

A Study on 1 Timothy

Week 9 | 5:1-16

Overview | Caring for those in need

Paul shifts his focus from speaking to Timothy about his own conduct and ministry to the issues that are at stake within the church at Ephesus.

Paul uses the metaphor of a family to describe how the members ought to relate to one another within the church. Each section of the broader passage begins with instructions about honoring a specific group of people:

- Honor those in the church as you would within family relationships (5:1-2)
- Honoring older women (5:3-16)
- Honoring older men (5:17-25)
- Honoring younger men (6:1-2)

The section we will look at today will focus primarily on honoring widows and can be outlined as follows:

- Honor those in the church as you would within family relationships (5:1-2)
- Honor widows (5:3)
 - The widow's own family should provide (5:4-8)
 - If no family, the church family should provide (5:9-15)
- Honor widows by making sure they are provided for (5:16)

Honor those in the church as you would within family relationships | 5:1-2

Paul picks up on a theme that Jesus taught saying, "For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother (Mark 3:35)."

Within the church, we are to relate to each other with the unique bond of those who are part of the household (family) of God. Being united together through the Holy Spirit, to Christ and to each other, changes the way we relate to each other.

The verbs in verse one relate to all four of the groups listed here so it could be drawn out to read as follows:

- Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father.
- Do not rebuke younger men but encourage them as brothers.
- Do not rebuke older women but encourage them as mothers.
- Do not rebuke younger women but encourage them as sisters.

It may seem odd that Paul instructs Timothy to not rebuke this group since much of this letter has been about refuting error and rebuking false teachers. This type of rebuke is not what is in mind here. This word "rebuke" has a harshness associated with it so that it could be translated as "speak harshly." In a more literal sense it means something like "to beat something or someone with fists (Duguid, Hamilton Jr., Sklar, p. 426)" which can also carry over to beating someone up with words.

Rather, Timothy is instructed to encourage them which means he is to exhort, appeal to, and urge them toward godliness in a way that is seasoned by the gospel of grace. There is an aspect of this that is similar to what Paul wrote in Colossians 4:6, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."

It's instructive that Timothy (and the church) is told to how to relate to each other using these familial terms. The desire is that respect, honor, and purity would be on display as they modeled healthy, gospel relationships for the world to see.

The widow should be cared for by her own family | 5:3-8

Paul begins this next section by addressing a dynamic that was very real within the church and had opportunity to be either a boost or a deterrent to the witness of the church. The issue had to do with widows. The concern was that they be taken care of as an implication of the gospel ministry while at the same time making sure that the help offered wasn't be taken advantage of.

Paul reminds the church that the primary responsibility falls to the widow's family (5:4). This is a direct application of the fifth commandment to honor our fathers and mothers. Jesus himself reminds us of this in Matthew 15:3-9.

"The phrase Paul uses here is actually redundant – her children are literally to 'give back recompense' (ESV 'make some return') to her. Paul's logic assumes that a widow's offspring owe her for the way she raised and took care of them. How could anyone ever repay his or her mother for what she gave them? By taking care of her in her time of need (Duguid, Hamilton Jr., Sklar, p. 428)."

Paul links this idea of taking care of one's mother as a direct implication of one's faith. (5:8). If one claims to be a Christian but does not fulfill a basic aspect of the parent/child relationship at best his witness of the gospel is suspect and at worst he is behaving worse than an unbeliever. Paul says this as a way to call the church to godliness in how they deal with their own families as a way to demonstrate the gospel. This has both the horizontal (human to human) practical implications as well as the vertical (human to God) implications that impact our worship of God and the witness of his gospel.

Sandwiched between these commands to take care of their widowed mothers, Paul lists aspects of what a true widow's character looks like. This is particularly important as the church must be wise in how it uses its resources, figuring out who the church can and should help support if in fact the widow has no family to help.

There are two types of women that Paul mentions in verses 5 and 6. The first, one that is deemed a "true widow" is:

- Left all alone – one who has no one else to help take care of her; without family
- Setting her hope on God – the resolution and determination to trust God in her situation
- Presenting her prayers and supplications to God night and day – this highlights her godly character and her entrusting her provision to God

The second woman is described as "self-indulgent." This lifestyle would be marked by wasteful, possibly immoral, actions. This highlights her corrupt character and her lack of pursuing godliness in her situation.

Is the church responsible to take care of both? "The latter are not in real need at all and supporting them would be the means of the church condoning sin which would affect the church's reputation in the community. Paul is giving wise advice to the church whilst encouraging proper provision for those in need. He is not seeking indiscriminate assistance for every widow who is on her own, since he could not countenance the idea of a church funding immoral lifestyles (Macleay, p. 185)."

In summary, widows should be taken care of by their own families. If they have no families, then the church must determine if and how it can help. The next section focuses on this.

The widow with no family should be cared for by the church | 5:9-16

As Paul instructs Timothy, and the church, one of the factors is limited resources. The church must be discerning in how it goes about administering care and aid for those in need. (This is a formal list of whom they will support in an ongoing fashion. This does not forbid them from helping out others at times.) This section lists specific qualifications for those who were to receive this care. The general idea here is that the widow's life is characterized by a pursuit and fruit of godliness.

- Must be 60 years old or older – the general age in that culture to be marked as elderly
- Was faithful in marriage – wife of one husband
- Has good reputation – good works
- Raised children – if she had children, she was faithful to the call as a mother
- Showed hospitality – a mark of gospel generosity
- Washed the feet of the saints – a mark of humility and gospel service
- Cared for the afflicted – a mark of compassion
- Devoted herself to every good work

The more difficult aspect of this passage is the instruction of who not to include on the list of those the church should support. (Remember that Paul is writing with a specific context in mind. Much of what he is writing against has taken place among some of the younger widows in the church.) Those who are not to be included on the list had some of the following characteristics:

- Younger than 60 years of age
- Passions drive them away from Christ
- The desire to marriage may drive them away from their former faith – this is not the forbidding of remarriage (Paul recommends this in 5:14) – rather this a self-indulgent desire for marriage that results in a marriage that pulls them from their faith.
- Those who spend their time as idlers, gossips, and busybodies – this is in direct contrast to the godliness of the true widow

One of the thoughts about the younger women is that they had time on their hands and the church should not support younger women who could still potentially be able to find a way for provision. (If they had time to be idle, busybodies, and gossips they could certainly find a way to provide for themselves.)

Paul encourages those who are able to marry and to have families; to invest in the more normative way for them to be provided for. This would also work against the desire to be idle and the temptation to gossip. (This also struck against the false teaching that marriage was to be forbidden.)

In all of the details of this practical advice we must not miss the fact that the end goal of all of this is godliness within the church as a means to bring glory to God and a good witness to the world. Paul mentions that by pursuing these avenues for godliness it gives no room for the adversary (5:14) even as some have already “strayed after Satan (5:15).”

Paul often reminds the church of the spiritual battle that is waging, often behind the scenes. He wants to make sure they understand that the issues at stake are not benign but rather have great consequences. Satan himself is at work to destroy the witness of the church.

So What? |

Resource List

Teaching 1 Timothy by Angus Macleay (Primary Source for class)

1 Timothy by Philip Graham Ryken

Let's Study 1 Timothy by W. John Cook

Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles by William D. Mounce

1-2 Timothy & Titus by Philip H. Towner

Expository Commentary: Ephesians-Philemon edited by Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., Jay Sklar

Commentary on 1 Timothy by John Calvin

ESV Study Bible