture. Widows of whatever age were almost completely dependent upon someone else caring for them.

## 2. Families have first priority to care for widows

*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.*

We need to remember that all that this teaching came in the context of first century Rome where there was no government aid, no social security, no food stamps, no WIC program. If you were destitute, you could not apply for federal or state aid. You could not get education assistance to be trained for a technical degree. There were no unemployment benefits. You could not even get a minimum wage job at McDonalds or Walmart. You were destitute.

For a Christian widow, at least she had the church as a source of help but Paul made it very clear that families always have first priority. And there were three reasons for this familial priority.

### 1. *let them first learn to show godliness to their own household*

Caring for someone in need is obviously an act of love toward that person but it is also a discipleship opportunity for the person meeting the need. As we were reminded last week, none of us is ever where we want to be in terms of godliness. There is always room for and opportunity for growth in godliness. Caring for widows and others in need is an opportunity to serve others and thereby strengthen your spiritual muscles. You are "learning to show godliness to your own household."

The second reason to take care of widows, Paul wrote, is to "make some return to your parents." Romans 13:8 says something similar in a general sense. *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.* Proverbs says that the borrower is servant to the lender, and this is true. The more financial debt that you have, the more of a slave that you are. Each time you take on more credit and load up the credit cards, you increasingly offer yourself as a slave to your creditors. The only difference is that in our culture we have this little get out of jail free card called bankruptcy. I am not saying that it is always wrong to file for bankruptcy. There are extreme circumstances where the law has provided for helping people get out from under the terrible weight of debt, but there is no question that far too many people file for bankruptcy simply because they were careless with their spending habits.

That kind of debt is bad but the debt of love that we owe toward others is good. Admittedly, it is a strange concept—a debt of love. By its very nature we always think of love as something completely and fundamentally voluntary. If love is coerced in any way, then it ceases to be voluntary and it ceases to be love. Isn't this how we view love? If one of your kids hits the other one on the head with a Tonka truck, the typical parental reaction is to say what to the offending child? We say, "tell your sister you are sorry!" So little Bobby goes up to his sister and sarcastically says, "I'm sorry!" That doesn't sound so genuine to you so you say to Bobby, "Tell your sister you're sorry and make sure you mean it!"

These situations don't sound a lot like love and forgiveness, do they? That's because they are not. So then, how can we owe someone else a debt of love? How can you reconcile these two verses?

Romans 13:8--*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.*

Romans 12:9—*Let love be genuine.*

How can love be a debt that it is owed but also be completely genuine? And taking us back to 1 Timothy, am I really expressing love to my widowed mother or grandmother if I am paying them back, as Paul taught?

This verse in Romans 13 is not saying that we are never allowed to borrow money. The Bible does not forbid debt. It is merely instructing us to pay back what we already owe. Let no debt remain outstanding." Money and debts can be repaid and satisfied but the debt of love is always remains outstanding debt. So "paying back" my parents is the same idea. It is, in every sense, a debt of love that I owe.

The third reason Paul gave for taking care of your family is similar to the rest—for *this is pleasing in the sight of God*. So when we put them all together, there really is a whole host of benefits for the person doing the helping. You are growing in godliness. You are making some return to your parents. You are repaying a debt of love. You are obeying the fourth commandment to honor your parents and you are pleasing the Lord.

And if you needed any more motivation than that, the teaching also comes with one of the sternest warnings in all of Scripture. *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.*

The eminent pastor and theologian John Stott said this about verse eight. "[This verse] tells us that it is a fundamental Christian duty to provide for our relatives. This is plain biblical warrant for a life insurance policy which is only a self-imposed savings plan for the benefit for our dependents."<sup>2</sup> I am not sure I would go so far as to say that not having life insurance means that you are sinning—that might be a good way to sell life insurance to evangelical Christians—but it is certainly a valid application of this principle.

Before Karen's stepdad passed away, he and Karen's mom did everything together. They played golf together. They played scrabble together and watched their nightly TV shows together. Karen's mom did not have a need to talk with Karen really often. But after he husband died,

Karen talks to her mom every single day. She is not a poor, destitute widow like is described here, but she does have real needs—relational needs.

Many families are caring for aging parents and if you are not now, you have already or will soon—stay encouraged! Your service to your parents or perhaps grandparents is a service unto the Lord. It is pleasing to him. It is growing you in godliness and paying your debt of love. It is a beautiful, so be encouraged.

Because the family is to be the chief caregiver, this means that...

3. The church is a last resort or back-up

Paul wrote: *Let the church not be burdened so that it (the church) may care for those who are truly widows.* If there was any kind of family available at all, the responsibility remained with the family.<sup>3</sup> The church was willing and eager to help if necessary, but not only did the church not have the resources to help everyone, by doing so, it would cause two negative things within the family structure. First, it would usurp the responsibility and authority of the family, in the same way that the government tries to remove parental rights, and it would rob the family of the joy of serving and pursuit of their own godliness.

What this proves is that it is sometimes more compassionate not to help someone if there is a better way. This is what I appreciate about our benevolent committee. They are very careful to investigate every request for help and if there is a better way to meet a need, they will pursue that route first. They attempt to be as compassionate and generous as possible but they also take the stewardship of your donated dollars very seriously. I think they strike an excellent balance between the two.

Something similar happened to me this past week. I got a phone call from someone who needed a ride to Westby so he could apply for financial assistance through Bethel Butik. In a previous conversation with him, I learned that he attended another evangelical church in town. I was glad that he was hooked in at some church so when he asked for a ride to Westby, I suggested that he ask someone from his own church. I confess that I had a twinge of guilt as I kind of felt like I was somehow less than compassionate but in the end, I felt it was the best decision.

As you will see, our fifth principle is related to the others.

4. Don't support an ungodly lifestyle

These two sections of Paul's principles are very clear.

- *she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives*
- *But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry **12** and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. **13** 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.*

It would probably be dangerous for me to say too much about verse thirteen. ☺ It is safe to say that many of the young widows in Ephesus were ruining their faith and Christian witness in the community. Men seemed to get picked on in the church, in sermons, etc. Men are the leaders of

the church and the family and marriages and we do have issues of faithfulness at times, but women also need to be held accountable for their actions and motives of the heart.

Once again, if supporting someone ultimately is a support of their ungodly lifestyle, we cannot be engaged in it and it is not compassion. The psychologists would call supporting an ungodly lifestyle as ‘co-dependency’ but the Bible just calls it irresponsible and possibly sinful.

The fifth and final principle brings us full circle.

5. The pursuit of godliness is necessary

- *She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day*
- *Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, **10** 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.*
- *So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.<sup>4</sup> For some have already strayed after Satan.*
- *Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach.*

I think verses 9-10 have a direct application to what our culture calls retirement since it mentions women above sixty years of age. What should we think about retirement? If by retirement you mean receiving a pension from your former employer and Social Security so that you can go bowling, golfing, fishing and endlessly pursue all manner of entertainment and pleasure, then this has no place for the blood bought believer who is awaiting an eternal home. But if by retirement you mean that you are financially stable and now have extra time to serve the Lord in any way he has called you to serve, then this is good and pleasing to the Lord.

Compassion is always driven by the gospel. We love because he first loved us. Widows, orphans, the poor and others need our compassion and our help but they also need Biblical principles to guide them—and the church can give them both. Let us pray that we are filled with compassion and wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Another warning passage: Malachi 3:5—“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

<sup>2</sup> John Stott, 1 Timothy and Titus, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the early church was not very active in serving the needs of widows and the poor. The passage in Acts 6:1-4 details the struggle within the early church and their proposed solution. *Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute,*

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*full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:8-9—*To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. **9** But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.* There was a different context in Corinth than in Ephesus. In Ephesus, the widows were straying from their faith but this did not seem to be the problem in Corinth.