

# The Church's Responsibility to Widows

1 TIMOTHY 5:3-16 • PART 2

Baxter T. Exum (#1505)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
July 7, 2019



This morning, we return to our series of lessons from the book of 1 Timothy, and we return to our two-part study of WIDOWS. And as we get started, I would invite you to take another handout if you don't have yours with you this morning.

We started three weeks ago by noting that for most, if not all, of human history, women have lived longer than men. We looked at some reasons for this, we thought for a moment about what this means practically in terms of financial and emotional stress, and then we looked at 1 Timothy 5:3-16, and as you can see on the handout, we started this two-part series with a summary of some CATEGORIES, some SCENARIOS that widows might find themselves in.

- We looked at those who are **WIDOWS INDEED** (in verses 3, 5, and 16), and we learned that “widows indeed” are those women who are truly in need of help. These are Christian widows who are legitimately destitute because of the loss they have suffered.
- We then looked at **WIDOWS WITH FAMILIES** (in verses 4 and 8), and we learned that if a Christian widow has any children or grandchildren, those members of her own family have a moral and God-given responsibility to step in and help. As children, Paul explains that we have an obligation to ***“make some return to our parents.”*** Our parents take care of us for the first two decades of life, and their old age is payback time!
- We then looked at those Paul describes as **WANTON WIDOWS** (in verse 6), and ***“wanton widows”*** are those who are self-indulgent, living in luxury, living for pleasure. Obviously, these are not the widows who need the financial support of the church.
- We then discussed the **ENLISTED WIDOWS** (in verses 9-10), those women who seem to have been recruited by the church to serve their fellow widows. And Paul gives qualifications for those who would be called upon to serve in this way. These women are not elders or deacons, but the qualifications are somewhat similar. They have been ***“enlisted”*** to serve the other widows.
- Paul then gives some words of advice to the **YOUNGER WIDOWS** (in verses 11-15), and Paul's inspired suggestion is that the young widows need to get remarried and raise up children. They might be tempted to join the ranks of the full time enlisted widows; however, Paul warns against taking that vow of chastity too early in life.
- And then, at the end (in verse 16), we have what we might describe as **LONE RANGER WIDOWS**. These are women who may or may not be qualified to serve with the ENLISTED, but they are helping widows

on their own. And so, as Paul brings some structure and corrects some abuses with the widow ministry, he wants these women to know that they need to keep on doing what they are doing. Keep up the good work. Do not dump on the church what you are currently doing, just because we have a special ministry now. We looked at Dorcas as a good example of this (at the end of Acts 9).

So, these are the SCENARIOS, and we had some inspired advice for the women who might find themselves in any of these categories. Today, I want us to look at this passage again, only this time I'd like for us to look at four very practical lessons. What does this passage really mean for all of us? But as we begin, let us all please look together again at 1 Timothy 5:3-16, and let us keep our Bibles open as we study - 1 Timothy 5:3-16,

***<sup>3</sup> Honor widows who are widows indeed; <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. <sup>7</sup> Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. <sup>8</sup> 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.***

***<sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, <sup>12</sup> thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; <sup>15</sup> for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. <sup>16</sup> 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 four very practical applications of this passage, four observations. And again, as you can see, I have labeled this as the "So What?" part of this study. What does this passage really mean for us today? We've looked at the various categories of widows, the scenarios they might find themselves in, but what does this really mean for us?

**I. And the first practical lesson comes in the reminder that WE AS GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO CARE FOR OUR OWN.**

As we just briefly noted several weeks ago (going back to verse 4), old age is payback time! For those of us with older parents, we as their children have a moral obligation under God's Law to ***"make some return"*** to our parents. They brought us into this world, they fed us, and clothed us, they gave us a place to live, they even taught us how to use a spoon, and now that they are old, we have the great privilege and honor of returning the favor. In commenting on this passage, someone suggested what we might do in return, "Prepare

a room for them, receive them with as much joy as when they welcomed you at birth, feed them, clothe them, love them and hold them, until the day you lay them in the grave.”

Even pagans and unbelievers understand how important this is. The Scottish commentator William Barclay reminds us that, “It was Greek law...that sons and daughters were, not only morally, but also legally bound to support their parents. Anyone who refused that duty lost his civil rights.” Can we picture that? As an election official, I’m thinking of the “felon list” that we have to check as people register to vote. If somebody is on that list, we have to turn them away until their voting rights are restored. But imagine having another list of those who refuse to care for their aging parents. “Ah, you’re here to vote! That’s awesome. But let me check this list. Oh, I see that you’re on the list of those who haven’t been taking care of their parents. I’m sorry, but you are not able to vote until you work that out.” That’s how serious this was in ancient Greece. In ancient Greece, if you did not take care of your elderly parents, you were a deadbeat, not worthy of participating in civilized society. The ancient philosopher Aristotle put it this way, “It would be thought in the matter of food we should help our parents before all others, since we owe our nourishment to them, and it is more honorable to help in this respect the authors of our being, even before ourselves.” In other words, the way Aristotle saw it, it would be more honorable that we starve ourselves than that we allow our elderly parents to starve. The ancient philosopher Plato said, “Next comes the honor of loving parents, to whom, as is [proper], we have to pay the first and greatest and oldest of debts, considering that all which a man has belongs to those who gave him birth and brought him up, and that he must do all that he can to minister to them; first, in his property; secondly, in his person; and thirdly, in his soul; paying the debts due to them for their care and travail which they bestowed upon him of old in the days of his infancy, and which he is now able to pay back to them, when they are old in the extremity of their need.” You might be wondering: Why is this preacher quoting ancient philosophers? The reason comes in verse 8, where Paul says, ***“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.”*** Since Paul references, ***“unbelievers,”*** these ancient philosophers remind us what actual ***“unbelievers”*** thought about this. And Paul is saying that if we as God’s people do not take care of our elderly parents, we are worse than those unbelievers - we are worse than men like Aristotle, and Plato, and the others.

And if this is true of us as individuals, it is also true of all of us together as a church. As individuals and as a congregation, we have an obligation to take care of our own. As we noted just briefly a few weeks ago, this is one of the first challenges faced by the early church. In Acts 6, the Greek-speaking widows are being overlooked in the daily serving of food. That tells us, first of all, that there was a daily distribution of food. They cared for each other. But it also reminds us that sometimes we as God’s people drop the ball. Sometimes we fail to do what we need to do. As a church, we do not always take care of the widows, as we should. But it also reminds us that when we fail, we have a chance to make things right, which is what ultimately happens in Acts 6. The apostles call on the church to find qualified men to fix that problem, and they fix it. It was that important. So, first of all, we as God’s people have an obligation to care for our own.

## II. As we get back to applying this passage to our lives today, there is a second lesson, and it comes in the reminder that **GOD IS DEEPLY CONCERNED WITH HOW WE CARE FOR OTHERS.**

In other words, God notices how we demonstrate our love for each other. I’ve put verse 4 as a reference up here, because in verse 4 (as we discussed a few weeks ago), we have the reference to ***“piety.”*** Piety is basically “godly fear or respect.” God, then, is deeply interested in how we treat each other. Caring for others is how we demonstrate our respect for God. And God has always been concerned about this. Let’s be turning briefly

to Deuteronomy 24:17-22 (p. 326). We think back to the Law of Moses and those words from Deuteronomy 24, and we are reminded how important all of this is to God - Deuteronomy 24:17-22,

***<sup>17</sup> “You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge. <sup>18</sup> But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing. <sup>19</sup> “When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. <sup>20</sup> When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. <sup>21</sup> “When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. <sup>22</sup> You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.*”**

So, we have, in the Law, provisions for the poor. They are to leave some of their crops in the field, on the vine, and on the tree. We refer to this concept as “gleaning.” They could go through their crops one time to harvest those items, but they could not go back. What they missed the first time was to be left for the poor. By the way, this also made it something other than a handout. They were not to harvest the items and deliver them to the poor, but the poor had to do something. The poor had to actually go out there in the fields. When I was a kid, a farmer down in Crystal Lake actually called the church and told my dad that he had missed some corn out in the field and that if there were any poor people at church, they were welcome to it. That’s when I learned we were poor! We went out and “gleaned” from that farmer’s field. This goes back to the Law of Moses. Generally speaking, laws keep us from hurting other people (don’t kill, don’t steal, and so on), but God’s law has always gone beyond that with some positive commandments. Not only are we not to HURT strangers, and orphans, and widows, but we are to take some positive steps to make sure they are cared for. And twice in this passage we just read, God gives the reason. We don’t always have a reason for God’s laws, but here we do. They were to care for those in need, because they themselves had at one time been slaves in the land of Egypt. And so the idea is: Since God helped them when they were helpless, so also they need to be helping others. And if that was true then, then it is also true today. And that’s why we had James 1:27 as our scripture reading a few weeks ago, ***“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after [to care for] orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”*** If we want to keep ourselves unstained by this world, we need to go above and beyond in caring for those who might not be able to care for themselves. We help others, because God has helped us. God, then, is deeply concerned with how we care for others.

**III. There is a third very practical lesson from this passage in 1 Timothy, and it comes in the reminder that WIDOWS THEMSELVES (AND THE ELDERLY IN GENERAL) MIGHT PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN HELPING OTHERS, IN HELPING EACH OTHER.**

And this goes back to our discussion of the ***“enlisted”*** a few weeks ago (in verses 9-10). It seems that Paul was helping Timothy recruit some of these well-qualified older women to reach out and help the other widows - so, we have “widows helping widows,” a “widow’s ministry,” so to speak. But even among those who are on the receiving end (in verse 5), we find that they are to be women who ***“continue in entreaties and prayers night and day.”*** In other words, even the recipients of the help are not really to be considered some kind of “charity case,” but they themselves have a vital role to play in the church. They might not have the health and energy of those who are younger, but they are to constantly pray, reaching out to God on behalf of others.

But even widening this beyond just the widows, we find a general principle here as we certainly understand that all of those who are older have so much to offer: visiting in homes and hospitals, giving advice to the young, teaching God's word in various ways, offering to watch the kids so a young Christian couple can get away for an evening. I remember an older couple did this for us a time or two, and it was so helpful. Both of us lived quite a ways from our parents, so our own parents couldn't do much babysitting, but we have always had some "adopted grandparents" here at this congregation. When we were starting to have kids, we faced a decision: 1.) We could move to be closer to our parents, or 2.) We could lean on our Christian family. Those who are older are a great resource. Some of you who are older have been a great blessing to our family. Some of our hardest workers at camp are "retired." They have not bought in to the world's way of thinking about retirement as a time to slack off and relax and coast off into the sunset playing shuffleboard in Florida, but they have dedicated their lives to helping others. We had two members of our staff this week who volunteer with the Sojourners. The Sojourners represent a group of thousands of Christian seniors who travel the U.S. in motor homes and RV's, volunteering their time and talent to help out at churches and Christian camps and children's homes and in so many other ways. What an awesome thing to do in retirement! We might also think of Chuck and Kathy Oppermann. Some of you remember when Chuck retired a number of years ago. He could have retired and wasted the rest of his life sitting by the pool at some retirement community, but he did not. Instead, he went back to school at the Florida School of Preaching, he learned how to be a preacher, and then he spent several years preaching for the church in Beaver Dam. They have since moved south, but he and Kathy continue to be heavily involved in the work of the church. But the point here is: Widows (and the elderly in general) play a huge role in helping others. We are not to waste our retirement years doing nothing.

**IV. As we come to the end of our lesson, I would also just briefly point out that THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS INCREDIBLY PRACTICAL - WHAT WE BELIEVE CHANGES THE WAY WE LIVE.**

And what I mean by this is: What Paul is implementing here will change lives in the church in Ephesus. As we look at this entire passage, the apostle Paul is giving guidelines that will ease the burden on the church, and he does this by mobilizing a significant population within the congregation. He enlists the senior widows and puts them into service. At the same time, he demands that Christian families take care of their own. And then he makes sure that those on the receiving end are also involved in the life and work of the church. Imagine what this would have said to the people in Ephesus: In a harsh world, the pagan community would look at the church and they would realize, "These people take care of their own! These people love each other! And I want to be a part of that!" And that right there is the reason for so much of what we do as individuals and as a group here at this congregation. As we sometimes say, we want to "be Jesus" to the world around us. We want to do for others what Jesus would do. And in this case, it means that we take care of our own. Love is practical. And that is why we had 1 John 3:16-18 as our scripture reading this morning,

***<sup>16</sup> We know love by this, that He [JESUS] laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. <sup>17</sup> But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.***

**Conclusion:**

And with this, we come to the end of this passage on widows. We've looked at the various scenarios that the widows in Ephesus might have found themselves in. We've looked at Paul's instructions for the women in each of these categories. And today, we've looked at what this means for us.

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. At that point, we are added to his kingdom, the church, and the Christian life begins. 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](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)