

Helping the Widows in the Church

1 Timothy 5:3–8¹

Introduction

There are many people in this world who are vulnerable. We as believers ought to help the ones who are vulnerable, yet, in many cases we do not. While the church's primary mission is to bring the gospel to all the world (Matt. 28:19–20), we can (through out good deeds) help those who have need. In doing so we (1) mark ourselves as true believers ("by your fruit you will be known" to borrow the biblical phrase), (2) provide an example to the world of God's love for His church, and (3) we are given yet another opportunity to share the gospel with those who do not know Christ.

Our identity in Christ is marked primarily by our love for those who are in the household of faith:

John 13:34–35 ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

One of the marginalized in the early church was the widows. These women had no husband to give them financial and cultural stability. As a result, these women were considered destitute. Our 21st century culture and mindset does not fully understand the significance and impact of women in ancient times who lost their husbands. Add to that the pain a *young widow* felt who may have lost her husband without having any children.

Naomi and Ruth are examples of this in the Old Testament. Naomi lost her husband Elimelech *and* her two sons—all while in a foreign land (Ruth 1:1–5)! The despair Naomi felt is recorded in Ruth one:

Ruth 1:12–13 ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, *if* I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, ¹³ would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!"

This view was common amongst ancient peoples. Hardship, to them, was a sign of God's displeasure (and still is considered as such by prosperity gospel preachers). However, God reiterates over and over again that He is a defender for the widows and orphans (cf. Deut. 10:18; Ps. 68:5; 146:9). God is the just judge for the widows. To refuse to care for the widows is to go against the strictest judge of all.

Thus it should come as no surprise that the Lord instructs the New Testament church to care for the widows. Paul writes to Timothy of these divine instructions in 1 Timothy 5:3–8. The church is to care for its own marginalized because it pleases God. *In order to demonstrate Christlike nature of "loving one another" (John 13:35), the church must care for the destitute widows in its number because this is pleasing to God.*

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version.

1 Timothy 5:3–8 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.

There are three features concerning the instructions to care for widows in the church:

Preview Outline:

- 1. The Command to Care for Widows**
- 2. The Character of True Widows**
- 3. The Condemnation for Neglecting Widows**

First,

1. The Command to Care for Widows (vv. 4–5, 7)

“Honor widows” — The first command begins simply enough: “honor widows” (v. 3). *Honor* (Gr. *τιμάω*) means “reverence, revere.” This is the same word used in the New Testament to mean “honor your father and mother” (cf. Matt. 19:19; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20). Parents are to be given proper obedience and respect by their children. However, the word “honor” here means more than simply “respect the widows in your church.”

For example, one expression of honor a son could do for his parents was to provide for them materially or financially:

Matthew 15:1–6 Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ² “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” ³ He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, saying, ‘*Honor your father and your mother*’; and, ‘*He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.*’ ⁵ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God”’—⁶ then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.

Here in the context of Matthew *honor* means “to give back to his parents financially. What was happening in Jesus’ day was sons were designating the money that they should give to their parents as “gifts” to God, thereby legally refusing to aid their parents and nullifying the commandment of God. God commanded (v. 4), but they were given religious exemption (v. 5, “but you say”). Contrary to the commands of the religious leaders, God accepts gifts of money offered to the father and mother who raised these sons and daughters. In providing for their fathers and mothers, these children were, in a sense, offering to God.

In fact, Paul says that God accepts and is pleased when children honor their parents:

1 Timothy 5:4 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 practice their godliness by “making a return” (NASB) to their parents.

“widows who are really widows” — So the church is to honor widows (i.e. provide for them materially and financially). But to which widows are they to do this specifically? Paul says it in

verse 3: “widows who are widows indeed” (NASB, KJV). Widows are those who have lost their husbands by his death and are, thus, unmarried and vulnerable. There are two types of widows that Paul addresses in our text: (1) those widows who still have family members (children or grandchildren) who can still provide for them, and (2) those widows who have no other family member who can help them (e.g. Naomi and Ruth).

“*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.*” — Those widows who have children or grandchildren are not to be added to the list of those who are financially cared for by the church. Why? Because their children and grandchildren are commanded to provide for them. The “them,” and “their” in v. 4 refers to the children and grandchildren of these widows.

One example of a son caring for his elderly father was Joseph from the book of Genesis. He urged his father to come to him while he reigned/worked in Egypt so that he could financially and materially take care of him.

Genesis 45:9–11 ⁹“Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph: “God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not tarry. ¹⁰You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near to me, you and your children, your children’s children, your flocks and your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹There I will provide for you, lest you and your household, and all that you have, come to poverty; for *there are* still five years of famine.”’

To “show piety at home” (KJV) is to be like God. Thus, to care for the widowed parent is to be like God because God Himself cares for the widows. Paul adds that to care for your widowed parent is “acceptable in the sight of God” (v. 4b). He uses this same phrase to describe how God views the act of praying for those who are in leadership (1 Tim. 2:3).

Now, you may be wondering “OK, what does ‘widow indeed’ mean?” Well, the word “indeed” could be understood as “truly,” rendering the phrase “honor widows who are *truly widows*.” Paul further defines what “widows who are *truly widows*” means in two ways. First, he defines it by what it is *not* in v. 4: a widow indeed is *not* one who has children and grandchildren to help her materially and financially. Second, he defines it by what it *is* in v. 5: “[one] who has been left alone” (KJV says “desolate”). A “widow indeed” or “a widow who is *truly a widow*” is one who has been bereft of her husband and has no children or grandchildren to take care of her.

The word “desolate” (KJV) means “to be left alone completely” and only occurs here in the New Testament. The widows who were completely left alone were particularly vulnerable in ancient times because they had no one to protect and care for them. The fact that many evil people took advantage of them is evidenced by the Lord’s repeated warning that *He* is the defender of the widows and will execute judgment on those who wrong them:

Deuteronomy 24:17–18 ¹⁷“You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow’s garment as a pledge. ¹⁸But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing.

Deuteronomy 10:17–18 ¹⁷For the Lord your God *is* God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. ¹⁸He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.

Psalms 68:5 A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, *Is* God in His holy habitation.

Psalms 146:9 The Lord watches over the strangers; He relieves the fatherless and widow; But the way of the wicked He turns upside down.

The cries of the marginalized do not go unheard by the One who sees and hears their cries:

Psalm 94:1–11 ¹ O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongs—O God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth! ² Rise up, O Judge of the earth; Render punishment to the proud. ³ Lord, how long will the wicked, How long will the wicked triumph? ⁴ They utter speech, *and* speak insolent things; All the workers of iniquity boast in themselves. ⁵ They break in pieces Your people, O Lord, And afflict Your heritage. ⁶ They slay the widow and the stranger. And murder the fatherless. ⁷ Yet they say, “The Lord does not see, Nor does the God of Jacob understand.” ⁸ Understand, you senseless among the people; And *you* fools, when will you be wise? ⁹ He who planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see? ¹⁰ He who instructs the nations, shall He not correct, He who teaches man knowledge? ¹¹ The Lord knows the thoughts of man, That they *are* futile.

It is the *wicked* who oppress the widows.

The Command to care for the widows in the church is particularly directed toward the widows who are “widows indeed” or “truly widows” (v. 3). If widows have grandchildren or children, those family members are instructed to care for their widowed mother/grandmother (v. 4). The reason Timothy is to instruct these things is so that the children and grandchildren may be blameless (v. 7). The next feature of Paul’s instruction on helping widows is—

2. The Character of True Widows (vv. 5–6)

Paul describes for Timothy two types of widows that he may encounter. The *first* is the widow who is, indeed, a widow (v. 5). This widow is not who has been “left alone” with no one to care for her. Yet this godly widow is not truly alone, because she is characterized by two spiritual qualities that mark her as a true widow in the church.

A. Hopes in God

The KJV rendering “trusteth” conveys the idea of the word, though the Greek word (ἐλπικεν) primarily means “hope.” This is not a wish (e.g. I hope God will take care of me”). Rather, this hope is a confident expectation. One commentator wrote

“Placing one’s hope on God is a hallmark of the believer... The perfect tense here indicates a past action with a continuing significance, i.e., such a woman has patiently trusted God, and still does, for her present life and for the future. She is trusting God for the special care he has promised to the widow.”²

A widow indeed, one who is truly a widow, trusts that God will take care of her even when she does not see how. She believes His promises and does so with the utmost confidence.

Hope in God ought to characterize every true believer. Paul hoped in the living God (1 Tim. 4:10). A true believer heeds the admonition of the psalmist to hope in God (Ps. 42:5; see also 38:15; 42:11; 43:5; 78:7; 146:5). God Himself is the “God of hope” (Rom. 15:13). To be without God is to be without true hope (Eph. 2:12). Like every true believer ought to do, the true widow places her implicit and complete trust in God.

B. Continues in Prayer Night and Day

One of the marks of a true believer is his trust in God as evidenced by his continual, humble posture of prayer before Him. Prayer to God (especially prayer for those who are your enemies, Matt. 5:44) is “pleasing in the sight of God (1 Tim. 2:1–8).

² Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 219.

To “continue in prayer” is to be consistent in it, even *persistent* in it. “Entreaties and prayers” are essentially saying the same thing: prayer for others submitted to the will of God. Jesus illustrated persistent prayer with a parable:

Luke 18:1–8 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, ² saying: “There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. ³ Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’ ⁴ And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man, ⁵ yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’” ⁶ Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge said. ⁷ And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? ⁸ I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”

The widow who comes to God “night and day” will find Him a timely avenger. Though His timing is often not what we thought, He is a good and righteous judge and does all things “after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). The phrase “praying night and day” means to pray consistently. Just like we are to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), so ought true widows.

Anna is a good example of this from the book of Luke:

Luke 2:36–38 ³⁶ Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ³⁷ and this woman *was* a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served *God* with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸ And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

Anna was a widow who was a “widow indeed”: (1) she without a husband (and presumably children), (2) she continued in prayers to God day and night (i.e. consistently), and (3) she hoped in God (v. 38).

It is these widows who are spiritually mature who are to be cared for by the church. The *second* widow that Paul describes is found in the next verse (v. 6). She is the antithesis of a true widow. Paul describes her by her *desires* and by her *condition*.

A. She lives for pleasure

This is the ungodly widow’s *desire*. The idea behind the Greek word for this phrase is that the widow “lives in indulgence.” Whereas the first widow in v. 5 lives for pleasing God in the way she trusts Him, the widow in v. 6 only cares about herself.

Paul does not elucidate what “pleasures” these widows will live for, but we may have a hint in vv. 11–13:

1 Timothy 5:11–13 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.

These widows (1) will feel sensual desires contrary to Christ, (2) deny their pledge of allegiance to Christ, (3) become lazy, and (4) will spend time gossiping so that they look good. Just like any person in a hardship, the difficulties can cause a widow to justify her fall into various sins. These sins may expose the true spiritual state of these women.

B. She is spiritually dead

This is the ungodly widow's *condition*. Her involvement in church implies that at one point she may have evidenced saving faith, but "the cares of this world choke out the word" (Matt. 13:22). So this widow may be alive physically, but she is dead spiritually. The contrasts between the widow indeed and this widow could not be more stark!

So, the church is to care for widows who are truly widows by providing material and financial help to them. This is the command. The character of a widow who is truly alone is marked by her hope/trust in God and her humble posture of consistent prayer to God. The primary purpose of teaching these things is so that the children and grandchildren may be above reproach (i.e. the Lord is not dishonored). Paul finally concluded this paragraph with a warning to those who do not care for their families—

3. **The Condemnation for Neglecting Widows (v. 8)**

"*But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household*" — This is a warning to those in v. 4 who refuse to obey the injunctions Paul lays out. The phrase "provide [not] for his own" refers to ones family members in a broad sense. The phrase "especially for those of his household" refers more to those under is own roof (i.e. his own family/household).

"*he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*" — This person who refuses to care for his own family has "denied the faith" (i.e. has become an apostate). This should come as no surprise because there will be many who will fall away, sadly (1 Tim. 4:1–5). This is not a carnal Christian; this is someone who claims to be a part of the family of faith, which is characterized by both God's love for unbelievers (demonstrated by Christ's death for us; see 1 John 4:9–10) and for the believer's love for other believers (cf. 1 John 4:7–8, 11–12, 21). John could not be more clear in his first epistle: if someone refuses to love his brother by demonstrating it with his actions, he is not of God (i.e. he is not a believer). This person is "worse than an infidel" (KJV) or "unbeliever" because even unbelievers have enough of a conscience (though marred by sin) to understand that they must care for their family members. This was a common expectation even amongst pagans during Paul's day. Though unbelievers do not have the Holy Spirit to guide their lives, they do have a conscience that comes from being made in the image of God:

Romans 2:14–16 ¹⁴ for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) ¹⁶ in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

For someone to have the Holy Spirit and refuse to help the vulnerable believer is to make a mockery of the gospel and its a shame because even pagans know that it is right and proper to care for the vulnerable. This is what makes Christ so beloved by His fellow heirs—He demonstrated that kind of loving care while hanging on the cross:

John 19:25–27 ²⁵ Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" ²⁷ Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own *home*.

Even while He was in His deepest pain and darkest hour, Jesus cared for His own mother who was vulnerable (and most likely a widow herself). *If our Lord and master did this, how much more ought believers do the same?* This is the kind of Christlike love and care that must be true of every congregation.