

Widows in the Church, Part 2

Scripture: 1 Timothy 5:5–8

Code: 54-37

INTRODUCTION

Our society will probably continue to see more women with greater needs. That is reflected in George Grant's book, *The Dispossessed: Homelessness in America* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1986), in which he claims that the Feminist Movement has been detrimental to the well-being of women, citing several authorities and statistics (pp. 73-79). He uses the phrase the feminization of poverty to describe the negative effect the movement has had on women. Economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett makes the same point in her critique, *A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women's Liberation in America*. She says that women have less economic security because of the movement and that it has eroded values such as responsibility, courtesy, respect, and commitment.

Evidence exists to support those claims. The majority of women in the labor force today work out of economic necessity. Most are single, widowed, or divorced and aren't paid as much as men for comparable work. One in three families with women as the head of the household is poor, compared with one in ten in those led by men, and one in nineteen where the home has two parents. Some experts say that if the trend continues, the poverty population will soon be composed only of women and their children.

Abortion and divorce are directly related to the economic welfare of women. Some women who are poor don't want children, so they abort them. But abortion can cause many medical complications and is now a leading killer in maternal deaths. According to one medical journal, half of the deaths related to abortion are probably not even reported. Even women themselves have become the victims of abortion. As for divorce, Lenore J. Weitzman notes in her book *The Divorce Revolution* that women experience a significant decline in their standard of living in the first year after a divorce, while their former husbands' standard of living increases. Years ago, one out of six American marriages ended in divorce. Today, it is estimated that at least half of current marriages will eventually end in divorce, and demographers expect that statistic to rise.

As the number of women who need help increases, the church will also experience an increased burden. As God's representative to the world, the church should help in the ways it can. God cares and we should too. One specific group of women in need of its care is widows. So Paul gave the church some principles to go by in caring for them.

REVIEW

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

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

A. Widows with Families (v. 4)

Lesson

B. Widows Without Families (vv. 5-6)

Paul stated that widows with families should receive their support from them (v. 4). In verses 5-6 he details how the church should evaluate the needs of those who don't have families. Some widows qualify for support and some don't.

1. Those who qualify for support (v. 5)

a) Widows who are alone (v. 5a)"She that is a widow indeed, and desolate."Paul again addresses

those who are widows "indeed," who apparently don't have any children or grandchildren who are willing to care for them (cf. v. 3). The family structure could be missing because of immorality, divorce, abandonment by the children, or even the children's death. The Greek term translated "desolate" (memonomeve) means "has been left alone." We derive the prefix mono from it, which means "one," "alone," or "single." The perfect tense indicates a continual condition or state of being. Those women have no one to turn to for help.b) Widows who are believers (v. 5b)"Trusteth in God."The Greek term "trusteth" (elpizo) could be translated "she has fixed her hope on God." The perfect tense implies not only a continual condition of being without means, but also a continual attitude of looking to God as her only hope. That describes a Christian. The Bible says, "Do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). The church might choose to help non-Christians, but it has a special responsibility to care for its own.A Christian widow has learned to trust in God as her provider. We see His provision for widows illustrated in 1 Kings 17:8-16. The Lord told Elijah to go to the town of Zarephath. There he would meet a widow who would give him some food and water. When he arrived, he saw a woman gathering together some sticks. He asked her for some water to drink and as she went to get it, he also asked her to bring him a small piece of bread.But she responded that she had no bread, only a little flour and some cooking oil. She had been gathering the sticks to prepare the last meal for her son and herself. After that, she said they would die. (There was a famine in the land.) Elijah told her to not be afraid but to first make him some bread, and after that, some for themselves because the Lord promised not to allow her supply of flour and oil to be insufficient. So she obeyed, and in fulfilling His promise, God continually provided for her.c) Widows who are godly (v. 5c)"Continueth in supplications and prayers night and day."That speaks of a widow is committed to God. She entrusts every aspect of her life to Him. Her prayer life is reflective of an intimate relationship with the Lord. "Continueth ... night and day" indicates a common practice of life. The Greek term translated "supplications" (deesesin) means "to ask" or "entreat." She tells God her needs because she knows He is her provider.Those are the kinds of widows that the church is to care for. But who is the church? You are! Rather than bringing a needy woman's needs to someone else's attention, first see what you can do.

2. Those who don't qualify for support (v. 6)

"But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth."The Greek term translated "but" (de) means "on the other hand." This woman lives in contrast to the criteria described in verse 5. "Liveth in pleasure" means "to live luxuriously." Her interest is in a life of ease and self-gratification. She may be alive physically, but spiritually she is dead. There's no trust, devotion, or love for God. She lives with disregard for what is right.The church isn't responsible to support that kind of widow. The implication is she is to be left to the consequences of her sins, which hopefully will lead her to repent. The Septuagint uses spatulosa to describe someone living in careless ease or unbridled sensuality (Ezek. 16:49). The church is not obligated to help someone continue a sinful lifestyle.The context of the verse indicates that there were such women in the church. Maybe a woman was active in the church with her husband, only to leave that lifestyle when she became a widow. Whatever past involvement she may have had with the church, she forsook it. Perhaps her heart was like the rocky soil in which the Word grew until tribulation came, but then died (Matt. 13:20-21). Or possibly her heart was like the weedy ground in which the Word was choked out by the pleasures of the world (Matt. 13:22).Paul didn't even issue a command--it's obvious that church resources are not for supporting spiritually dead people. That doesn't advance His kingdom.There are built-in consequences to deviating from God's Word. For example, harmful diseases can result from immorality. Or alcohol can ruin a person's career. The church needs to faithfully teach the Word, which reveals the God who can transform any person's life. People should receive the church's support only when they qualify for it biblically. Those who don't should be left to deal with the consequences of their sin. Hopefully the misery of their sins will lead them to Christ.

C. A Church with a Good Testimony (v. 7)

"These things command, that they may be blameless."

"Things" refers to everything Paul told Timothy since verse 3. Church leaders to continually instruct the church so it will maintain an irreproachable testimony. That includes instructing families to fulfill their obligations (vv. 3-4) and widows to live godly lives (vv. 5-6). The church also needs to know which widows qualify to receive its support. So the instruction is to everyone in the church. There will be no cause for criticism when the church cares for widows in the right way.

However, in the name of Christianity, millions of dollars are given to organizations that aren't even centered on the Word of God. Unscrupulous individuals use the money for financial profit, while multitudes struggle to survive. That's wrong! When the unsaved world sees that, they turn away from the church because of the so-called Christian organizations that do such things. So it is important for the church to have a testimony without reproach before God and the world. Its care of widows is directly related to that.

D. A Christian with a Bad Testimony (v. 8)

"But 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 infidel."

The Greek term translated "but" (de) indicates that verse 8 states negatively what verse 4 says positively: The latter says it's good for families to support their parents; the former says if they don't, they are acting worse than unbelievers.

"Provide" means "to think of beforehand" or "care for," indicating that support requires careful forethought and planning. A believer is to support "his own," a general reference to the believer's sphere of relationships. It might be friends, neighbors, acquaintances, or relatives.

"Any" indicates every believer is responsible to provide that support. When he can, a believer should meet needs without taking it to the organized church. "Specially" means "chiefly" or "most of all."

Above all, a Christian is responsible to care for his own family members. If he doesn't care for those God brings into his fold, he is guilty of two things.

1. He doesn't show love

"He hath denied the faith" doesn't refer to someone who has stopped believing in God. Rather, this is someone who is not loving others as he should. That is a serious matter because love is at the center of the Christian faith. a) John 3:16--"God so loved the world that he gave" (emphasis added). b) Romans 5:5--"The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts." c) John 13:35--Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." d) 1 Thessalonians 4:9--Paul said, "As touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you; for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another." Love will compel you to give sacrificially to others and is the element by which others can tell if you are a Christian (John 17:21-23).

2. He doesn't set a good example

Most unbelievers take care of their own because it is a natural thing for them to do. They may not understand that doing so is a biblical obligation. And none have Christ to follow as their model or possess His indwelling power. So when a believer doesn't fulfill an obligation that even an unbeliever knows enough to do, he's acting worse than an unbeliever. Even pagans revere and worship their elders and ancestors.

Conclusion

In John 19 Jesus hung on a cross, near death. Gathered at the foot of the cross were His mother; His mother's sister; Mary the wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene. Verse 26 says, "When Jesus, therefore, saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!" Jesus focused her attention on John, not Himself. And John received Mary as his own mother.

Why did Jesus want John to care for her? Joseph already had died, so she had no husband. Now she was losing the Son of her love, the Son of the virgin birth, the Messiah. Apparently Jesus did not want her to be left in the care of His unbelieving brothers. Out of deep love, He responded to her

situation so she would receive the proper care.

That tells us something important about caring for widows. As Jesus hung on a cross, He spoke only to two individuals. One was a wretched criminal hanging next to Him, whom He forgave. The other was His widowed mother. Nothing reveals God's heart better than when His Son was dying on a cross to bear the sins of the world. With eternity past and future gathering to a great, redemptive climax, the two things preoccupying His mind were the salvation of a sinner and the care of a widow. Jesus said "woman" (v. 27) and not "mother" probably because He didn't want to make the wound of her heart any deeper. Nor was He to be seen anymore as her son but as her Savior. Although no work was ever more strenuous and inconceivable than what Christ accomplished on the cross, the compassionate heart that beat within our Savior never lost sight of caring for a widow.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Explain the criterion of widows who are alone (1 Tim. 5:5).
2. Explain the criterion of widows who are believers (1 Tim 5:5).
3. How did the Lord provide for a widow in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-16)?
4. Explain the criterion of widows who are godly (1 Tim. 5:5).
5. Who is the church? What is the implication of that?
6. How do we know that a widow living in pleasure is an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:6)?
7. Might unsaved widows seek church support? Explain.
8. What does "things" in 1 Timothy 5:7 refer to?
9. Why is it important for the church to maintain a good testimony?
10. True or false: The care of widows directly relates to the church's reputation.
11. Explain the significance of "but" at the beginning of 1 Timothy 5:8.
12. Whom does "his own" refer to in 1 Timothy 5:8?
13. Explain the significance of "any" in 1 Timothy 5:8.
14. What does denying the faith as referred to in 1 Timothy 5:8 seem to mean? Support your answer with Scripture (v. 8).
15. How can a Christian act worse than an unbeliever? (1 Tim. 5:8)?
16. Explain how Christ's example on the cross shows the importance of caring for widows (John 19:26).

Pondering the Principles

1. Believers can grow in the faith by learning from the example of a godly Christian widow (1 Tim. 5:5). She has experienced adversity in the loss of her husband and has tasted the bitterness of loneliness. But in her affliction, she still loves God with all her heart, trusting in Him and praying to Him. These are verses she can particularly identify with:
Job 23:10-12--"[The Lord] knoweth the way that I take; when he hath tested me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot hath held his steps, his way have I kept, and not declined. Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food"
Isaiah 26:3--"[The Lord] "wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusteth in thee."
Romans 8:28,32--"All things work together for good to them that love God" and He "freely [gives] us all things."
Learn from a Christian who has experienced adversity and yet maintains a godly testimony. If you are presently in a difficult situation, allow God to comfort you through His Word, knowing "that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7).
2. First Timothy 5:8 illustrates that love for others is at the center of the Christian faith. John Hooper

said, "Love of man necessarily arises out of the love of God. The love of the creature is but the corollary to the love of the Creator. This is what the Christian finds, as a matter of fact. His heart is overcharged with love to God. It finds its way out in love to man" (The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations , I.D.E. Thomas, ed. [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989], p. 176).

Prayerfully consider the verses below and allow God to give you an awareness of others' needs and an increasing desire to help them.

Romans 13:8--"Owe no man anything, but to love one another; for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law."

Galatians 5:14--"All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

1 John 3:11, 16-17--"This is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.... By this perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whosoever hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his compassions from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"

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