

Widows in the Church, Part 3

Scripture: 1 Timothy 5:9–10

Code: 54-38

INTRODUCTION

It's God's design that a husband care for his wife. She can then be free to fulfill her biblical duties of serving her family and the Lord. First Peter 3:7 instructs the Christian husband to "live with [his wife] in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman" (NASB). The implication of "weaker vessel" is that a husband is to protect, provide, and care for his wife. A wife should have the character of "a gentle and quiet spirit" and be submissive to her own husband (1 Pet. 3:4-5, NASB). First Corinthians 7 speaks of a woman who was not married and under her father's protection (vv. 36-38). Apparently the father wanted his daughter to be completely devoted to the Lord and not marry anyone. But Paul stated that if later in life the daughter wanted to marry, it was not sin for the father to permit her to do so. He was not bound to his original vow. The passage shows that a father is responsible to make decisions protecting his daughter's welfare. Today, we see that protection most commonly displayed when a father gives someone permission to marry his daughter. However, a widow often has no one to protect her. That is why she is the special object of God's compassion and protection. Since the church is to demonstrate that same compassion, Paul left us with some guidelines so we can render proper care to widows.

REVIEW

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

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

LESSON

III. THE CHURCH'S OBLIGATION TO MAINTAIN A HIGH STANDARD FOR WIDOWS WHO SERVE IN THE CHURCH (vv. 9-10)

"Let not a widow be taken into the number under sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for good works, if she hath brought up children, if she hath lodged strangers, if she hath washed the saints' feet, if she hath relieved the afflicted, if she hath diligently followed every good work."

We know the early church had elders, deacons, and deaconesses (1 Tim. 3:1-13). Apparently a group of godly widows were also given official status as servants in the church. They were older women primarily responsible for serving the younger women of the church. As there are qualifications for elders and deacons, so also there are some for these church widows. That there are qualifications for them supports the idea that they were serving in some kind of an official capacity. The early church kept lists of such women.

Their areas of service likely included visiting the church's younger women to provide teaching and counseling, visiting the sick and afflicted, and providing hospitality to travelers such as itinerant preachers and evangelists. They probably had a ministry to children as well. In those days, children were often left in the marketplace because their parents didn't want them. Abandoned boys were often trained to become gladiators. Eventually, they would be fighting in an arena training program so they could eventually fight in an arena against wild beasts as entertainment for the Roman crowds. Abandoned girls were taken into brothels and used as prostitutes. It is likely those widows found such abandoned children and placed them in good homes so they could receive proper care.

If today's church had a group of godly widows with the same preoccupation, its younger women would greatly benefit. God wants those kind of widows to be active in the church, not retire from it. Many view retirement as a time of self-indulgence, but Scripture points toward ministry. Titus 2 says older women should have a behavior that "becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things, that they may teach the young women to be sober-minded, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, [pure], keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the Word of God be not blasphemed" (vv. 3-5). Spiritual enrichment needs to pass from one generation to the next.

A. They Are to Be Mature (v. 9a)

"Let not a widow be taken into the number under sixty years old."

There is no evidence that the church leaders ordained those on the widow list or that the church financially supported them. The issue of financial support stops at the end of verse 8, and the issue of qualifications begins in verse 9. Therefore verse 9 is not saying a widow has to be at least sixty to receive financial support from the church. There is no age limit for that.

Rather, this verse is saying a widow was to be at least sixty years old to be listed as an official church helper. In many cultures it is common to associate that age with maturity. In the eastern world, sixty was the age to retire from activity and engage in a life of philosophical contemplation. In the Roman Empire, sixty was the recognized age for someone who was old. And for the widow, that age exemplified maturity.

Because of her age, it is unlikely she would want to remarry. She would be content in her present state and be drawn to a strong relationship with the Lord. She is willing to say, "Lord, I'll give the rest of my life to you."

But a widow under sixty years is more likely to consider remarriage. If she were already on the list and wanted to marry, she would be discontent in her ministry. And that discontentment could lead her to compromise her faithfulness to the Lord. Then she would bring reproach not only to herself but also to the church's testimony. Paul therefore concluded it was best that a younger widow not be placed on the list (v. 11).

B. They Are to Be Pure (v. 9b)

"Having been the wife of one man."

The literally refers to a "one-man woman." First Timothy 3 uses the same type of word construction in describing elders and deacons. It obviously doesn't refer to a woman who was married one once because 1 Timothy 5:14 says it is best if younger widows remarry. And 1 Corinthians 7:39 says a widow may "marry whom she will, only in the Lord." Rather, it emphasizes a total devotion to her husband. She lived in complete fidelity with her husband, and their marriage relationship had no blemishes.

C. They Are to Be Reputable (v. 10)

"Well reported of for good works, if she hath brought up children, if she hath lodged strangers, if she hath washed the saints' feet, if she hath relieved the afflicted, if she hath diligently followed every good work."

"Good" signifies nobility and excellence of character. It is similar to the quality of blamelessness, which describes an elder and deacon (3:2, 10). She is well known for her excellent character. Verse 10 says, "She hath diligently followed every good work." She has an unrelenting pursuit of doing good to others.

There are five specific ways that she demonstrates her excellence. They give a profile of a godly woman in the same way Proverbs 31 does. Her character serves as a model not only for the younger women but also for all the women in the church. It is the kind of character that God exalts.

1. For being godly mothers

"She hath brought up children." Her children had the spiritual benefit of her godly influence. They received nourishment in a spiritual environment. Being a mother is one of the greatest privileges a

woman can have because her influence will greatly affect her children's character. That doesn't mean a woman without children is less valuable to God. His plan and design for her is equally important. In fact 1 Corinthians 7 exalts a single person because he or she can be devoted to the Lord without the cares of the world. But bringing up children is the norm for most women. And the mother who lives in "faith and love and holiness with sobriety" (1 Tim. 2:15) is a model that other women should imitate.

2. For being hospitable (v. 10c)

"She hath lodged strangers." "Lodged strangers" refers to housing missionaries, itinerant evangelists, preachers, and other Christians who were constantly traveling. Often they sought refuge from their persecutors. So it was a vital ministry to provide them with shelter. The Bible's commendation of Phoebe as a "a helper of many" undoubtedly included her aid toward traveling believers (Rom. 16:1-2). Free from the responsibilities and duties of caring for her husband and children, an older widow could devote more time and effort into that kind of ministry.

3. For being humble

"She hath washed the saints' feet." In those days, all the roads were either dusty or muddy. So people had their feet washed when coming into a home. It was a menial task that was often given to slaves. The phrase doesn't mean the widow always washed the feet of others because she may have had a servant in the house do it as well. Rather, the phrase came to describe humility: The Christian is willing to do lowly service for the benefit of another. Jesus was the perfect example of humility. When He washed the disciples' feet, He said, "Do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). When we see a person in need, we should help that person, no matter how lowly the task. The service will often be done at personal inconvenience and never for personal profit.

4. For being unselfish

"She hath relieved the afflicted." "Afflicted" speaks of being under pressure, whether mental, physical, or emotional. She relieves the pressure of believers. "Relieved" (eperkesev) appears only here and in verse 16. Its use in verse 16 indicates support, which might include money, meals, housing, or counsel to ease the pressures of believers. Her time is spent on others, not herself.

5. For being kind

"She hath diligently followed every good work." This widow is like Dorcas in Acts 9. When Dorcas died, widows were "weeping and showing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them" (v. 39). Dorcas met a vital need by making clothes for widows. They wept at the loss of one who cared so much. Likewise, the widow described here is one who helps others and is kind. The woman who lives in those ways will honor the Lord. She will be a model of excellence for others to imitate.

Conclusion

Ian Maclaren, the pseudonym of John Watson, a Scottish preacher of the last century, told a story about a woman in his congregation. He visited her in the little cottage where she lived. As they were talking, she began to weep. Dr. Maclaren asked what was disturbing her. She said that when she was a girl, she surrendered her life to the Lord. And now that she was older, she sometimes thought she had done little for Him. The thought made her heart very heavy. Maclaren asked her what she had done during her life. Washing dishes, cooking meals, mopping floors, mending clothes, and rearing children was her reply.

Maclaren sat back in his chair and asked where her sons were. She replied that she named her sons after the gospel books. Mark was a missionary in China and Luke ministered at a mission station in Africa. Matthew served with his brother in China. And John, who was only nineteen, wanted to be a missionary in Africa with his brother. Presently he was caring for his mother since she was close to being with the Lord.

Maclaren responded that he wanted to see her heavenly reward. It would surely be great.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why is a widow the special object of God's compassion and protection?
2. What are some ways that widows can serve in the church?
3. What does Titus 2 teach about the behavior of older women?
4. True or false: There is no evidence that the church financially supported widows on the list.
5. What is the difference in issue between verses 8 and 9?
6. What is the significance of the age of sixty as a qualification?
7. What does "the wife of one man" mean?
8. What does "good works" tell you about the godly widow's character?
9. First Timothy 3:10 is similar to what chapter in Proverbs?
10. What specific importance is there in being a godly mother (v. 10)?
11. In what way did a widow show hospitality?
12. What is the spiritual significance of washing the feet of believers?
13. Explain what relieving the afflicted means (1 Tim. 3:10).
14. How did Dorcas demonstrate kindness (Acts 9:39)?
15. In what valuable way did the widow who lived in a cottage serve the Lord?

Pondering the Principles

1. A widow who washed the feet of the saints demonstrated humility (1 Tim. 5:10). The Puritan John Flavel wrote, "When the corn is nearly ripe it bows the head and stoops lower than when it is green. When the people of God are near ripe for heaven, they grow more humble and self-denying.... Paul had one foot in heaven when he called himself the chiefest of sinners and the least of the saints" (The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations, I.D.E. Thomas, ed. [Edinburgh: The banner of Truth Trust, 1989], p. 147). Are you allowing the Lord to develop within you an awareness of your own sins and a desire to overcome them, coupled with a greater appreciation for His forgiveness? Such an outlook will help you "esteem others better than [yourself]" (Phil. 2:3).
2. The age of sixty was a point of reference to indicate maturity (1 Tim. 5:9). Spiritual maturity is the process of God's conforming the believer to the likeness of His Son. Paul expressed his desire to be like Christ when he said, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). Pressing toward the mark includes prayer (Phil. 4:6-7). Read Colossians 1:9-11 and learn how Paul prayed. Study similar passages as a guideline to teach you how to pray and be further along the path of spiritual maturity.
3. A widow who serves the church must have a holy life (1 Tim. 3:9). Read Genesis 39 to see the holiness in Joseph's life. How was Joseph tempted (v. 7)? What was his response (vv. 8-12)? Who was the focus of his attention (v. 9)? Because Joseph refused to sin, what was the outcome (vv. 21-23; cf. 41:38-44)? When you face temptation, what does 1 Corinthians 10:13 teach you?
4. The widow serving the church relieved mental, physical, and emotional pressures that believers faced (1 Tim. 5:10). To the afflicted who found relief, she was a true friend. The Puritan George Downname said, "Our afflictions are profitable, as they pluck from us false-hearted parasites, who, like the ivy, cling about us, to suck our sap, and to make themselves fat with our spoil; and to discover to us our true friends, who are hardly discerned from the other till this time of trial.... 'A friend cannot be known in prosperity, and an enemy cannot be hidden in adversity'" (The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations, p. 113). The Bible says, "A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Prov. 17:17). Be that kind of friend to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

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