

Widows in the Church, Part 4

Scripture: 1 Timothy 5:11–16

Code: 54-39

INTRODUCTION

A. The Physical Weakness of Women

Because God designed a woman as the "weaker vessel," she is to receive protection and care from a man (1 Pet. 3:7). In marriage, that care comes from her husband. Before marriage, she often can find that protection from her father. "Weaker" doesn't mean weaker spiritually or intellectually, but physically. Scripture indicates women are weaker in that way.

1. Isaiah 19:16--"In that day shall Egypt be like women; and it shall be afraid and fear because of the shaking of the hand of the Lord of hosts, which he shaketh over it." Egypt was compared to women because it was a vulnerable and unprotected nation.

2. Jeremiah 50:37--"They shall become like women; a sword is upon her treasures, and they shall be robbed." God was prophesying that when He moved against Babylon, its weakness would be like that of a woman's.

3. Jeremiah 51:30--"The mighty men of Babylon have [ceased] to fight, they have remained in their strongholds; their might hath failed, they became like women; they have burned her dwelling places; her bars are broken." Babylon's army was compared to women because it was afraid, without strength, and defenseless.

4. Nahum 3:13--"Behold, thy people in the midst of thee are women; the gates of thy land shall be set wide open unto thine enemies; the fire shall devour thy bars." The inhabitants of Ninevah were said to be like women because they were defenseless and vulnerable to the enemy's attack.

It's not a negative thing for a woman to be a weaker vessel. In making the man stronger, God designed a wonderful partnership between him and the woman.

B. The Reasons for Singleness

However, some women never marry and experience a husband's protection. There are several possible reasons for their singleness.

1. A divine calling

It is God's plan that some believers never marry. 1 Corinthians 7:26-35 realistically points out that believers undergoing persecution had an advantage in remaining single. The early Christians lived in a hostile environment where they were arrested, beaten, and even killed. A married person had the added burden of caring for his wife, family, and household. If he were killed, his family probably would have had no means of support. First Corinthians 7 also implies that God gives singleness as a gift to some men and women so they can concentrate on serving Jesus Christ, without being encumbered by the cares of the world (vv. 7, 17, 28).

2. A divine chastening

Some believers might be single because they are living in disobedience to the Lord. Marriage is "the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7), but when we are disobedient we can experience chastening, not blessing (Heb. 12:6-11).

3. A divine enrichment

Sometimes the Lord chooses to spiritually enrich believers during the time of their singleness. Until the single believer finds the right one for a mate, God uses the time to accomplish His divine purposes. God's general design is that most women will marry and receive protection and provision

from their husbands. However, when women in the church lose their husbands, the church needs to care for them in the proper way. So Paul instructed the church about its obligations in that area.

Review

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

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

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

LESSON

IV. THE CHURCH'S OBLIGATION TO INSTRUCT YOUNG WIDOWS TO REMARRY (vv. 11-15)

"The younger widows refuse [to put on the official list]; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they will marry, having condemnation, because they have cast off their first faith. And, besides, they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle but tattlers also, and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not. I will, therefore, that the younger women marry, bear children, rule the house, give no occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some are already turned aside after Satan. If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged, that it may relieve them that are widows indeed."

Widows in the Biblical Sense and Their Right

1. Those whose unsaved husbands desert them

Sometimes an unbelieving husband will leave his wife when she becomes a believer. In the early church desertion was a common occurrence. First Corinthians 7:15 says, "If the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not in bondage in such cases." If an unbeliever ends his marriage with his believing wife, the woman has the privilege and right to remarry--but only a believer (7:39; 9:5).

2. Those whose husbands engage in an adulterous lifestyle

According to the Lord Jesus, sexual sin is legitimate grounds for divorce (Matt. 5:32; 19:9), especially an ongoing adulterous lifestyle without repentance. In Old Testament times it resulted in the guilty party's death--and death certainly dissolved a marriage! God's graciousness doesn't sentence the innocent party to lifelong celibacy. Where biblical grounds for divorce exists, there is freedom to remarry.

3. Those whose husbands die

Romans 7:2-3 says that when death dissolves a marriage there is freedom to remarry. "I will" in 1 Timothy 5:14 speaks of calculated, rational thinking, not emotion. Paul instructed the church to encourage younger widows to remarry rather than placing them on the official list of the church's servants or helpers. Being placed on the list might end up spiritually hurting younger widows. For example, suppose an unsaved husband left his wife because she was a believer. Or perhaps she divorced him because of his ongoing adulterous lifestyle. She essentially becomes a widow, feeling hurt and brokenhearted. In the emotion of the moment she says, "I'll never marry again. I'll devote the rest of my days to the Lord. Please place me on the list so I can serve with the other godly women." Since it could be difficult for her to sustain the commitment she made in her time of grieving, the church was to "refuse" to place her on the list (v. 11). "Refuse" is a strong word Paul previously used in 1 Timothy 4:7: "Refuse profane and old wives' fables." The church's refusal to place younger widows on the list is an affirmation of not placing a widow on the list who is under sixty years of age (1 Tim. 5:9). However, needy widows of any age are eligible to receive financial support (vv. 3, 5). First Timothy 5:11-15 gives several reasons for the church's encouraging younger widows to remarry rather than placing them on its list of servants.

A. So They Don't Become Frustrated (vv. 11-12)

"When they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they will marry, having condemnation,

because they have cast off their first faith."

1. About remarriage

The verb "will" stresses a desire (v. 11). It's describing a woman who made a rash vow to God never to marry again, but now long to remarry. "To grow wanton against" means "to feel the impulses of sexual desire." It refers to a woman's desire for a man and all that entails. It's the only verse in the New Testament where the word is found. Outside of Scripture it's used of an ox trying to escape from the yoke. The picture is of a widow who wants to break out of her rash vow. "Wanton" also implies a disregard for what is right. Unfulfilled and unhappy, she might be vulnerable to men whom she should not approach. At the same time, she knows it's wrong to break a promise. Having strong desires to remarry but feeling bound to her vow leaves her with no desire for serving in the church. In such a state she could easily compromise her Christian values.

2. About the Lord

Resenting her vow, her frustration could lead to anger against the Lord. The meaning of casting off one's first faith depends on the translation of pistin. If we translate it "faith," it means she abandoned her original commitment to obey, love, and serve Christ. It would be like saying, "I'm through with serving Christ, and I'm going to do what I want." If it is translated "pledge," she is saying she no longer will be subject to the vow she made to serve the Lord in the church. Either way, she's violating her commitment to the Lord.

B. So They Don't Become Idle (v. 13)

"They learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle but tattlers also, and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not."

A younger widow who went from home to home, instructing and counseling other church women, collected a large amount of information about the women's personal lives. But if she no longer wanted to serve others, she would accomplish little or no spiritual work.

Paul was concerned that what was originally a commitment to the Lord might turn into a social outing. The information such women collected from counseling other women could lead them to say things they shouldn't say. The Greek term "tattlers" speaks of gossip or babble. Such women speak nonsense, making empty charges and accusing by malicious words. They go from one place to the next, destroying God's people and work. That would be disastrous! "Busybodies," consumed by curiosity, look into things that aren't their concern.

There were women like that in the Ephesian church. That's one of the reasons Paul said, "I permit not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man" (1 Tim. 2:12). False teaching in the church can come from women as well as men (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1). And moral and doctrinal error can result from frustrated women longing to remarry.

C. So They Fulfill Their Responsibilities (vv. 14-15)

"I will, therefore, that the younger women marry, bear children, rule the house, give no occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some are already turned aside after Satan."

Rather than placing themselves in a vulnerable position by being on the church's list, younger widows were to find fulfillment through certain areas of responsibility instead.

1. Of remarrying (v. 14a)

"I will ... that the younger women marry." "Younger" is a general term that doesn't specify an exact age group. Certainly it included widows at childbearing age. The church was to instruct a younger widow to remarry so she wouldn't have to struggle with her strong desires for remarriage. A husband would give her the affection, care, and provision she needed. The church's instruction reflects our Lord's compassion in caring for widows. Paul was not saying that every young woman who loses her husband is looking for trouble or is a gossip. Obviously there are exceptions. Those who say the Bible justifies divorce but not remarriage need to explain how the church will care for its widows. When there is divorce because of a spouse's adulterous lifestyle (Matt. 5:32; 19:9) or because an unsaved spouse leaves his believing mate (1 Cor. 7:15), a Christian has the biblical right to remarry.

2. Of having children (v. 14b)

"Bear children." Bearing children is God's purpose for most women. Losing a husband and remarrying doesn't change that. Rearing godly seed in a Christian home is God's general design for women.

3. Of managing the home (v. 14c)

"Rule the house." This includes managing the household and nurturing the children in a Christian atmosphere. The wife and mother is to be a keeper at home (Titus 2:5), which speaks of managing the home with the resources provided. The husband provides the resources and brings them home, and the wife manages or dispenses those resources in behalf of the family.

4. Of maintaining a godly testimony (vv. 14d-15)

"Give no occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some are already turned aside after Satan." "Occasion" speaks of a launching point or a base of operations. "Adversary" refers to any enemy of the gospel. Our ultimate enemy is Satan, but his slander usually comes through human agents. Younger widows who remarry, rear godly children, and properly manage the household give no cause for criticism against the church. But men and women who violate God's purposes give grounds for criticism. Some people constantly criticize the church. They're Satan's instruments, looking for any fault they can find. To keep them from having any source of slander, it's best for most younger widows to remarry. That way, a woman won't be as vulnerable to sin against Christ or be lured by worldliness. Instead, she will find security, strength, and protection in a godly relationship with her husband. Some in the church had already turned from following Christ. They listened to false teachers, acted according to their lusts, spread lies, and behaved as busybodies (2 Tim. 3:6-7; 1 Tim. 5:13).

IV. THE CHURCH'S OBLIGATION TO MAKE SURE CAPABLE WOMEN SUPPORT THEIR WIDOWS (v. 16)

"If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed" (NASB).

Competent women within the church should support any widows in their fold so that the widows aren't left for the church's care. Widows' support should first come from their families (1 Tim. 5:4). If widows didn't have families to provide support, the church's men should care for them (1 Tim. 5:8). The third line of responsibility for support fell on capable women in the church (1 Tim. 5:16). Some of the capable women might have included widows themselves. And some might have been married to unbelievers. Their support didn't always have to be money--it could be meals, lodging, clothing, and many other things.

Only after those three lines of responsibility have been exhausted should the organized church provide support for its godly widows. But remember, you and I are the church. If we have the resources as individuals to support widows, we should do so. If we don't, the church should support them collectively.

Conclusion

Caring for widows should be a joy because it's our Lord's joy too! Deuteronomy 27:19 says, "Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the ... widow" (NIV). Deuteronomy 14:29 says, "The widow, who [is] within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest." Since God was displeased with a lack of care for widows in Old Testament times, He certainly is displeased with a lack of care now. And since God cared for widows in those days, He certainly cares for them now!

Focusing on the Facts

1. In what sense are women "weaker" (1 Pet. 3:7)? Support your answer with Scripture.
2. Why do some women remain single?

3. Describe widows in the biblical sense.
4. Explain how a widow might change her thinking about remarriage (1 Tim. 5:11).
5. Explain how a widow might change her thinking about the Lord (1 Tim. 5:12).
6. In what sense could a younger widow become idle (1 Tim. 5:13)?
7. How do younger widows benefit from remarriage (1 Tim. 5:14-15)?
8. Can a divorced believer remarry? Support your answer with Scripture.
9. Explain what it means to "rule the house" (1 Tim. 5:14).
10. What specific benefit is there for a younger widow to maintain a godly testimony (1 Tim. 5:14-15)?
11. What are the four lines of responsibility in caring for widows? Support your answer with Scripture.
12. Why should caring for widows be a joy for every believer?

Pondering the Principles

1. First Timothy 5:13 indicates that believers can act immaturely through sins such as laziness or gossip. The Puritan Thomas Brooks wrote "that sin will usher in the greatest and the saddest losses that can be upon our souls. It will usher in the loss of that divine favor that is better than life, and the loss of that peace that passeth understanding, and the loss of those divine influences by which the soul hath been refreshed, quickened, raised, strengthened, and [made glad], and the loss of many outward desirable mercies, which otherwise the soul might have enjoyed" (Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987], pp. 32-33). Meditate on 1 Peter 1:14-19 and allow the Spirit to increase your desire for holy living.
2. Paul wrote that some in the church were already following Satan (1 Tim. 5:15). Their lives showed a disloyalty to Christ. In contrast, three men in the Old Testament were noted for their loyalty to the Lord. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ordered Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to be thrown into a fiery furnace because they refused to worship a golden image (Dan. 3:1-30). Second Corinthians 13:5 says, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test?" (NASB). Does your life show that you are a Christian? If it does, ask the Lord to help you have the same loyalty to the Lord that Daniel's friends had.

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