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CARING FOR WIDOWS

1 Timothy 5:3-16

By

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May 8, 1994

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Lesson 16

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David Lloyd-George once said, "The true test of a civilization is the way it treats its old people."

A *U.S. News & World Report* (4/3/81) article uncovered the ugly fact of brutality against the aged by their own families:

Each year, perhaps a million elderly Americans—or about 1 out of every 25—are abused by relatives.... Few people are aware of such abuse, although it occurs with a frequency only slightly less than child abuse.... Only one in six cases ever comes to the attention of authorities.... Victims are likely to be 75 or older, and women suffer more often than men. The most likely abuser is the son, followed by the daughter and spouse....

Though the article described physical, sexual, and extreme emotional abuse, we in the church are sometimes guilty of another form of abuse toward the elderly: apathy. Perhaps many of you reflect such apathy by responding to the topic of this sermon, "Caring for Widows," with a wide yawn. I must confess that it isn't a hot topic that I would pick to preach on. But the very length of Paul's discussion (14 verses) makes it hard to miss. Maybe God is trying to get our attention on a subject we're inclined to shrug off. God is concerned that His people be concerned about widows.

It's a problem that will only continue to grow in our culture, as our population ages. By the year 2000, 13 percent of Americans will be 65 or older, with the greatest increase in the over-75 group, which is more in need of physical and financial care. One-half of women over 65 have lost their spouses, and two-thirds of those over 75. Four times as many widows are alive as widowers.

There are numerous passages in the Bible dealing with widows. God has a special concern for them, along with orphans and others in difficult circumstances. Many passages lay down laws to protect widows. God is described as their protector and judge: "A

father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows is God in His holy habitation" (Ps. 68:5). "The Lord protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow" (Ps. 146:9). "Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow" (Deut. 27:19). "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

It's significant that Paul, learned theologian and visionary apostle, was concerned about the care given to widows in the local church. In these verses to Timothy, he gives some wise, practical counsel, telling us that ...

The church should wisely care for the widows in her midst.

Due to the difficult nature of this passage, I think it best to follow the outline of the text to explain what Paul is saying. Then we'll draw some practical lessons. There are two sections: (1) The duty to support needy widows (5:3-10); (2) The duty not to support younger widows (5:11-16).

1. The church has a duty to support needy widows (5:3-10).

There are four types of widows in these verses: (1) The "widows indeed" (NASB; NIV = "really in need"), who do not have family members to care for them (5:3-5, 9-10); (2) Widows with children and grandchildren (5:4, 16); (3) Younger widows, who should remarry (5:11-15); (4) Widows who live for pleasure rather than for the Lord (5:6).

A. Needy widows should be cared for by the church (5:3-6, 9-10).

A "widow indeed" is a godly woman over 60 (v. 9) who has been left alone. Either she has no children and grandchildren, or they have died or are so far away as not to be able to render aid to her. This woman has fixed her hope on God (v. 5) and is a woman of prayer. Anna, the godly old woman in the Temple who held the baby Jesus, is an example (Luke 2:36-38).

Paul says that the church should "honor" such widows (v. 3). This is not to imply that we may disrespect other widows! Paul means that the church should help them financially. (In a moment we'll look at the further stipulations, vv. 9-10). The Greek word

translated "honor" has a double meaning. First, it has the idea of a "price" paid or received. From there it came to refer to honor or esteem attached to something or someone due to their value. Thus the word can refer both to material support and/or esteem. In 1 Timothy 5:17, the word has both senses. In 1 Timothy 6:1, it clearly refers to esteem. In our text (5:3), it seems weighted toward material support.

Scholars differ as to whether there was an "official order" of church widows in Paul's time. We do know from a fourth century work called "The Apostolic Constitutions," that there came to be an official order of widows later in church history. It seems at least that Paul is giving requirements for widows who could qualify for church aid. They were to be actively devoted to the ministry of the church, and the church gave them financial help.

In verses 9-10, Paul elaborates on the conditions of verses 3-5 concerning needy widows. They are to be at least 60 years old. Younger widows Paul advises to remarry. They are to be the wife of one husband, literally, "a one-man woman," the same qualification laid down for elders and deacons (3:2, 12). She is to have a reputation for good works (v. 10), including "bringing up children." This probably means that if she has had children, she has raised them in the faith. But it may also include caring for unwanted orphans. In the Roman world, unwanted children were often left unattended to die. Unscrupulous people would sometimes take them for slavery or prostitution. But a godly Christian woman would take them into her own home to care for them.

Furthermore, she must have shown hospitality to strangers and have washed the saints' feet, a sign of her humility in serving the church. She must have assisted those in distress, which could refer to everything from visiting the sick and helping them to giving counsel and comfort to the distraught. To sum up, she has "devoted herself to every good work." The widows in the church who met these qualifications were recognized by the church as being on "the list" (v. 9) and they were to serve in various capacities in the church.

In contrast to these godly women, Paul mentions widows who live for "wanton pleasure" (v. 6). The word means "to live in luxury" (see Ezek. 16:49, LXX, where God condemns Sodom because

“she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but did not help the poor and needy”). Thus Paul is referring to a widow who lives in luxury and has no concern for others. Such a woman is “dead even while she lives.” She is insensitive to the things of God.

This verse sounds a warning to us American Christians. The spirit of our age is, “I’ve worked hard all my life. I’ve saved up enough to enjoy myself. Now that I’m retired, I don’t want to be bugged. I’m going to block out the world and its problems and live for me.” But a godly person approaching retirement should see it as an opportunity to be freed up so that he or she can devote more time to serving the Lord. Real fulfillment is not found in living for pleasure and self-gratification; that is death. Real fulfillment is found in living for Christ and serving others for His sake.

What about a widow with children or grandchildren?

B. Widows with families should be cared for by their family members (5:4, 7-8).

Paul plainly commands that a widow with children or grandchildren should be cared for by them. The parents have contributed immeasurably to their children and grandchildren’s welfare. Now it is their turn “to make some return” (v. 4) to their widowed mother or grandmother. This is “acceptable” or pleasing in the sight of God (v. 4).

In fact, Paul goes so far as to say that if a person does not provide for his own family (and he clearly includes elderly parents), he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (v. 8)! Even most unbelievers were kind enough to provide for aged parents. It was Greek law from the time of Solon that sons and daughters were morally and legally bound to support their parents (William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [The Westminster Press], p. 106). The word “provide” (v. 8) is literally, “to think ahead” or “to take thought for,” and is a pretty good case for a man to have adequate life insurance or other provision for his family. (Any insurance salesmen owe me a buck.) Thus Paul is saying that if you don’t provide financially for your family—not luxury, but for their needs—you are behaving worse than unbelievers.

To sum up, the principle is, if the family can provide for older widows, they should do so. If there is no family to provide, then such older widows may be supported by the church if they are godly women devoted to serving Christ. If they are living for pleasure, then the church has no responsibility for them. But what about younger widows?

2. The church has a duty not to support younger widows (5:11-16).

Paul is wise and practical. He does not want the church to turn into a welfare agency, supporting those who are not serving or who should be carrying their own load.

- A. Younger widows should not be supported, but should marry and be devoted to their families (5:11-15).

These verses are not easy to interpret. Some understand that the older widows made some kind of pledge to the Lord and to the church to the effect that they would remain single so as to devote their remaining years completely to serve the Lord. If a younger widow made such a pledge, but then started wishing to marry again, she would thus go back on her pledge and incur the censure of the church. Paul is not condemning the natural desire of a younger widow to remarry. What is wrong is the breaking of a pledge.

Others take it differently. The words "previous pledge" (v. 12) are literally, "first faith." Coupled with verse 15, they argue that Paul was addressing an existing problem, namely, that these younger widows who were put on the support of the church were allowing their desire to remarry to be greater than their faith in Christ, so that they even would remarry an unbeliever.

Furthermore, they were falling into the errors of the false teachers (the terms used to describe these women in 5:13 parallel those used of the false teachers, 1:6-7; 4:7; 6:3-4, 20). Thus they were actually turning away from their first faith in Christ, promoting false teaching, and marrying on the basis of sensual desires, not marrying in the Lord. Thus Paul instructs that they not be supported, but rather marry and devote themselves to home duties, so as to give the enemy no occasion for reproach (5:14).

- B. Unmarried women in the church with dependent widows should support them (5:16).

Some later manuscripts add “any believing man,” probably added by a copyist because the original, “believing woman,” is difficult. Probably Paul, as an afterthought, is answering a question which might arise, “But what if there is no man as the head of the household? Should the church then support the widows in that family?” Paul says that a believing woman should do all that she can to support or assist widows in her family so that the church is freed up to minister to widows truly in need.

Practical Lessons:

1. Godly families are at the heart of a godly church.

And, godly mothers are indispensable to godly families. In 5:10 & 14, bearing and raising children are mentioned first in the list of good deeds. We live in a day when many Christian women are putting their careers ahead of their duties at home. The notion that a woman should be “just a homemaker” is viewed as a cultural anachronism that we no longer need to follow.

I contend that the biblical model is that the husband normally should be the main provider (5:8), even as Christ provides for His bride, the church; and that the wife should be a godly homemaker who manages the home under the husband’s loving supervision. To put it bluntly, a mother’s place is in the home with her children, not in a career. I realize that there are difficult situations where a mother of young children has no alternative but to work. I’m not speaking against that. But I know Christian women who put their young children in day care and go off to work because they’re bored at home! Such a thing would have been unthinkable to the early church!

Listen to this quote arguing that the woman’s proper place is in the home (cited in “Quit You Like Men,” 12/93, p. 20):

Man is, or should be, women’s protector and defender. The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life. The constitution of the family organization, which is founded in the divine ordinances, as well as in the nature of things, indicates the domestic sphere as that which properly

belongs to the domain and function of womanhood. The harmony, not to say identity, of interests and views which belong or should belong, to the family institution is repugnant to the idea of a woman adopting a distinct career from that of her husband. The paramount destiny and mission of women are to fulfil the noble and benign offices of wife and mother. This is the law of the Creator.

You might be surprised to learn that this quote came from the United States Supreme Court in an 1873 decision sustaining a state law denying to women the right to become attorneys! When the Supreme Court sounds more in line with the apostle Paul than many modern evangelical Christians, you might say, "We've come a long way, baby!" We need to elevate again the importance of godly mothers and godly homes.

2. As godly families, we each have a responsibility to honor and care for our elderly parents, especially widows.

Again, this is countercultural. Our society views the elderly as being a bother to our pursuit of personal pleasure. We're so utilitarian that we discard people who no longer can function in a contributing way. But the Bible says that it pleases God when children and grandchildren practice piety by making some return to their parents (5:4). It would be judgmentally wrong to say that every family must take elderly parents into their homes. There are situations where that is not a viable option. But even if an elderly parent must be put in a nursing facility, the children should not abandon them. Even if their minds no longer function properly, they still deserve our loving care and respect.

In a *Newsweek* "My Turn" article (9/10/79), Milton Gwirtzman noted, "Although Shanghai is one of the five largest cities in the world, it has just one home for the aged. Older people in China don't need Golden Age clubs or retirement communities. They have the most important life-support system of all: active, dignified work in an atmosphere of close family life and community respect." Maybe American Christians can learn from the Chinese what the Bible affirms!

The film series, "Whatever Happened to the Human Race," has a graphic scene depicting the way our culture neglects and

abandons our old so that we can pursue our own interests. An elderly lady is wheeled down a white corridor by her children and grandchildren. They kiss her on the forehead and assure her that she will be all right. They leave and a nurse wheels the confused old woman into a darkened room where a TV set is blaring with the obnoxious voice of a game show host. She is abandoned by her family to live out her final days in front of the TV set! It almost makes euthanasia seem like an option! At least it's quicker! But God's way is not abandoning or killing the elderly; it is honoring and caring for them.

3. Godly elderly people can make a valuable contribution to the cause of Christ.

Although they may not have the energy of the young, the elderly have more time and the wisdom of a lifetime of walking with Christ. They can be involved in a ministry of prayer (v. 5) and good deeds (v. 10). This can be about as broad as the person wants to make it. They can offer spiritual and practical counsel to younger families. They can serve on church committees. They can visit shut-ins or those in hospitals and nursing homes. They can call on church visitors. They can help in church office work. They can help Sunday School teachers in preparing materials or in managing their classes. They can assist in child evangelism ministries or by calling on the homes of Sunday School youngsters. They can open their homes in hospitality, help out with church socials, volunteer to babysit an evening for a younger couple, correspond with missionaries, help mission organizations, collect clothing for the needy, help a shut-in clean house, or use their individual skills in various ways. You name it! There are many opportunities available to the godly older person who wants to serve Christ. Again, I would emphasize that we must deliberately reject the world's thinking about self-centered retirement living. As long as God gives us life and strength, we should live to serve Him.

4. Godly living affects the practical areas of life.

Many people in our day claim to be Christians, but their lives are no different than those who do not know Christ as Savior. The gospel Paul preached urged people to "repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20). Believers are to be zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:14). We don't live to

serve ourselves, whether we're 20 or 80. We live to serve Jesus Christ and to lay down our selfish interests for the sake of those for whom Christ died. We are deliberately to reject the cult of self-fulfillment, and "through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13), not just in "spiritual" ways, but ministering to the total person.

Amy Carmichael, the missionary to India, was criticized for becoming too involved in humanitarian efforts because she sought to rescue little girls from being sold as temple prostitutes. She retorted, "One cannot save and then pitchfork souls into heaven.... Souls are more or less securely fastened to bodies ... and as you cannot get the souls out and deal with them separately, you have to take them both together" (cited by Ruth Tucker, *Guardians of the Great Commission* [Zondervan], p. 134).

So, as a church and as individuals, we must be involved in practical good deeds that minister to the total person. We must minister wisely. We are not to support someone who is living for pleasure. The church must not take on responsibilities that God has assigned to families. If people are able to work but refuse to do so, Paul was clear: they shouldn't eat (2 Thess. 3:10)! Each one must bear his own load (Gal. 6:5). But neither can we, as the church, turn our backs on the truly needy, especially on elderly widows. God cares for the widow who trusts in Him. So must we!

Discussion Questions

1. Agree/disagree: The many convalescent homes in America reflect our lack of concern for the aged.
2. Is a live-in arrangement for aged parents always in the best interest of all parties concerned? Why/Why not?
3. Can you build a biblical case for a Christian woman choosing a career track rather than motherhood? Is it sin for Christian mothers to work outside the home?
4. Why do you think that more elderly people are not involved in actively ministering in the church?

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