

Instructions for the Care of Widows in the Church

1 Timothy 5:1-16

1 Timothy 5:1-16: *“Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers,² older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity.³ Honor widows who are really widows.⁴ 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.⁵ Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.⁶ But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives.⁷ And these things command, that they may be blameless.⁸ 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.⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ But refuse the younger widows; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry,¹² having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully.¹⁵ For some have already turned aside after Satan.¹⁶ 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.”*

Background Notes

In 1 Timothy 3:14-15, Paul wrote, *“These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”* When the apostle Paul wrote this letter, Timothy was at Ephesus. Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus while he went on to further missionary activities in Macedonia. Paul intended to return to Ephesus, but we don’t know if he ever got back.

In the meantime, Timothy was to help organize, and structure, and build up the local church at Ephesus. He was to deal with false teachers and their false teaching. He was to teach the different roles of men and women in the church. And he was to give guidelines for recognizing elders and appointing deacons in the church.

In chapter 5, the apostle gave instructions on how the church should care for widows. There were a number of widows in the early church (as there are in churches today). The care of widows was probably a bigger problem for the early Church

than for the local church today – at least in our country. Today there are pensions, retirement funds, insurance policies, and Social Security for many widows – but this was not so in the 1st century. A few years ago, Margie and I enjoyed a “poor man’s tour” through Scotland. As we drove our little rental car and stayed in humble B&B’s, we would often see big tour buses rolling by, full of well-dressed grey-haired ladies. Apparently many of them were widows - and many of them were well off, reaping the benefit of pensions, annuities and life insurance. I said to Margie at that time, “We may not have a lot of money, but we’re getting to see Scotland while we’re young and together!”

The early Church had to handle the problem of widows who were left with no money, and no way to earn money. In fact, the first deacons were appointed specifically to care for the poverty-stricken widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6). While the financial needs of widows may not be as big a problem today as it was in the early Church, there are needy widows in our churches today, and 1 Timothy gives guidelines on how to care for them.

Doctrinal Points

1. Some widows should be supported by the church.

The point of verses 3-16 is that the church is responsible to care for its widows. However, the church should support these women only if they have no other means of support. If a widow has family and connections to care for her financially, then the church should not be burdened.

Verse 3: *“Honor widows who are really widows.”* What’s a “widow indeed” (as the King James Version puts it)? A “widow indeed,” or “widows who are really widows” are widows who have no means of support. In these cases, the church had a responsibility to care for those widows in the 1st century - and in the 21st century as well.

Notice - it is assumed that widows who qualify for support from the church are living a godly life (v5). The godly widow is not looking for handouts - she is looking to God to meet her needs. She is also concerned for others, and is praying for her fellow believers, night and day. It’s important to encourage these women to stay active in the church, because being involved in serving the Lord and others helps with the emptiness, or loneliness, or sense of great loss that follows the loss of a spouse.

Verse 10 indicates that the worthy widow has lived a godly life in her younger days as well. She is *“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.”* My mother, who is now widowed, would be a good example of the qualities described in verse 10.

I think we all know widows who are godly but poor women. These widows may be, and should be, supported by the church as needed. This does not mean that the church cannot give some support to other widows, depending on the situation, but the church is responsible to provide for poor and godly widows who have no family to care for them, and no other means of support.

2. Some widows should not be supported by the church.

There are three categories of widows who should not be supported by the church:

a. Widows who have other means of support.

Verse 4: *“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.”* Children and grandchildren should not “unload” their widowed mothers onto the church! Notice - taking care of your folks in old age is really repaying them for what they did for you in bringing you up (v4). Just think about all the time, money, effort, and love that your parents poured into your life! And caring for needy parents is ***pleasing to God***.

Verse 8 indicates that if you don’t take care of your aging parents, then you have not only sinned - but you’re worse than an unbeliever! The average unbeliever at least supports his aging parents. And verse 16 indicates that we are responsible to support needy widows in our extended families, like widowed cousins, or widowed aunts.

b. Widows who are not characterized by a godly lifestyle.

Verse 6: *“But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives.”* The idea here is not necessarily sexual sin, but a luxurious and self-indulgent lifestyle. Those of you who have been on cruise vacations have probably seen widows who fit this description. They are living it up physically - but they are dead spiritually. Note the warning of verse 7, *“And these things command, that they may be blameless.”* The church should not support a widow who is not living a godly life.

c. Younger widows.

Verse 9: *“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.”* This exact meaning of this verse is a little difficult. The phrase “wife of one man” may mean married only once - but it certainly includes the idea of being faithful in marriage.

Younger widows were not to be put on the “official” widow’s support list because they might want to remarry. This was not wrong - in fact, remarriage was encouraged! Verse 14: *“Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house - give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully.”* The point here is not that the church

couldn't support younger widows who were poor, but that widows should not be put on the regular support list before they were sixty.

What does "disregarding Christ" and "setting aside their first pledge" mean (v11-12)? Apparently, before a widow would be put on the "official widow's support" list, she would make a pledge to give of her time to serve the church. If a young widow made this pledge and then decided to remarry, she would be abandoning the commitment she had made before the Lord to serve the church full-time.

Even if a younger widow didn't want to remarry, she might easily fall into idleness and gossip (v13). And if her desire to remarry was very strong, she might even marry an unbeliever. That seems to be the idea in verse 15: "*For some have already turned aside after Satan.*" That would give the world an opportunity to slander the church.

So, in order to avoid all these potential problems, it was best if the younger widows did not take the pledge, and were not put on this official widow support list. It was better if they remarried in the Lord, and became mothers and homemakers. So 1 Timothy 5 gives us guidelines for the church's support of needy widows. These guidelines are still good for today! The church should support some widows - but some widows should not be supported by the church.

Practical Application

Remember - we are a family!

Look back at verses 1-2: "*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.*" Let's face it - all believers make mistakes, and these mistakes need to be corrected.

Suppose you see a fellow believer who is making a mistake that need to be corrected, what should you do? The most important point to remember is that **we are a family**, and we should treat one another with **love**! If an older man is involved in doing wrong, exhort him as a father, with respect. If it's an older woman, exhort her as a mother, with tenderness. If it's a younger man or woman, exhort him or her as a brother or sister in the Lord. We're a family. I'm so glad that's the way older Christians have treated me!

In regard to speaking with younger women, notice that Paul added "**with absolute purity.**" So many tragedies and scandals within the church could be avoided if this Scripture were carefully and rigorously followed in pastoral care and counseling.

Remember - we are a family!