

(1 Timothy 5:1-8; Psalm 68:4-6; Luke 2:36-40)

A man travelled to an African country on a mission trip. He stayed with a Christian family that was desperately poor. Their only possessions were the clothes on their backs, a tiny one-room shelter and a chicken. As the mission trip drew to a close, the host family held a special dinner in the man's honour, at which soup was served for the main course. To the man's astonishment, there was meat in the soup. He wondered what kind of meat it could be. Suddenly he realized that he must be eating chicken soup.

The man was so overwhelmed by the generosity of this Christian family that tears began streaming down his cheeks. He marvelled that the family had offered up their only chicken for him. Yet to the father of the household, this sacrifice seemed like the most natural thing in the world. They were willing to share everything they had with the missionary. After all, he was a brother in Christ, and therefore virtually a member of their own family.

The New Testament tells Christians to find their personal and family identity in Jesus Christ: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). Therefore, everyone who believes in Jesus Christ belongs to the same family. Indeed, the family God has established through Jesus Christ is the Christian's first family - it takes precedence even over one's biological or nuclear family (Mark 3:31-35). If anyone understood the family of God, it was Paul. There are more than 100 references to brothers and sisters - people like Quartus, Sosthenes, Phoebe and Apphia - in the writings of Paul. In his first letter to Timothy Paul calls the church itself God's "household" (1 Timothy 3:15). In other words, Timothy's congregation is not just like a family - it is his family. To help Timothy with his pastoral relationships, Paul uses the analogy of a human family (in vv. 1-2 of chapter 5), where there is a father, a mother, brothers and sisters. If Timothy relates to the members of his congregation in the way he would treat his own family members, then he will be greatly helped to know how to approach each of them in appropriate ways and without awkwardness to himself or to them. This comparison of the local church to a human family is a helpful one, because it takes into account differences in gender and age and is able to cater for these in practice.

1. Family Matters (vv. 1-2)

In an orderly family, each person is treated with respect, according to his or her age and gender. God's household is no exception: "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity" (vv. 1-2). Each and every member of the family should be treated in the proper way.

Showing respect for one's elders is not simply a cultural convention - it is the will of God. According to Old Testament law, the young should "rise in the presence of the aged [and] show respect for the elderly" (Leviticus 19:32). There may be times when the pastor must confront an erring or troublemaking older man in the Christian fellowship. If so, that man must be dealt with respectfully on the basis of his seniority. Even when a rebuke is called for, a younger minister must not be overbearing. Instead of being harsh, a minister should deal with an older man gently and tactfully, the way he would appeal to his own father. He should "exhort" the older man, aiming to win him over from his mistakes by means of a sympathetic appeal.

Younger men should be treated rather differently. Timothy should not look down on them or talk down to them. Instead, he should treat them as peers: "Treat younger men as brothers". The wisdom of running a household this way is obvious. At the same time younger men are treating older men with deference, older men are treating younger men as equals. Thus dignity and intimacy are both maintained in their relationships. The principle here is vital to the peace of the family. It is the responsibility of older Christians to bridge the general gap to younger Christians, and not the other way around. The proper way to talk to a toddler is to get down to his or her level, face to face, on your haunches or even hands and knees. One of the best ways to help younger

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Christians become mature is to treat them with a measure of equality. Yet there is a danger here for the young. Even if older Christians treat them as equals, they should not think of themselves as equals - rather they should treat their seniors with humility.

Younger ministers, and indeed all Christians, should relate to women as respectfully as they relate to men. Older women should be treated like mothers. They should be loved and listened to. They should be protected and cared for. There is a touching example from Paul's own life, when, at the end of his letter to the church Rome, he greets "Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me too" (Romans 16:13). Finally, to complete the portrait, younger women should be treated as sisters. Within God's family, men and women ought to display tender affection towards one another, the kind of fondness that a brother has for a younger sister. But Paul quickly adds a warning: "with absolute purity". As close as a relationship between siblings may be, there must not be anything improper about it. Here the concern is clearly sexual - a minister must not compromise his commitment to Christ by having an inappropriate relationship with one of his sisters in Christ. Paul was anxious to make sure that Timothy's ministry was not compromised. As we shall see next time, not all the young women in Ephesus were discreet (vv. 11-13), and Timothy needed to be careful in his relationships with women in the church.

2. A Protector of Widows

The surprising thing about the house rules Paul gives Timothy is that they say so little about most family relationships and so much about widows. Why is this? For a start, from the early chapters of Acts, it is clear that from the beginning of the church there were many widows among the Christians. It may be that they chose to move to the urban centres to finish their days because the larger city churches could do more for their support. This would explain the sizeable widow groups in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6 - the controversy concerning the care and feeding of widows which led to the appointment of the first deacons) and here in Ephesus. The amount of space Paul gives here to widows suggests that in the church in Ephesus they presented practical problems that needed addressing.

But the attention to detail in these instructions given by Paul to Timothy also says something important about God. God has a special place in his heart for single women, especially for widows. Actually the Greek word for "widow" refers to any woman without a husband, and not simply to a woman whose husband had died. Kent Hughes in his commentary wisely comments, "Today the application of this passage should be wider, because modern American culture has produced a category of women virtually unknown in the first century - Christian women and children who have been abandoned by their spouses and left without family support. Godly single mothers are a new class of "widow". And those without family and resources are the church's sacred responsibility".

In the Old Testament, God is called the protector or defender of widows. We see that written into the law (Deuteronomy 10:17-18) and into the Psalms (Psalm 68:4-6). Some of the most touching episodes in the Old Testament concern the care and feeding of widows. And, not surprisingly, Jesus also took special care for widows, bringing back to life an only son for the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-15). Even on the cross, Jesus made provision for his own mother in her widowhood (John 19:25-27). The reason for God's concern is that widows were vulnerable in the ancient world. They lacked the economic power to provide for their needs, especially in old age. Also, without the protection of a man, widows were sometimes exposed to physical danger. The same is often true today. God wants all his children to share their Father's heart for the fatherless and husbandless. This means caring for widows first of all. The principle applies not only to widows, however, but to every family member who needs special care: the sick, the elderly, the disabled, the homeless and single mothers. God knows that as long as his weakest children are protected, his whole family will be safe.

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3. Putting Religion into Practice

There are needy widows in nearly every church, of course, which is why Paul pleads their cause: "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need" (v. 3). He then proceeds to offer several guidelines for assessing a widow's true needs. The first qualification is that a true widow does not have independent means: "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God" (v. 4). Widows who are all alone need special care from the church, whereas others can rely on family support.

To make sure that Christians do their duty, the Bible gives 2 motivations for caring for widows. First, support is something children owe their parents. After everything parents have done over the years, it is only fair for their children to provide for them in old age. In the economy of God, this is the way children can repay their parents. It doesn't necessarily mean that children need to provide all the care themselves. It is important to plan for the future, which may include carrying the proper medical and life insurance. There is also a legitimate place for professional care-givers, as well as for nursing homes, particularly in cases of dementia or chronic illness. But it is the responsibility of children to make sure that their parents receive the best possible care. Not only is family loyalty something children owe to their parents, but it is also something they owe to God. This is the second motive Paul offers: caring for family needs is "pleasing to God". God is glorified when Christians love and care for their families.

To underscore the importance of family care, Paul issues this strong warning: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (v.8). Even non-Christians have a sense of duty to their relatives, especially ones living under their own roof. If even unbelievers out of natural affection care for their relatives, how much more ought Christians, who claim to know the God of compassion! The failure to make proper provision for ailing and aged family members is a practical denial of the faith, and exposes a Christian to the criticisms even of non-Christians. No matter how eloquent the man's testimony may be, his life denies his Christianity. This warning needs to be heard in our day, because we do not live in the most compassionate of times. In many cases, aged or dependent parents are abandoned in nursing homes where they do not receive the attention and affection they need and deserve. Christians who have had abusive or neglectful parents will find it particularly difficult to respond to the Bible's teaching here. But the healing mercies of God's grace in Jesus Christ can enable even traumatised children to extend forgiveness and to show honour to unworthy parents in their later years. The way Christians care for parents and grandparents ought to proclaim the love of God, the compassion of Christ. So should the way we care for other people's parents when, for example, we share the good news about Jesus Christ in local nursing homes and aged care facilities. We are the children of a Father who is the Protector and Defender of Widows, and therefore we are called to be agents of his protecting and providing grace.

4. The Praying Widow

No matter what her economic status may be, if a widow belongs to God through faith in Jesus Christ, she is never alone - she always has a family. Even if no one else will help her, the church will show her mercy because the church is her family. In the church she is to be given "proper recognition". She is to be helped in the meeting of her emotional and material needs. Anyone who takes care of an older woman - doing her shopping, providing transport for her, being her companion, mowing her lawns, or whatever - gives her proper recognition. Paul has already explained how a widow physically qualifies for support - she must be without independent means, even destitute. Now he adds a spiritual qualification: she must be faithful: "The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and ask God for help" (v.5). She is not overwhelmed by her circumstances. Instead, she puts all her hope in God. She throws herself upon his mercy, and then she finds that she is not alone after all, because God is with her.

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This verse calls Christian widows to a unique ministry of intercession, both publicly and privately. Susan Hunt writes about this ministry in her book, "By Design: God's Distinctive Calling for Women": "It seems to me that widows have entered into a dimension of dependence on God that prepares them for the ministry of intercessory prayer... Older women who do not have the daily responsibilities of jobs are another power source for intercessory prayer." Perhaps the best biblical example of the praying widow is Anna, the prophetess at the temple in Jerusalem, at the time when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord and offer the appropriate sacrifice. Luke tells us that "she never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37). Paul almost seems to echo this passage when he encourages widows to continue "night and day to pray and to ask God for help".

I remember as a young elder that one of the households assigned to me as part of my elder's district comprised 3 elderly women in their early 70's, one widow and two single women. They always requested that each time I visited (every 3 months) I bring with me a list of matters (and people) for prayer in relation to the life of the church. The prayers of such women - widows and single older women - give strength to the church. As a result of their intercession, young mothers with their toddlers, men and women on their jobs, students at school and university, those exercising various ministries in the life of the church and missionaries at home and overseas all receive spiritual help for their work. Perhaps you are one of the women God is calling to the crucial ministry of intercessory prayer. If so, embrace the joy and responsibility of it.

Paul's passionate call to pray explains why his next words are so harsh: "But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives" (v. 6). This widow is no woman of prayer. She has not fixed her hope on God. Instead, she takes comfort in the things of this world and lives for pleasure rather than God. Such a woman belongs to the living dead, because although she is alive physically, she is not alive to God through faith. She is as good as dead, spiritually speaking. What the Scripture implies is that a widow who lives for pleasure has no right to expect any help from the church at all. This is a reminder that the mercy of the church is not an entitlement. The church has a responsibility to identify people's needs and ultimate commitments. Often this means that elders and deacons need to ask personal questions such as, "What resources do you have?" "What do you need to get by?" "How is your walk with the Lord?" Then it is up to the church's leaders to make judgments about whom to help, and how to help them.

These rules for God's household are not just for Timothy, or for ministers, but for the whole church: "Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame" (v. 7). How important it is for the leaders of the church, for the families and for individuals to be taught their respective responsibilities in the household of God. For the faithful carrying out of these responsibilities set out in vv. 1-8 of 1 Timothy 5 is so important to the church's reputation in the world as the family of the God who is rich in mercy and abounding love. Are we faithfully carrying out those responsibilities in the life of our church?

Amen

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