

“Widows” (1 Timothy 5:9–16)

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Many people today talk about social justice issues. You may or may not have heard that phrase, “social justice.” But you certainly have heard people talk about things like racism, poverty, and civil rights. Often, when we talk about those issues, the question really is, “What is the government going to do about these things?” Some people believe that social justice issues are the biggest, most important issues of the day, and they assume that the government should be the one to fix these problems.

Other people recoil when they hear the phrase “social justice.” Something inside of them says, “Here we go again.” They probably agree that there are problems like racism and poverty, but they think what’s important is personal responsibility, and those problems could be fixed if people simply treated others better and worked hard. These people also think that many other moral issues, ones involving personal conduct, are more important.

I think that’s a funny dichotomy. We shouldn’t have to choose between caring about problems like racism and poverty and caring about personal behavior. After all, the two are linked, they’re connected. You can’t have systemic, institutional problems without individuals. Groups are sinful because individuals are sinful. And I’ve come to dislike the phrase “social justice,” because it implies there’s another category of justice, an “antisocial justice,” perhaps.

According to the Bible, there is one kind of problem, and we call it sin. Everything that we see going wrong in the world is rooted in sin, rebellion against God. And all sin affects society, one way or the other. So, there’s not really a category of sin called “social sin” and another category of sin called “individual sin.” All social sins are caused by individual sins, and all individual sins will affect society. Sin cannot be kept private. For example, if a man watches pornography, that’s not just an individual sin. That will affect the way he views women. Eventually, it will affect the way he treats women. If he’s married, it will affect his marriage. And that will spill over to other people, especially if that marriage ends in divorce. So, in the end, there’s no social sin and individual sin, and there’s no social justice and individual justice, or antisocial justice. There are sins and there is justice, period.

Yet here’s something that I want us to see this morning. What the Bible says about these issues challenges us all. God repeatedly says that his people should care about the poor, the

outcasts, the sojourners (we would call them immigrants), the oppressed, the orphans and widows. Some people love the fact that the Bible addresses the issues. Yet God also says that it's not the government's job to take care of these people. It is the responsibility of individuals who comprise the church. And God expects people to take personal responsibility. People should work hard. People should personally help those who are needy.

We see these issues today in a passage that talks about helping widows. Last week, we started to see the issue of helping widows in 1 Timothy 5. If you haven't been with us recently, let me catch you up a little bit. We've been studying the book of 1 Timothy, found in the New Testament of the Bible. It's a letter written by the apostle Paul to his younger associate, Timothy. Paul left Timothy in a city called Ephesus to take care of a church that he started there. The church had some problems, including wrong teaching and beliefs. It also had some issues of wrong behavior. So, Paul wrote to Timothy for this reason: that "you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).¹

Last week, we read a passage that deals with widows. I'm going to read those verses again. So, let's start with 1 Timothy 5:3–8:

³ Honor widows who are truly widows. 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. ⁵ She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, ⁶ but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. 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.

Paul tells Timothy that the church must "honor" true widows. "Honor" refers to financial support, not just respect. And true widows, in Paul's eyes, are those who have no family to support them and who are godly women—their hope is set on God. Paul also warns Timothy that people who claim to be Christians yet who don't take care of their family members are contradicting the faith that they claim to believe. Even non-Christians take care of their family members; how much more should members of the family of God take care of their sisters in Christ.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Now, before we continue, I just want to note that caring for widows is something we see throughout the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Here are some of those passages:

Exodus 22:21–24 (ESV)

²¹ You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. ²² You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. ²³ If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, ²⁴ and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

Deuteronomy 10:17–19 (ESV)

¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. ¹⁸ He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹ Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 14:28–29 (ESV)

²⁸ At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. ²⁹ And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

Deuteronomy 24:19–22 (ESV)

“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²¹ When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²² You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.

Psalms 146:9 (ESV)

The LORD watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Isaiah 1:16–17 (ESV)

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,

correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.

That's just the some of what the Old Testament says about widows. There's a whole book, Ruth, devoted to the story of two widows, Ruth and Naomi, and how God takes care of them through a man named Boaz.² We see in all these passages that God cares for their plight. He commands people to take care of them. But we also see that widows and others would have to gather the crops that were left for them. In other words, they had to work if they could. Ruth did that, providing for herself and Naomi, her mother-in-law.

In the New Testament, we see that the church took care of widows. In Acts 6, a dispute arose because only some of the widows were being cared for. In order to care for all the widows, the apostles told the church to set people apart to serve them (Acts 6:1–6). And James, an apostle and the brother of Jesus, says this: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27).

We should keep all of that in mind as we continue to think about what Paul says about widows in 1 Timothy 5. Now, let's read the rest of what Paul writes. Today's passage is 1 Timothy 5:9–16:

⁹Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, ¹⁰and 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. ¹¹But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry ¹²and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. ¹³Besides 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. ¹⁴So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. ¹⁵For some have already strayed after Satan. ¹⁶If 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.

Here, Paul describes widows that should receive financial support from the church. Not all widows should receive such support. First, Paul says that widows should be at least 60 years

² I preached through the book of Ruth in December 2016: <https://wbcommunity.org/ruth>.

old. That doesn't mean the church can't help widows who are younger. It seems that Paul expects younger widows to be taken care of by family, to get remarried, or to work. Again, think of the book of Ruth.

Paul also says that these widows should have been married to one husband. Literally, Paul says that such a widow should have been a "one-man woman." Paul does not mean that a woman could have been married only once. That wouldn't make sense, because what would happen to a woman who had more than one husband die? What "one-man woman" means is that this woman, while she was married, was faithful to her husband. When Paul describes overseers and deacons, he says that they should be "one-women men" (1 Tim. 3:2, 12). Again, this doesn't mean a pastor or a deacon cannot have been a widower and then remarried, and it doesn't mean a pastor or a deacon couldn't have been divorced. There are legitimate reasons for getting a divorce (if the wife committed sexual immorality or abandoned the husband). The idea is that widows deserving of support should be faithful.

That's made clear in verse 10, where Paul writes that these widows should have "a reputation for good works." If a widow "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," then she should receive financial support. I don't think Paul would be legalistic and say, "A widow above 60 years old who was faithful to her husband but didn't have children can't be supported." This is a general description of an ideal Christian. If this widow cared for her children, for strangers, for other Christians, for the poor, then she should receive support in her time of need.

So, we already see that Paul has established some conditions for those who should be supported.

Paul also states who *shouldn't* receive support. Obviously, widows who were not faithful Christians are ruled out. But Paul also says that younger widows—at least of a certain kind—shouldn't receive support. Look again at verses 11–13: "But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. 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." Paul is not saying that it's wrong for younger widows to remarry. There is

nothing wrong with remarrying after your spouse has died (Rom. 7:2; 1 Cor. 7:39). Paul makes it clear in verse 14 that he would rather have younger widows remarry.

Paul is probably referring to younger widows who marry non-Christians and are led astray by their desire to remarry. In other words, if a younger woman is a widow, her loneliness and desire for a man may be so powerful that she is willing to marry anyone. And Christians should not marry non-Christians, because that will put them in a position of constant tension. They will be torn between their relationship to Jesus and their relationship to someone who doesn't acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior. That is another theme that runs through the whole Bible. We see many cases of people—usually men—who are led away from God because they love ungodly women. (Samson and Solomon come quickly to mind.)

Paul says that women who are led astray from Jesus may incur condemnation. Those are harsh words, but the truth is that all of us deserve condemnation. Each one of us has sinned. The only way to cover up that sin, to get rid of sin, is trusting in Jesus, who died in our place, taking on the penalty of sin for us. If we truly trust Jesus, that faith will endure. Real faith does not last for a while then disappear. Real faith prioritizes Jesus, even above a marriage.

Paul also says that younger widows who are “idlers” should not be supported. He's being a bit ironic when he says they “learn to be idlers.” It's like saying, “They train hard to be lazy.” But Paul has a specific kind of behavior in mind: these women go around from house to house, gossiping. It's possible that they went from house to house relaying the false teaching that had invaded the church in Ephesus. Whatever it was that they were saying, it wasn't right. They were “saying what they should not.”

What these women should do is “marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.” By marrying non-Christians, or by being gossips and saying things that they shouldn't, these women would give Satan an opportunity to slander the church and other Christians. That's what happens when we gossip—we slander. And when we deny the faith by not doing things God's way, we give Satan an opportunity to create division, to create chaos, to lie and destroy. This is the opposite of what Paul says about godly widows, the ones who set their hope on God and pray night and day (verse 5). Godly women set their hope on God. They use their mouths to speak the truth and to pray. They don't gossip. They don't go around complaining. They do the things that God wants them to do, whether that's marry a believer, raise children, or do good works in general.

Godly women care about widows. We see that in verse 16: “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.” You may wonder why Paul says that a woman should care for widows in her family. I suppose that’s because it may be more appropriate for a woman and not a man to care for another woman. But the main point is that families should take care of widows. If the church had to support all widows, it would be burdened. But Paul says that the church shouldn’t be burdened. Let the church care for true widows, the widows who are all alone, who can’t work, who are unlikely to remarry, the widows who have set their hope on God.

Now that we’ve gone through this passage, I want us to think about four things.

One, this passage shows that Christianity teaches both grace and personal responsibility. In other words, it teaches charity, but it does so conditionally. Not every widow should be cared for by the church. Only those who are truly deserving and in need should be cared for. Widows should be cared for by family members. Before God created the church, and before governments were established, God made the family. The family is the most basic, fundamental unit of society. So, relatives should help. But if there are no relatives who can help, the church should help. It is first the family’s responsibility to help, and then it’s the church’s responsibility. We’re never told that it is the government’s job.

When I think about this, I am reminded of a passage from another one of Paul’s letters. This is what Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12:

⁶Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Notice that “idle,” “burden,” and “bushybodies” appear here, too. Paul says that he and his associates weren’t idle. They didn’t burden the church. Instead, they worked. All people, if they are able to work, should do so. “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” The Bible

teaches both charity and responsibility. It teaches us to give to those who can't help themselves and, if we can work, we should.

The second thing I want us to know is that the whole notion of charity comes from Christianity. More accurately, it comes from Judaism and Christianity, from the Bible. That's true historically. Unless I'm wrong, and I don't think I am, we don't have records of other religions or societies consistently providing for the poor and needy. That's not something that arose out of the pagan religions within the Roman Empire at the time Paul was writing. Other people noticed that Christians cared for the sick, for children, for the poor, and for the elderly.³ Philosophically, the idea of charity doesn't come from atheism or naturalism. If we believe in the survival of the fittest, we would help ourselves, not the weak and vulnerable, who would only bring us down. Christianity teaches us that we should give, even to those we don't think are deserving, because God gives to undeserving sinners. While we were enemies of God, God gave his precious Son, Jesus, who came to live the perfect life that we don't live and to die in our place, taking on the punishment for sin that we all deserve. He did this for those who trust him, for those who set their hope not on themselves or anything else in the world, but only on him. He alone can make us right with God. He alone can take care of our sin. He alone can give us forgiveness and eternal life. So, if we realize how much God has given us, we should give to others.

But Christianity also tells us that grace is conditional. Forgiveness is conditional; it is given to those who confess their sins and repent, those who turn from their old ways and turn to Jesus. Charity is conditional, too. Paul says that charity should be given only to certain widows. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul said that those who are willing to work should be fed. So, Christianity teaches both charity and hard work. It teaches both grace and personal responsibility. If there is no personal responsibility, things will start to fall apart. If we only have personal responsibility, then those who are poor, weak, unable to work, and unable to provide for themselves wouldn't survive. In fact, if we only had personal responsibility, we would all die in our sins.

Here's a third thing I want us to consider, which is how this should apply to us. I think we have to do a bit of translating to see how this passage applies to us today. Social conditions are a bit different. We may have to think a bit differently about age requirements, because in

³ For information about how the idea of charity arose from Christianity, see Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

Paul's day, people didn't live as long. Sixty was generally the age at which someone was considered "old." Also, in Paul's day, widows were particularly vulnerable. Women didn't work at jobs that made a lot of money. There was no Social Security, nothing like modern insurance policies. Today, a widow may have Social Security. She might have received a life insurance payment from the death of her husband. She may be able to get a good job on her own. And, hopefully, she has family members—children, grandchildren, siblings, parents—who can help. If a widow doesn't have these things, we can help. If you're a widow, set your hope on God. And if you're in need, let the church know.

I think this also means that we all should be careful to think about our relatives. We have a responsibility to provide for people in our family. And we have a responsibility to care for people in the church. I think we should do a better job of figuring out what people's needs are. That means, on the one hand, that those with needs should make their needs known. On the other hand, it means that we as a church need to know people better. Ideally, that would be part of the deacons' job. (Acts 6:1–6 is often thought to be the beginning of the office of deacon, and that passage shows the "proto-deacons" taking care of widows in need.)

Here's the final thing I want us to consider. When the Bible tells us that we should care for orphans, in part it's because there's a sense that we're all orphans. We start out in this world without a right relationship with God the Father. We need to trust Jesus in order to be adopted into God's family. Likewise, there's a sense that we're widows.

In the Old Testament, Israel rebelled against God. Instead of serving the true God, they turned to false gods, idols. This is what we do today. We may not think of something as an object of worship or an idol or a god, but if we make something—anything—the center of our lives, it's our god. That thing can be money, a career, a relationship, politics, entertainment—any person, thing, or practice can be our master, the thing that owns us and the thing that's most important to us. So, Israel had abandoned God. And God likened Israel to a barren widow. But God promised he would marry this widow. We see this in Isaiah 54:1–8:

- ¹ "Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
break forth into singing and cry aloud,
you who have not been in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than the children of her who is married," says the LORD.
- ² "Enlarge the place of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;

- do not hold back; lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.
- ³ For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
and your offspring will possess the nations
and will people the desolate cities.
- ⁴ “Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;
be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.
- ⁵ For your Maker is your husband,
the LORD of hosts is his name;
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.
- ⁶ For the LORD has called you
like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit,
like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
says your God.
- ⁷ For a brief moment I deserted you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
- ⁸ In overflowing anger for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,”
says the LORD, your Redeemer.

Obviously, the whole idea of God being the husband of his people, even men, is a metaphor. It reflects the exclusive, loving, caring relationship between God and his people. Just as spouses should be faithful to their spouses, we should be faithful to God. We should only worship him. And just as a good husband cares for his wife, God cares for his bride.

God cares about widows and so should we. God provided for a widow and we should provide for widows. But the “widow” God marries isn’t just anyone; it consists of those who turn to him in faith. If you haven’t turned to Jesus, you aren’t turning to God. If you don’t understand that Jesus is your only hope, the only one who can make you right with God, you’ll never be part of God’s family. He will not provide for your greatest need. So, turn to Jesus today. I would love to talk to you more about what that looks like in your life. I would love to explain more about who Jesus is, what he has done, and how you can know, love, and follow him.

Christians, be a good bride to Jesus. Care for widows. Care for the poor, the orphan, the vulnerable one. Don’t just meet their physical needs. Encourage them to turn to Jesus, who can take care of their real problem, the problem of sin, and give them what we all really need: forgiveness, hope, a future, everlasting love and everlasting life.