

1 Timothy 5

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Most of you probably didn't realize it, but a month or two ago, the phone line to the church building abruptly stopped working, and it stayed that way for several weeks. I'm usually working in the church building seven days a week. I know that it's important for the church to have a phone line so that, for instance, people can call us and find out when our times of worship are. I know those things, and yet, I still found myself remarkably reluctant to call the phone company and tell them to fix our line. There's a very simple reason for that. During the week, 95 percent of the callers to the church building fall into one of two categories. Either they are telemarketers who want to sell the church something, or they are people with a sad tale of woe who want the church to give them money. A big part of me was willing to give up my chance to talk to the 5 percent who had something useful to say, just to get rid of the money-loving 95 percent.

Of course, there's nothing new about this. Ever since money was invented, people have wanted it, and ever since they realized that they might get a handout from a church, they've been after churches for money. We see Paul address the question of what churches should do with their limited resources in the fifth chapter of 1 Timothy. Even within the church, what does a needy person who ought to be helped by the church look like? Should the church financially reward men who have done an exceptional job in carrying out its work? These are still questions that concern us today, and when there are so many things that we could do with our funds, we ought to turn to the word of God to call upon His wisdom so that we can figure out what the right answer is. Let's look at this topic and others in 1 Timothy 5.

Christians and Widows.

Although much of his commentary is oriented toward money, Paul begins with a discussion of **ADDRESSING OTHER CHRISTIANS**. This appears in 1 Timothy 5:1-2. In this passage, we see the counterbalance to Paul's warning that Timothy must not let others despise him for his youth. Timothy and his message were worthy of respect, but that didn't mean that his brethren weren't worthy of respect. Even in cases where a Christian needed to be warned away from wrongdoing, Timothy was still responsible for honoring them like his own family.

We ourselves may not be young men, but we can still put this lesson to work in our lives. Sometimes, when we see a brother or sister in sin, we're tempted to call them down harshly for it. That is almost always a terrible mistake. Few indeed are the people who will bear up under a tongue-lashing, and if we come to them in that spirit, they're much more likely to reject what we have to say, even if we're right. Instead, we must learn to reach out to others in a spirit of gentleness. Even that is no guarantee that we'll be able to persuade them, but it offers our best hope.

From there, Paul shifts to the topic of widows, which is going to occupy the bulk of the chapter. Interestingly enough, the first subtopic he tackles within this is the subject of **WHOM NOT TO HELP**. This distinction first appears in 1 Timothy 5:3-4. Paul here identifies two classes of people: true widows and widows whom the church should not help. The second class is made up of widows who have children and grandchildren to care for them, and in cases like that, the church should not get involved. Instead, their families should provide for them in order to please God.

More broadly, though, this tells us how God wants us to handle the money given to His work generally. Some denominations act like it's the work of the church to tend to the needs of all poor people everywhere. The problem with that is that if we set ourselves to that goal, we can give every dime the church has to the poor, still have poor people left, and not have anything left over to save the lost and keep the saved. Paul's vision of church benevolence is very different. As we see later on in the text, all the widows he's talking about here are faithful Christians and worthy women. Even when dealing with this group, though, help from the church is to be the last resort instead of the first. If a widow has no other options, that's when the church can help her. Otherwise, her own family needs to take the burden itself.

Paul continues in this vein in 1 Timothy 5:5-8. This text begins with another contrast between types of widows. The first type lives for God and always looks to Him; the second type lives only for themselves. Even if the self-indulgent widow is destitute and without family, her behavior is not something the church can condone or support. Once again, there's a broad principle here that we can use to guide our dealings not just with widows, but with the poor generally. Paul does not instruct Timothy to hand out money to any nominally Christian widow without asking questions. Instead, he's to investigate the character of those who are seeking help, and only give help to those whom he finds worthy. Paul isn't commanding Timothy to be hard-hearted here; he's commanding him to be prudent. Likewise, when anyone asks the church for help, we should be prudent in our generosity. It doesn't do a man any good if we give him money that he promptly takes to the boats or to the liquor store. Instead, we should only help those whose good character we know.

We are responsible for being prudent with the Lord's money, but we are also responsible for taking care of our families. God expects man to work to support his own. Period. Sometimes unemployment or illness will make us unable to do that, but if we are able, we are commanded to do it. If we can't make ends meet with the job we have, we either

need to slash expenses or get a second job. Likewise, we must always make our decisions with an eye to their financial repercussions. Spiritually speaking, we're far better off doing something we hate that pays the bills than something we love that leaves our families hungry. Otherwise, we are actually worse in God's eyes than an unbeliever.

Next, Paul describes in greater detail the qualities of **WIDOWS INDEED**. Consider with me 1 Timothy 5:9-10. In many ways, this passage is an echo of the qualifications for an elder. The widow has to be at least 60, she has to have been lawfully married, and she has to have been generally righteous in her dealings with her children, strangers, brethren and the sick. Even beyond that, if there's a good work, she has to have been involved in it. This list is useful for two reasons. It teaches us what women are worthy of church assistance, but it also provides a model of godly womanhood. The daughter of God can learn from this list, just like she learns from Proverbs 31, what kind of a woman He wants her to be. If she does these things, whether she ever becomes a widow or not, she can be certain that she has pleased Him.

Paul then spends some time explaining one of the more surprising elements of this list, its prohibition against supporting **YOUNGER WIDOWS**. This discussion begins in 1 Timothy 5:11-13. Once again, we see Paul's concern that those the church supports not draw it into disgrace. Apparently, experience has shown that putting younger widows on the list doesn't work out well. Many of these younger widows are drawn away from Christ by evil men, whom they apparently discover while the church is supporting them. Other younger widows become the church equivalent of welfare queens. They just wander around from house to house gossiping with each other and prying into others' business. Perhaps some younger widows wouldn't do this, but enough would that enrolling any of them is a bad idea.

Paul's solution for this problem of overabundant energy emerges in 1 Timothy 5:14-16. His point is that widows who are young enough to remarry and manage another family ought to do that. That way, they keep Satan out of their lives. None of this is meant to smear the character of young widows or women generally. Instead, it highlights a nearly universal problem. God intended for people to work and keep busy. If we sit around being idle instead, that's bad for us, and it will start to eat us up from the inside. Younger widows were to prevent this through rewarding, life-affirming labor.

It's also worth noting here that in v. 16, we see a clear distinction between benevolence from the individual and benevolence from the church. Some people argue that anyone an individual can help, the church can help. From this passage, that's plainly not true. Instead, as we see in Scripture, church funds are only for deserving brethren in need.

Elders and Judgment.

Just as Paul gives Timothy different advice for righteous and wicked widows, so too there are different ways of handling good and bad **ELDERS**. Look with me at 1 Timothy 5:17-20. When Paul says "double honor" here, he's referring to financial support, and he makes it clear that elders are supported on a different basis than widows. Widows indeed receive support from the church because of need. Elders, as well as preachers, receive support from the church on the basis of merit, because they work for their wages and earn them. That means that supported workers in the church who do especially well ought to be paid more than mediocre workers. Conversely, if an elder or preacher isn't pulling his weight, his salary ought to reflect that, regardless of what his needs might be. Church workers are not charity cases.

Paul supports this position by reference to two passages of what he calls "Scripture". This is interesting because of the sources of those passages. The first one, about the ox and the grain, comes from the Old Testament, from Deuteronomy 25:9. The second one, about the laborer and his wages, comes from the New Testament, from Luke 10:7. This is important, because it shows that as of 1 Timothy, Paul considered the writings of Luke, like Luke and Acts, to be just as much Scripture as the writings of Moses. Likewise, in 2 Peter 3, Peter endorses the letters of Paul as Scripture. The books of the Bible weren't decreed to be Scripture by some denominational council meeting hundreds of years later. Instead, from the very beginning, the inspired writings of the New Testament were put on an equal footing with the Old.

However, not all of Timothy's dealings with elders were going to be peaceful. At times, he was going to have to entertain accusations against elders. If those accusations came from a single mouth, Timothy was to ignore them. The dignity of an elder was such that only an accusation brought by many should be heard. However, if those charges had validity, the elder's position required that he be publicly rebuked, to show that not even a church leader is above the law. Whether Timothy particularly liked the elder or despised him, his responsibility was to be an impartial judge of truth.

Finally, Paul addresses a few matters of **GOOD JUDGMENT**. The first of these appear in 1 Timothy 5:21-22. Timothy was to be careful in his associations and not form friendships or spiritual connections with those who would later turn to sin. However, he wasn't to take his search for purity to an extreme. Consider the words of 1 Timothy 5:23-25. Apparently, Timothy had been drinking bad water that had caused his digestion to deteriorate. To arrest that decline, Paul urged him to drink a little wine for medical purposes, the first-century equivalent of a water-purification tablet. If we have some similar genuine medical need for wine, it's legitimate for us to drink it. However, this verse does not condone any kind of social drinking. Finally, Paul addresses consequences. Sometimes, we get the idea that what other people see doesn't matter, that the sins we keep hidden from men are hidden from everyone, and that the good works we do in secret go unnoticed. Paul says that's not true. Whether we do good or evil, publicly or privately, God always knows.