

Widows in the Church, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Timothy 5:3–4

Code: 54-36

INTRODUCTION

By God's design, a wife is to be the special object of her husband's love and care. As "a weaker vessel" (1 Pet. 3:7), she is under his authority and protection. But if a woman loses her husband, she is often left without any means of financial support. Such women are under God's special care. The psalmist said the Lord is "a defender of widows" (Ps. 68:5, NIV; cf. Deut. 10:18). God's compassion goes out to them because of their difficult situation. And Scripture reveals that has always been God's attitude toward widows.

A. Old Testament Teaching

1. Deuteronomy 27:19--"Cursed be he who perverteth the justice due ... the ... widow."
2. Isaiah 1:17--"Plead for the widow."
3. Jeremiah 22:3-4--"Do no violence to the ... widow.... For if ye do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting upon the throne of David ... he, and his servants, and his people."
4. Exodus 22:22-23--"Ye shall not afflict any widow.... If thou afflict them in any way, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry." So God blessed those who cared for widows but cursed those who didn't.

The Old Testament also taught that remarriage was the ideal for a widow. Where remarriage was not possible, a widow could stay either in the house of her parents (cf. Gen. 38:11) or in-laws (cf. Ruth 1:16). And according to Levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-6), the brother of the deceased husband could marry her. If he refused, the next male-of-kin was free to do so. Boaz married Ruth in that manner (Ruth 4:1-10) .

B. New Testament Teaching

1. The example of Christ

a) In the Temple Jesus Christ exemplified the perfect attitude toward widows. Mark 12 tells us He Jesus sat opposite the Temple treasury as worshipers gave their money offerings. He noticed that the wealthy gave large amounts of money but a widow gave only a small amount. Jesus said to His disciples, "This poor widow hath cast more in than all they who have cast into the treasury; for all they did cast in of their abundance, but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living" (vv. 43-44). Christ commended the widow's worship. Her generous spirit was evidence she had a sincere and godly heart. b) In a widow's home As Jesus approached the city of Nain, "there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and many people of the city were with her" (Luke 7:12). Because of her son's death, no one was left to care for her. When the Lord saw her, He "had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. And he came and touched the bier; and they that bore him sat still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother" (vv. 13-15). Jesus was so touched by the widow's plight that He raised her son from the dead so he could continue to care for her. c) On the cross John 19 tells us that when Jesus, hanging on the cross, "saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home" (vv. 26-27). Jesus deeply cared about Mary so He entrusted her to the apostle John's care.

2. The example of the early church

a) The church at Jerusalem Because of its rapid numerical growth "there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration" (Acts 6:1). "Hebrews" refers to Jewish people living in Palestine while "Grecians" (also called Hellenists) refers to Jewish people who had been dispersed or scattered outside of Palestine. Hellenists came to Jerusalem for holidays, and some even moved to Palestine to live. Perhaps those referred to in Acts 6 were residents of the city, or stayed in homes with other Christian families, or were housed at various inns. Apparently the Hellenistic widows in the church did not receive the same care as those from Palestine. Perhaps that was because the Hellenistic people were not a part of the original Jewish community. Whatever the reason, the apostles gathered the believers together and asked them to find "seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" to care for the Hellenistic widows (v. 3). Honesty was necessary since they would be handling money and food; wisdom and the Spirit's control were necessary to evaluate each widow's need with sensitivity. The plan pleased the Hellenistic believers and seven such men were chosen.

b) Peter at Joppa In the city of Joppa lived a kind and gracious believer named Tabitha (also called Dorcas), but she became sick and died (Acts 9:36-37). Normally it was not the Jewish custom to embalm the body but only to wash it for a time of viewing or mourning (v. 37). The believers in Joppa heard that Peter was in the nearby city of Lydda, so they sent for him, obviously knowing he had demonstrated the power of God through many previous miracles. Perhaps they hoped he could do something for Tabitha as well. So Peter journeyed there and came to the room where she lay. "All the widows stood by him weeping, and showing the coats and garments which Dorcas had made, while she was with them" (v. 39). Dorcas had apparently used her own resources to make clothing for a number of destitute widows. Then Peter asked everyone in the room to leave, "kneeled down, and prayed; and turning to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes; and when she saw Peter, she sat up" (v. 40). There was probably confusion along with the weeping. Peter was considerate in having them leave the room rather than trying to stop their crying. He probably wanted to be alone to pray as well. It was the second resurrection recorded in the New Testament that benefited widows, the first being the resurrection of the widow's son in Nain. The brokenhearted widows of Joppa were comforted because the woman so dear to them had been raised from the dead. The book of James summarizes God's compassion for widows: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (1:27). A believer demonstrates his faith by deeds of love and mercy to those in need. Paul wanted the church to demonstrate its faith that way. His lengthy section on widows (1 Tim. 5:3-16) shows the importance of the subject. In that section, he gave several principles to govern the church's conduct toward widows.

LESSON

I. THE CHURCH'S OBLIGATION TO SUPPORT WIDOWS (v. 3)

"Honor widows that are widows indeed."

A. Defining Widows

The Greek term translated "widow" (*chera*) means "bereft" and conveys a sense of suffering loss or being left alone. The term does not tell us how a woman became a widow and therefore the cause is not limited to a husband's death. "Widows indeed" is qualified by the Greek term translated "desolate" (*ontos*; v. 5), which means "having been left alone." It indicates that no one is able to help her.

In ancient times, widows were in an especially difficult position because honorable employment for women was not readily available, neither were there any secular institutions to provide for them. Perhaps some could receive help through family or friends, but many lived in poverty, never having received an inheritance. Since the outlook for many was bleak, it was vital for the church to assist them. In fact, as we saw in James 1:27, the treatment of widows was a test whereby believers

demonstrated the genuineness of their faith.

B. Honoring Widows

Christian widows left alone are to receive "honor" (Gk., *timao*, "to revere" or "value"), if they meet the qualifications that Paul later mentions.

Matthew 15 illustrates that honor includes financial support. The scribes and Pharisees confronted Jesus, saying, "Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?" (v. 2). The "tradition of the elders" was a large compilation of rules and regulations imposed upon the Jewish people's way of life. It developed from interpretations of Scripture by various Jewish religious leaders but often added to or even contradicted Scripture.

The scribes and Pharisees said Christ's disciples violated their tradition because they "wash not their hands when they eat bread" (v. 2). That washing had nothing to do with sanitation but was directly related to a religious, ceremonial cleansing.

Since the disciples didn't recognize the tradition as scriptural, they simply ignored it. And Jesus responded by saying, "Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? For God commanded, saying, Honor thy father and mother; and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; and honor not his father or mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition" (vv. 3-6). His explanation included a reference to the Ten Commandments about honoring your parents (Ex. 20:12). The Jewish people in the days of Moses understood that to include financial support.

But the tradition that developed contradicted the intent of that commandment. It allowed a person to pledge money to God by saying, "It is a gift." The money could then only be given to the Lord. So if a person didn't want to give money to his needy parents, he would simply pledge it to the Lord. If he later decided to keep the money for personal use instead, tradition also allowed him to rescind his original vow. So it served neither God nor family but only selfish interests.

C. Supporting Widows

Widows receiving honor are qualified as "widows indeed." The Greek term (*ontos*) translated "indeed" means "in reality" or "in point of fact." The fact is they are alone and therefore in need of financial support. So "widows indeed" are to be distinguished from widows having financial means. Some husbands may have left their wives with wonderful resources such as a home and some money. In those instances, the church should still be there to provide for any spiritual needs.

We live in a country that provides some basic coverage for widows. But the scope of their needs is increasing. Some widows might desire a Christian education for their children, and the church could set up a scholarship fund toward meeting that need. Other widows may have previously lived on a low income while others may have lived on a higher one. So the church will need to exercise wisdom to determine which needs are real ones.

The church must be committed to widows who genuinely need assistance, whatever the cost might be. It may mean transferring money out of optional church programs so basic needs can be met. The church should be happy to do that because it shows God's compassion toward the destitute. Even when widows have financial resources, the church needs to come alongside with encouragement, love, and support in every way possible.

The increasing collapse of the family unit in our society means there will be an increase in the number of widows that need to be under the church's care. For instance, a Christian widow with several children might not receive any help from unsaved parents. It would be good if she could move back into her parent's home (Gen. 38:11) but that is not always possible.

II. THE CHURCH'S OBLIGATION TO EVALUATE THEIR NEEDS (vv. 4-8)

The church needs to discern which widows are in genuine need of financial care. It cannot indiscriminately give to everyone. So Scripture lays down some guidelines to determine who qualifies

and who doesn't.

A. Widows with Families (v. 4)

"If any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to show piety at home, and to requite their parents; for that is good and acceptable before God."

The Greek term translated "nephews" (ekgonos) means "descendants" or "grandchildren." Many widows have children and grandchildren. The Greek term translated "home" (oikos) refers to the family. "First" indicates a priority of order. Family members are the first ones responsible to care for widows. The first place for children and grandchildren to demonstrate their godliness is in the context of family living, which includes making sure each family member is provided for. In fact, verse 8 says, "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an [unbeliever]."

True spirituality reveals itself in the context of family relationships. Paul previously emphasized that in chapter 3, where he said an elder must manage his own household well (v. 4), and a deacon must exercise good oversight over his family (v. 12). The burden isn't only on the older family members: godly young people will desire good relationships with their family members as well. Relating well to each other is an indication of a godly family. Perhaps even an application of enrollment for a seminary student could include a letter of reference from the parents. It might ask, What evidences of godliness have seen in your child's life?

Family members are not only to show godliness at home but also "to requite" (Gk., amoibe, "recompense") their parents. Children are to give back a return to their parents, which includes a financial obligation. Besides providing material items such as food, clothing, and housing, parents also give intangible assets such as love and encouragement. It should be a great and happy privilege for children to return a small measure of the tremendous support they have received from their parents.

Conclusion

A widow in the biblical sense may be a daughter, a mother, a sister, a niece, or an aunt who loses her husband through divorce, desertion, imprisonment, or especially death. Caring for such a woman is a privilege and a manifestation of God's compassion. Paul said doing so "is good and acceptable before God" (v. 4). Parents deserve our respect and support, especially those who are widows.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Explain the Old Testament teaching about widows.
2. Explain three instances where Christ honored widows.
3. Explain the problem the church at Jerusalem had (Acts 6:1). How did they solve the problem?
4. Why were the widows at Joppa so sad (Acts 9)? How did Peter comfort them?
5. What verse summarizes God's compassion for widows?
6. What is the first principle to guide the church in caring for widows (1 Tim. 5:3)?
7. Explain the meaning of "widows" (1 Tim. 5:3).
8. Why were widows in ancient times often in a difficult financial position?
9. Define "honor" (1 Tim. 5:3). Give an example of it from Matthew 15:1-6.
10. Explain the meaning of "indeed" (1 Tim. 5:3).
11. What kind of commitment does the church need to make in caring for widows?
12. What is the second principle to guide the church in caring for widows (1 Tim. 5:4-8)?
13. Define "nephews" and "home" (1 Tim. 5:4). Who is first obligated to care for widows?
14. True spirituality reveals itself in the context of.
15. Explain the meaning of "requite" (1 Tim. 5:4).
16. True or false: In the biblical sense a woman becomes a widow only through her husband's death.
17. What is God's evaluation of those who care for widows (1 Tim. 5:4)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Honoring our parents is a duty and privilege (Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:2). The Puritan Richard Baxter said, "Be sure that you dearly love your parents; delight to be in their company; be not like those unnatural children, that love the company of their idle play-fellows better than their parents, and had rather be abroad about their sports, than in their parents' sight. Remember that you have your being from them, and come out of their loins: remember what sorrow you have cost them, and what care they are at for your education and provision; and remember how tenderly they have loved you ... and how much your happiness will make them glad: remember what love you owe them both by nature and in justice, for all their love to you, and all that they have done for you: they take your happiness or misery to be one of the greatest parts of the happiness or misery of their own lives" (The Practical Works of Richard Baxter, vol. 1 [Ligonier, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990], p. 454). Reflect upon the many benefits you have received from your parents. Be sure to express your appreciation to them.

2. True religion involves visiting "widows in their affliction" (James 1:27). Visiting speaks of caring for them, and affliction refers to anything which burdens or pressures the spirit. Practical deeds of love can help relieve their pressures and burdens. Cleaning the house or taking them with you on trips are simple but important ways to uplift them. Create a list of ways you can help and begin to do them.

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