

“Care for Widows”

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Downtown & Lexington

June 14, 2020

Have you ever tried to help someone, but you didn't really know how to help? The help you offered never really worked... or even worse, it all blew up in your face?

I remember one of the first times I dealt with this in ministry. Before my wife and I were married, we had a friend in Midtown's college ministry. She turned out to have borderline personality disorder. We walked alongside her through manic depression and anger and suicidal ideation for over a year and it just kept going downhill. We ended up doing 24-hour watch with her for more than a week and realized, “This just isn't working.”

Today in our text in 1 Timothy 5, Paul addresses one of these complicated help issues. He digs in and gets really practical and specific. I want to read back through the whole passage connecting some dots and then pull out three principles for us.

1 Timothy 5:1-2

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, 2 older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity. 3 Honor widows who are truly widows. (So this is the issue he digs in on. How do we help widows? Even more so in their day, widows did not have many options or supports and often ended up destitute. Church wants to help but it's complex, so Paul helps them think it through:) 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. (First thought. If the widow has kids or grandkids, they should take care of her. The church shouldn't accidentally enable children to abdicate their familial responsibility. He comes back around to this even harder in v. 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. And again at the end of the passage in v. 16 - 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. This is a huge deal to Paul that we'll come back to... Pick it back up where we left off in v. 5. - 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. We already read v. 8 so skip to v. 9 - Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 10 and 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. (Like he did for church leaders in ch. 3, he's giving a list of positive character qualifications, and then he lays out concerning trends they were dealing with:) 11 But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry 12 and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. 13 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. 14 So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. 15 For some have already strayed after Satan.

So there are three big ideas that we can take from this:

- 1.) **Church is a family.**
- 2.) **Church is a family where we calculate value differently.**
- 3.) **Church is a family where our goal is help that really helps.**

First, **Church is a family.** Family is such a powerful word. In the life of our church, there may be no single more distinctive word than family. And it's unfortunate because lots of businesses are now using this for marketing. AirBNB says "We accept everyone no matter who you are into the AirBnB family..." subtext: so long as you give us your money. One time I saw a bank ad welcoming new customers into a community to belong to... a FAMILY. Woof.

Hear me: Family is not a marketing slogan to our church or the Bible. In fact, family is the primary metaphor the Scriptures use to describe the church. Every time the Scriptures call Christians brothers or sisters, children of God... Every time it talks about brotherly affection, fellowship, God adopting us, God being our Father, it's all pointing to this. So Paul starts here in v. 1-2 with 4 commands for us to treat each other like family:

- Treat the older men as fathers. (v. 1)
- Treat the younger men as brothers. (v. 1)
- Treat the older women as mothers. (v. 2)
- Treat the younger women as sisters. (v. 2)

And he gives a few qualifiers, that I'll go into more on the podcast this week, but he mostly lets the analogy carry the weight here. Because the analogy is beautiful and weighty on its own. How beautiful of a picture it is when the church operates like a family? How much better would our world be if everyone was part of this family and treated each other as brothers and sisters? If every widow was honored and cherished by younger people who treated her like their own mother? If every younger woman was honored by all men as a sister - treated with all purity. This is why marketing execs use the slogan because everyone wants to be part of this. And this church-as-family context is essential to how we think about helping, because:

Second, **Church is a family where we calculate value differently.**

I love that his instruction in v. 3 is **3 Honor widows.** Not just deal with them. Not just help them. **Honor them.** Think about widows for a second. Culturally speaking here in Ephesus, widows were even worse off than in our culture. No social security. No guaranteed means of income or access to education. A widow is aging, relatively unemployable, seen as a burden. Especially if she didn't have kids. And Paul says, that's a group of people you're going to want to honor. One pastor Beau Hughes put it like this: *"It's amazing that Scripture has so much to say about widows. Scripture has such a high view of them. It honors them in such a way that most cultures don't. In a lot of cultures still today, a woman's significance is entirely wrapped up in her husband, so when her husband dies, so does her social significance. The culture just begins to disregard them. And Paul is saying, 'No, no, no. They're valuable, and they're to be honored and loved and served regardless of if they have a husband or not, because they're important to God and they're important within the church family.'"*

Throughout the Scriptures, God is described as a father to the fatherless, defender of the widows. He defends their cause. He says over and over again, "Don't take advantage of the orphan or widow. If you take advantage of a widow and she prays to me, I will hear her cry, and I will be provoked in anger." You don't want those problems. So in the Old Testament, judges who withheld justice from widows were judged harshly by God. Farmers are told "Take a tithe of what you get and give it to the widows. Leave the edges of your fields unharvested for those in need." You get to the New Testament, and Jesus picks up the theme. He raises the widow of Nain's son. He teaches a parable about the persistent widow. Honors them over and over. Then even on the cross, Jesus provides for his widowed mother. Tells John, "This is now your mother."

And all of this focus on widows is one example of a bigger aspect of God's character: ***God has a special love for the vulnerable*** - the little guy, the weak, the unnoticed, the oppressed. And because of His love for the vulnerable, He commands us to be a people where value is calculated differently than in the rest of society. In general, in society, human value is bound up by function and productivity. You're smart, productive, impressive, socially skilled... ok, you get the money and honor and respect. But the weak, the oppressed, the elderly, the sick? They are afterthoughts or seen as burdens rather than image-bearers.

But not to Jesus. When He descends to earth, He lives as an impoverished, sometimes homeless man. As He ministers, He embraces both the weak and the strong, challenging and exposing corrupt systems along the way. On the cross, as He's being crucified, He's still thinking of the vulnerable and the weak. The broken-hearted. The burdened ones. That's beautiful.

Beautiful on multiple levels. For all of us, it's beautiful if we perceive the ways in which we are spiritually weak and vulnerable. Unable to heal ourselves outside of the cross of Jesus.

And also at a really practical level, this is beautiful because the church family is designed to be a refuge for the hurting - where the vulnerable are honored, loved, cherished. Because we calculate value differently. We calculate value in God's terms. As Christians the way society calculates value is unacceptable. This is why as a family of churches we are vocal about racial injustice. This is why we care about the unborn. This is why we advocate for fostering and adoption and love the homeless. In fact, each of our STC partnerships fits into this category. This is not just talk for us, we put our time, energy, effort, and money into this.

And third, **Church is a family where our goal is help that really helps.**

As Christians we are absolutely called to reflect God's love for the vulnerable and there is a way to give help that doesn't actually help. I love how Paul gives specific instructions and helps answer questions for how this church can think through the issue of helping widows:

- *Who should be giving the help?* V. 4, 8 and 16, he says if the widow has kids or grandkids they should take care of her, not the church. So every time someone asks for help doesn't mean you should be the one giving that help. Sometimes we help by point people to a better place to receive the help they need.
- *How is the help going to be used?* In v. 11-15 - there's a specific issue the church in Ephesus where some of the widows are using the church's generosity to freeload, becoming idle gossips and busybodies, helping promote false teaching while they get led away from Jesus to unhealthy marriage idolatry. Paul says, that's not a good use of the church's resources.
- This leads to maybe the biggest question of all - *What kind of help does this person really need?* In v. 5 Paul describes the faithful widow as devoted to and dependent on God and in v. 9-10 he adds that she is a faithful wife who took care of her kids, is known for her good works, hospitality, servant-heartedness, and love for the afflicted. In other words, she faithfully follows Jesus. This is all in contrast with a faithless widow he describes in v. 6: "*she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.*"
- So hear this: there are all kinds of help that miss the mark of what someone really needs.
- If someone is well-fed but dead in her soul? That's a loss. As the church, we always want to help but we know that sometimes the type of help that's needed is a call to repentance. Sometimes it's connection to a community of people to walk alongside. Sometimes it's physical and material help. But we gotta know what kind is needed when.

Ok so all of this is really helpful. We are thinking about this kind of stuff all the time. I'll give you an example: All of this, is exactly what we've been doing during Covid. We've all given money, and we're deciding what to do with it. We've done rent payments, car payments, groceries, tax payments...

Now if someone comes to us and says I need \$10k, we're going to say ok, "Have you lost your job? No... Oh ok, are you sick? No... oh ok, "are you in risk of losing your job." No? Ok then we're not going to give you ten grand right now.

With any kind of help situation we're asking these questions:

Who should be giving the help? A pastor? Their LifeGroup? Their family members? I'll tell you this, if you're a LG leader and you try to help everyone hurting in your group, I'll tell you what you'll be a year from now. A burned out LG leader. Or not a LG leader anymore. We're a family so we share the load. Many hands make for light work.

How is the help going to be used? We can't control all of this but as much as possible we want our help going to real needs, not to self-destructive behavior. A long time ago in Columbia someone working with the homeless told me you should never give money to a panhandler. Ask them if you can take them to go get some food. Have a conversation and get to know them. At the bare minimum you made sure your money went to food. But even more you're starting a relationship where you can think beyond the food to what kind of help they really need.

This is always the biggest question. **What kind of help does this person really need?** So in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, Paul says - "*If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.*" The miss here is to think, "that's unloving!" No it's a deeper love. As Christians we always want to love and help but love and help take different forms. If someone can work, but won't work, then the form love takes is "Go get a job. How can I help you get a job? Do you need to borrow my suit for an interview? Need help practicing for the interview? Need me to look for some work around my house I can pay you to do in the meantime?" Great. I'm in for all of that. But if you're not gonna work and you're able to work, then free food would actually be detrimental, not help.

Let me end by addressing some different groups of people who are listening:

For my LGs who are struggling to help someone right now: I'd encourage you to ask these 3 questions. These are conversations your CoreGroup should be having regularly. These kinds of questions help us last, help people with wisdom and not grow cold or burned out over time.

For anyone with parents. You're gonna note that's most of us. Let me be real clear in case you missed it in v. 4, and again in v. 8 and again in v. 16: If you have parents, you absolutely 100% have a responsibility to take care of them as they age. Hard stop. Paul goes so far as to say if you don't, then you've rejected Jesus and you're worse than an unbeliever. Now there are a variety of ways to do that but what you can't do is act like it doesn't concern you. Your parents gave the best parts of their lives caring for you when you were helpless. They changed your diapers. They kept you alive. And this text it pleases God when you realize that and make a return on their investment by loving them and caring for them as they age.

Now I know that some of you have painful, estranged or damaging relationships with your parents and you might have to have to wrestle with God's Spirit and talk to your LG about what this means for you, but overall, the vast majority of our parents are not monsters and we have a God-given responsibility to take care of them as they have need.

For my critiquers. Some of y'all, you like to play this fun game where you sit back and do nothing while you critique everyone who does get in the game and tries to actually help... largely on twitter and facebook. Whether it's your LG leader or politicians or your pastors, listen: these are hard and complex issues. You know who you are and you should repent from your critical spirit, humble yourself and ask how you can help instead of telling everyone else they're doing it wrong.

For my “Can’t we just help everybody?” folks. Well yes... but only if you realize that God’s vision for help is bigger and different and not exactly what you think it is...

And secondly, when it comes to you personally. No. You cannot. God is God, not you. Jesus is Savior, not you. I’ll tell you what someone told me early in ministry when I was running myself into the ground trying to help everyone. Read through the gospels and notice when Jesus says no. In Mark 1 - disciples run up to Jesus saying “this whole town with sick people are looking for you Jesus” and He says, “Cool. We need to go to some other towns.” End of Luke 4 a crowd is begging Jesus to stay and help them more. He says “No I gotta go preach elsewhere.”

Sometimes the most loving thing to say to someone asking for help is "I'm sorry but I'm not going to do that." Are they going to like that? Probably not. Will they slander you to others? Well, they certainly do that to me sometimes so my guess is they will do it to you too. But the other option is you try to be everyone’s savior and you die.

Ok last one, **For my “That’s not my problem.” folks.** If you claim to be a Christian, you worship God who became a man who took on all of our sin problem onto Himself, dying in a cross. He literally took responsibility for OTHER people’s problems. Mine and yours. And He commands us to go love the vulnerable, the weak, the oppressed people that He has a special love for.

1 John 3:17 - *if you have the world’s goods and close your heart to your brother in need, how can God’s love abide in your heart?*

You can repent, or admit you’re not a Christian. But don’t go on living a self-indulgent life thinking you’re fine. Paul says you’re dead even while you’re alive and the least helpful, least loving thing I could do is not call you on it.

Let’s pray.