

“Care for Them,” 1 Timothy 5:1-16 (Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost, August 5, 2018)

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers,  
<sup>2</sup> older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

<sup>3</sup> Honor widows who are truly widows. <sup>4</sup> But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. <sup>5</sup> She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, <sup>6</sup> but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. <sup>7</sup> Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. <sup>8</sup> But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

<sup>9</sup> Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, <sup>10</sup> and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. <sup>11</sup> But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry <sup>12</sup> and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. <sup>13</sup> Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. <sup>14</sup> So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. <sup>15</sup> For some have already strayed after Satan. <sup>16</sup> If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.

## PRAY

We come to chapter five this morning in our study of 1 Timothy and here Paul gives instructions to Timothy, the pastor of a local church in the ancient city of Ephesus, for how the church and the people in it are to care for widows.

Widows have always been a vulnerable class of people. Women in the ancient world obtained their status and social identity by virtue of being legally “embedded” in a male – first their father, and then later their husband. Widows, therefore, were in a precarious position when they lost their husband because their father was probably already dead, too. They were easily taken advantage of because they were non-persons in the eyes of society. Women’s testimony was inadmissible in court, they could not bring suit in their own name (if a woman needed to go to court a man had to initiate a lawsuit on their behalf), nor could they own property.

In fact, it wasn’t all that long ago that this was true in the U.S. If you get on Highway 6 and head east, about halfway between here and Pontotoc you’ll see on the south side of the road a historical marker dedicated to Betty Allen. In 1837 she won a case, brought in her name by her brother, that established her right to own property in her own name (not her husband’s), and soon after Mississippi became the first state in the Union and indeed the first jurisdiction following the English common law system to allow a wife to own property separately from her husband. Other states followed suit, England even followed later, but Mississippi was the first. So

remember that the next time you read about Mississippi being the fiftieth state, the bottom on some national ranking – we have occasionally been first in some good things.

But God, because it is his nature to love and protect those who cannot provide for themselves, looks out for widows. He calls himself the “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows ...” Psalm 68:5. In Deuteronomy 10:18 we read that God “executes justice for the fatherless and the widow ...”

Therefore, in Israel under the old covenant, God through the old covenant scriptures (otherwise known as the Old Testament) established laws so that his people would set aside enough resources to make sure widows (and other classes of vulnerable people) would be provided a minimal standard of care. One of these laws in particular can be found at the end of Deuteronomy 14, and when you think about this law it’s really amazing what it provides for.

Every three years the people of Israel were to gather a tithe of all their produce, and this tithe was to be made available to the widows of the land. Think about it: under the old covenant every three years ten percent of the gross domestic product of Israel distributed to the poor and the widows. That’s 3.3% annually. Just to give you some idea of how big a deal this was: in 2016 the gross domestic product of Mississippi was \$95.2 billion. 3.3% of that is \$3.1 billion. That would be quite a lot of money for the poor of our state.

In 1 Timothy 5 the local church in Ephesus is trying to do its best to care for the widows coming to them for help but they were operating under the new covenant. In the old covenant the people of Israel and the nation of Israel were the same thing, so they could provide for the poor through taxation in the form of tithes. But in the new covenant the people of God are in the church, the church is distinct from the state, so the church can’t gather taxes to care for widows.

In our passage Paul works out how Christians under the new covenant are to care for widows as they are commanded to under the old covenant (because God is still the protector of widows) but *without the resources provided by the old covenant*. And if that sounds like a hopelessly obscure topic for a Sunday morning sermon, it’s actually not. In this passage is a framework for understanding how we as Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can perform a very important task: caring for those in need.

How are Christians today to care for the poor? Paul gives two sets of instructions. *First, Paul gives instructions to the institutional church*. These instructions are given to local church and we should take them into account when we make our budget every year and when individuals come to the church leadership for help. *Second, Paul gives instructions to individual Christians*. These instructions are for us personally, in our own, individual lives.

First, Paul’s instructions to the institutional church. Let’s read verse 9a: “<sup>9</sup>Let a widow **be enrolled** ...” The practice in Ephesus was for widows to be registered in some kind of formal program where they received food and possibly a stipend to live off of. We read in Acts 6 that the church in Jerusalem had a similar registry of widows.

But the institutional church in Ephesus simply could not care for every widow in the city. The church as an organization lives off the freewill offerings of its members, so it has never had the resources to write into its annual budget enough money to feed everyone in need.

So, Paul tells Timothy, you've simply got to limit those the church enrolls on its widow's list, and Paul gives him several steps to work through before a widow gets on the list. Paul tells Timothy first to limit the widows to those who believe, to Christian widows in the church. That's verse 10. Paul says let a widow be enrolled if she has "a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work." It's not that the church can't serve those outside, *but we must not do so to the neglect those inside the church*, which is after all the family of God. "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." Galatians 6:10.

Second, the church should not enroll widows who can take care of themselves. That's verse 3: "Honor widows who are truly widows." In other words, Paul is saying, some women are technically widows because they've lost a husband, but they haven't been reduced to poverty because of it. Even though widows were legally non-persons in the ancient world, the custom of the time still provided for them through the practice of the dowry. The dowry was a trust fund the father of the bride gave to her husband at the wedding, but the husband could only use it to provide for his wife. If the husband died, the dowry reverted back to the father of the bride or some other male relative to make sure she continued to be cared for. According to Paul, a widow in this situation isn't to be enrolled with the church. But most widows didn't have a dowry to fall back on, as most fathers aren't wealthy enough to provide a trust fund for each of his daughters at their weddings. I'm probably going to be one of those fathers.

Third, the church should not enroll widows who have children who can care for them. That's verse 4: "4 But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God." This isn't a Christian notion – in every society on earth children have been taught to honor their parents by providing for them.

If a widow has children who claim to be Christians, then Timothy's first duty is not to get the church to provide for the widow but to tell those children to care for her. That's verse 7: "7 Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach." In other words, it would not be loving to allow children to shirk this duty by enrolling their mothers in the widow registry, and if someone did then it's proof that, no matter what they might say, those children don't follow Jesus. That's verse 8: "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." It is gross sin to refuse to care for your family when you can. That goes not just for your parents but for others, certainly your children, even if you for whatever reason no longer live with them. Paul says we should not welcome someone as a Christian (no matter what they might say) when they have the means to provide for their family yet refuse to do it.

Fourth, the church should not enroll young widows at all. "But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry <sup>12</sup> and so incur

condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. <sup>13</sup> Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. <sup>14</sup> So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.” 1 Timothy 5:11-14.

It’s understandable if at first as you read these verses you feel Paul is engaging in ugly stereotyping about women. You may think he’s saying that women will, given the chance, be extremely lazy. Just lie around all day eating Bon Bons and watching soap operas.

But instead Paul is making a point about human nature in general. If you don’t have a purpose in life, some meaningful work or goal, and if you have the means so you don’t have to work, then you will more than likely degenerate into laziness. He talks about women in 1 Timothy but says something similar about men in 2 Thessalonians 3.

In Ephesus in the first century, there was no employment for women. They couldn’t work outside the home. And young widows would have ample opportunity to remarry – one estimate of the population of the Roman Empire is that for every 100 women there were 131 men. This was because Roman families would often kill girl babies at birth as they were seen as financial burdens. It was hard for men to find wives in the ancient world. So Paul says, “I’m not going to require it, but I’m going to encourage young people to keep themselves busy as a way of keeping them from sin, and for women in our culture that means marriage and raising children.”

Therefore, the institutional church, was the care for “the widows who were truly widows,” those widows in the church who had no dowry, who had no families to care for them, or who had families who could not or would not care for them, and who were too old to be expected to remarry and have children. These widows have no other earthly hope; the church must be there for them. This includes today: the church may only exist on the freewill offerings of its members and it will never have enough to care for all widows, but it must use every dollar it has if necessary to keep *these* widows from poverty.

But, still, that leaves an awful lot of poor widows and other people in need out there not cared for by the institutional church. Are we just to tell them, “Sorry”? What do we do with them?

Second, Paul’s instructions to individual Christians. If the church as an institution is to care for “the widows who are truly widows,” for whom do individual Christians – like you, like me – care? Obviously, we care for our relatives. We’ve already seen that in verses 4 and 8.

The verse I really want to be sure and point out is verse 16: “If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened ...” 1 Timothy 5:16a. Now “if any believing woman has relatives who are widows” is, I think, a misleading translation. The Greek literally reads “if any believing woman *has* widows.” I think Paul is saying, “If you *know* of a widow, if you’ve come across of a poor widow, **you take care of her.** Don’t pass her off to the church. You do it.”

And this principle can by extension be applied to anyone in need. If you are a believer and if you come across someone who is in need, you care for them. Don’t say it’s the church’s

responsibility or hope that the government will do it – you care for them. If you serve on staff at a church and you come across someone in need, don't pass it off on the church benevolent fund (and as a pastor I can tell you this is a real temptation) – you care for them.

If you say, “How do you get from widows to anyone in need?” the answer is found in Luke 10, where we read of a lawyer who came up to Jesus to test him with a question. Even two thousand years ago you had to keep an eye on lawyers with questions.

The lawyer asked Jesus, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”<sup>26</sup> He [Jesus] said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? How do you read it?’<sup>27</sup> And he answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>28</sup> And he said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.’<sup>29</sup> But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Luke 10:25-29.

In response Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan. Many of you know this story. A Jewish man travelling down the Jericho road came upon robbers who beat him, stripped him, and left him for dead. A priest and then a Levite saw him but passed by on the other side of the road. Then a Samaritan came along and had compassion for the man. Samaritans and Jews were mortal enemies, and normally a Samaritan would see a Jew lying in a ditch on the side of the road and think, “He just got what he deserved.” Normally, if he got off his horse it would only be to see if the Jew was alive and then finish him off. But this Samaritan treated the man's wounds, put him on his own animal, put the man up in an inn and cared for him, and then the next day left money with the innkeeper to meet any further needs the man might have.

After telling the story, Jesus asked the lawyer one last, devastating question: “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”<sup>37</sup> [The lawyer] said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise.’” Luke 10:36-37. If you see someone, anyone, in need, Jesus says, you care for them. *The Bible tells individual Christians that whenever they see someone in need to do whatever is in their power to help, because everyone we come across will be our neighbor.*

Note: it does not say we have to help everyone who *says* they are in need. Enabling destructive behavior is a thing and we must be discerning with our help. The good Samaritan didn't meet someone who just *said* he was in need; he actually was in need.

Yet that is the command, and immediately all these objections to obeying this command come to our minds. How in the world can we be a neighbor like that to anyone we meet who might be in need? In 1732 Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon called “Duty of Christian Charity to the Poor” where he gave the most biblically-saturated answers I've ever heard to the objections that come up most often in my mind, and I'll share some of them with you now.

**One** objection we have to helping those in need is when we say, “I barely have enough money for my family. How could I possibly spare money to help someone else?” Edwards replies that while that probably is true in a few cases, more often than not what people mean when they say, “I have nothing to spare” is “I can't spare anything for those in need and continue to live as well

as I do, without cutting into the lifestyle I've grown accustomed to." But Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ," and Edwards says, "If we are never obligated to relieve others' burdens except only when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor's burdens, when we bear no burden at all?"

A **second** objection, and I have been guilty of using it myself, is that we are not obligated to help those in need unless that need is extreme. I call this the "nice television" objection. More than once I've heard it said, "Those people who live in the poor part of town can't be in too much need, because they've got a nicer television than I do." But the law of God is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." We don't wait until our poverty is extreme before doing something about our condition. We shouldn't wait until our neighbor is reduced to nothing before we help him?

**Third**, a lot of people say they don't have to help those in need when they got there by their own actions. But that doesn't absolve a Christian of all responsibility. Maybe this person spent money so foolishly because they've never been taught better. Then, Edwards says, the Christian should thank God he was taught better and try to help. Maybe this person is in need because they were just plain lazy or because they gambled all their money away or spent it all on drugs. But this is no reason not to help unless they continue in those vices. If they stop, the rules of the gospel require us to forgive them.

Yet what if, Edwards says, they continue in their vices and they refuse to stop their destructive behavior? He says it still does not excuse us from charity to their families that are innocent, and if we can't relieve their families without their having something of it, that should not stop us from helping them.

I can imagine someone saying, "Alright, J.D., you're saying that if I know of anyone in need, I'm required to do something about it. Well, I know there are a lot of poor people who live in a certain part of town. Does 1 Timothy 5:16 require me to go and visit them and meet all their needs?" No, I don't think so. I know people who have done that, I know people who have moved into poor neighborhoods or into third world countries and lived among the poor and given all they had to help. I think God does call some people to do that, but I don't think he calls all of us to. When, in Luke 19, Zacchaeus told Jesus, "Look Lord! I give half my possessions to the poor," Jesus didn't say, "That's not enough, Zacchaeus – you must give it all away." The Lord does not require us to impoverish ourselves in order to care for the poor.

But what I don't think you can't say is, "I'm not helping anyone in need because I don't know of anyone in need." You can't say that. Loving your neighbor means opening your eyes until you see someone in need. If you really don't know of anyone, ask just about anyone who works in the school system – they can point you to some kids in need and opportunities to serve them. Talk to anyone who works in adoption or foster care. Reach out to the people at Compassion International or World Vision and sponsor a child. But you can't say you don't know anyone. Refusing to even try to find some way to help amounts to hiding your eyes from the poor, and about that the Bible says, "Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse." Proverbs 28:27.

But why is it that it's such a struggle for us to care for those in need? Why aren't we more generous? A couple of reasons.

First, it is a great temptation to think we got where we are by our own hands, by our hard work and ingenuity. Each morning I wake up in my comfortable bed in my nice house. I go into my roomy kitchen, make a cup of coffee, and sit down in my comfortable chair. And every morning it's a struggle not think, "I did this. My hard work and my discipline got me these things."

You know what the Bible says? ***Everything you have is a gift.*** Yes, maybe you have worked hard. But who gave you the body with which to work? Who gave you the talents and intellect you used when you worked? Who caused you to be born into the greatest country the world has ever known so that you could put those things to work and make money off of them? Not you. God did that. Everything in your life is a gift.

If you think you got everything by your own hard work, then you've got to work hard to hold onto it. You can't just give it away. But if everything in your life is a gift, you don't have to hold onto it with an iron grip. You can give it away – God gave it to you before, and he will give it to you again. God loves to give his children good gifts.

When King David was gathering all the material to build the temple of God in Jerusalem, we read that he and everyone else in Israel was blown away by all the great quantities of gold, silver, bronze, and precious stones the people donated. In response David said, "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand." 2 Chronicles 29:14 (NIV 1984).

We struggle with being generous because we don't remember how everything we have is a gift from God to begin with, and ***we struggle because we forget how needy we were before we met Christ.*** I talked about the parable of the good Samaritan a few minutes ago, and I mentioned how it shows us that everyone is our neighbor, and so Christians have a duty to care for anyone they meet who is in need. And that's true, but if that's all you know about the good Samaritan you will misunderstand it.

Remember how the parable begins? It begins with the lawyer asking Jesus this question: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke 10:25. In the parable of the good Samaritan Jesus isn't only talking about the Christian's duty to those in need; *he's talking about salvation.*

When we think about the parable and apply it to our lives, we shouldn't put ourselves in it where we normally do – in the role of the good Samaritan, looking for neighbors in need. Friends, in the grand context of Scripture, we are not the good Samaritan on his horse, looking for people to save. In the context of the Bible we are the man in the ditch.

We are sinners, wretches, dying in our transgressions and sins. And we look up from the ditch and we see Jesus. Now we have every reason to look up from the ditch at Jesus in horror, because he is by nature our enemy – the Jew and the Samaritan were enemies, and sinners are by nature enemies of a holy God. But rather condemn us as we deserve, Jesus on the cross took our

place under the judgment of a holy God. He didn't just bind up our wounds and broken hearts (though praise him he does that), he bore the wrath of God we deserve so that now through Jesus we can, in the eyes of a holy God, be pure again.

To be a Christian means knowing that before we met Jesus *we really had nothing*. And to the degree we remember how needy we were before we met Jesus, to that degree we will be motivated to care for those in need now. Not because we have to show mercy to the poor (after all, we are saved by sheer grace) but because we have ourselves been recipients of God's infinite mercy. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." 2 Corinthians 8:9.

We are going to take the Lord's Supper now. We invite all people who have personally trusted in Jesus Christ to participate, regardless of what church you are a part of and regardless of how you have been baptized. As you take the bread and the cup, remember how poor you were before you met Jesus. Remember how you had no hope. And think on how Jesus left the riches of heaven, so that you through his poverty might be the recipients of his grace. Drill that deep into your heart and you will long to care for those in need. PRAY.