

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF WIDOWS

by Ray C. Stedman

In Chapter 5 of Paul's first letter to Timothy, the apostle addresses certain continuing problems in the church at Ephesus. Timothy will have to deal with various classes and people in the congregation; he will have to face problems of discipline -- even discipline of elders, as we will see in the latter half of this chapter.

The apostle opens this section with a general word about how to look at people. Verse 1:

Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a father; treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity.
{1 Tim 5:1-2 RSV}

Hidden in that verse is another one of those profound psychological insights so frequently found in Scripture, which says that the way you treat people depends on how you see them. Paul is suggesting that if Timothy sees every older man in the congregation as a father, then he will treat him with a natural deference and respect.

How you look at other people is very important. In the world, almost everyone falls into the category of a rival who is trying to get the best of one, or a friend, whom one can use to get ahead. As Christians, however, we are to have a very different view of other people. Paul tells this young pastor to look at older men as he would look at his own father; to view them as men with some degree of experience, men who have survived crises in their lives, men who have developed a certain degree of understanding and wisdom by virtue of being young a long time.

Further, Paul tells Timothy to view young men as though they were his brothers. Again, this reminds Timothy that there is a family relationship involved. Young men are not his rivals, his enemies; they are his brothers. That relationship speaks of openness and honesty with one another, and yet respect and concern for each other. When a young man sees other young men as brothers he will treat them as such.

Paul tells Timothy to treat the older women as mothers. I remember various older women who were like mothers to me as a young man. As a result, I learned to treat them with great respect for the wisdom and love they manifested to me.

Notice that Paul does not say to treat older women as mothers-in-law. That is a different form of treatment! Really, mothers-in-law are all mothers too, and they need to be treated that way. My friend Howard Hendricks served as a pastor in a college town for a summer, and he discovered that several mothers in the congregation had designs on him to be their son-in-law. In fact, one of them said to him one day, "I am praying that you will be my son-in-law." When he tells this story, at this point, Howard always says, "Have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayer?"

Paul then tells Timothy that a young pastor should treat younger women as sisters -- with love, with interest and concern, but certainly without any attempts at sexual involvement. That is why Paul adds the words, "in all purity." A young pastor is to be pure in his intentions, his attitudes and his dealings with the younger women in a congregation. There would be nothing wrong with Timothy developing a romantic relationship that might eventually lead to marriage with a young woman in the congregation, but Paul is simply reminding him that the normal relationship of a young pastor to young women is that of a brother who is helping them, seeking to understand them and know them.

There is a wise word in the Song of Solomon that many of the present generation would do well to remember. The Song of Solomon is the one book of the Bible that is dedicated to romantic love, the love between a husband and a wife. In the midst of the beautiful language of the book there is an admonition given by the bride to her female companions: three times it says, "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem ... that you not

stir up nor awaken love until it please" {Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4}, i.e., do not artificially stimulate romantic involvement; do not work at it, do not develop it; it will come in time all on its own. In the meantime, relate to one another as brothers and sisters. That gives an opportunity to really learn who people are, without the blindness that accompanies sexual arousal. Proceed with all purity in this area, Paul warns Timothy.

Paul now turns to the problem of widows. In this 1st century culture, widows were a real concern to the churches. Soon after the birth of the church, shortly after the day of Pentecost, the book of Acts tells of the widows who murmured because they were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. That was the first internal problem confronted by the early church, and it came out of the culture.

In those days when a wife lost her husband there was hardly anything she could do to support herself. Very few businesswomen are mentioned in the New Testament. There is Lydia, the seller of purple, whom Paul met at Philippi. She, evidently, had found a trade where she could serve as a woman. There is Phoebe, the deaconess from Cenchrea, near Corinth, whom Paul mentions in Chapter 16 of Romans. She was a traveling woman and evidently a businesswoman.

In those days almost everybody got married. This was one reason why the Roman Empire was so strong and stable. Though it was pagan, and though there were many forces that disintegrated it from within, the Roman Empire nevertheless survived for many centuries because it emphasized a strong family unit. When a woman found herself without a husband in those days she needed care. Sometimes she was provided for, but not always so, so Paul gives Timothy admonitions as to how to deal with this matter. Here are his words:

Honor widows who are real widows. If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; whereas she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command this, so that they may be without reproach. If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. {1 Tim 5:3-8 RSV}

Those strong words indicate how important this matter was in the early church, and, in principle, how important it ought to be to us today. In the early church, apparently, a special pension fund was maintained from which widows were supported; and those who were placed upon this roll pledged themselves to keep busy in a ministry of help and prayer, and not to marry again.

So certain limitations and qualifications had to be fulfilled. Some widows could be included in this; some were not qualified. Paul treats both of these categories in this passage. To be included, women must fulfill at least five qualifications which the apostle gives here.

First, they were to be real widows, i.e., they had no family to help them. If they had children or grandchildren, they had the responsibility to take care of the older members of the family, especially the widows who had no other means of support. This establishes the principle that it is really up to the family to take care of all of its members, as far as this is possible; and we can carry that principle over into our own times.

Today, however, with insurance often available to widows, independent income, the availability of jobs, etc., women oftentimes end up with more money than men. As a matter of fact, in this country more money is controlled by women than by men. Many widows are left richer than they have ever been in marriage. As far as the necessities of life are concerned such women are not to be the responsibility of the church in any way. But they are to be honored, as Paul points out in Verse 3. They are to be paid reverence and respect; they are to be shown love, compassion and concern to meet their emotional needs. This is what the church is responsible to do. These women were not to be put on the pension fund, though, if they had families.

Second, the apostle says,

She who is a real widow, and is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; whereas she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command this [i.e., announce this], so that they may be without reproach. {1 Tim 5:5-7 RSV}

This indicates that widows who were to be supported by the church were to give themselves to a spiritual ministry. They were to keep busy during these declining years of their life. They were not to utilize the time to entertain themselves, but they were to have a spiritual ministry.

In the letter to Titus, the apostle urges Titus to help the older women learn to teach the younger women. In our congregation there are a lot of younger women who would love to know older women whom they could call up to ask for advice, to pour out their hearts to them and share their struggles and problems with them. This is the kind of ministry the Word of God encourages older women, especially widows, to have -- to be available to the younger women of the congregation for prayer, for support, for teaching, for understanding.

This is a great ministry. I always feel hurt when I see a widow who has been left a considerable amount of money spending her days traveling around the world, going to bridge parties, and entertaining herself. The apostle implies that such a woman might as well be dead. She is not using her life as God intended. Her life is all focused on herself instead of others. As a result she is missing out on a wonderful ministry. Paul urges Timothy to make this clear so that widows may be without reproach, that they may use the years left to them in ways that are filled with blessing and ministry for others.

I am going to pass over Verse 8 for the moment and go on with Paul's list of requirements for widows on the church roll. Verse 9,

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, [that is if you can find out how old she is!] having been the wife of one husband; and she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, show hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. {1 Tim 5:9-10 RSV}

First, a woman was to be at least sixty years old. In the early church that almost always meant that she had only a few years left to live. Most people died in their sixties in those days; very few lived into their seventies or eighties as they frequently do today. A woman left a widow at sixty today has, perhaps, twenty years of useful service left. To use those years in running around the world is a terrible waste. Here the apostle urges that in Ephesus they only take those who were sixty years of age or over. Such women presumably would not have too many years left, so they were asked to devote those years to the service of the Lord.

Then a woman was to be the wife of one husband. That has confused many people who have taken that to mean a woman could not be married more than once. Yet husbands died in those days; women at times were divorced in those days, so a widow could well have been married two or three times in the course of her lifetime. Take a prominent woman of today, like Elisabeth Elliot, who has been married three times. None of her marriages, failed -- her first two husbands died. If we were to take this the way some people do it would mean that a woman like that could not be enrolled. But in Verse 14 Paul urges younger widows to marry and bear children, so he certainly does not mean that if they marry again, when they reached the age of sixty or more and subsequently lost their husbands they could not qualify.

The word that is used here is similar to that requirement for marriage in the qualifications of an elder or deacon who were to be a "one-woman man." Here a woman is to be a "one-husband woman." This does not mean she cannot have been married more than once, but rather that when she is married her focus is on her husband. She is not a philanderer; she is not entering relationships in any degree with other men, but she was solidly behind her husband.

Then a widow must have good references: "She must be well attested for her good deeds" (Verse 10). There is quite a list of things here: "One who has brought up children, shown hospitality (her home has been open to many needs), and washed the feet of the saints." People were not dirtier in those days than they are today.

They wore sandals then, not shoes. When one arrived at a house, therefore, somebody had to bring out a basin to wash his feet, and the mothers of the households frequently did this. This is also used as a symbol for any kind of menial ministry, one that others would pass by. It refers to women who showed a willingness to serve whatever the need. A humble spirit is the implication here.

Further, she must have "relieved the afflicted." She must have been ready to soothe the fevered brow of some neighbor, to clean up the house when someone was sick, to be available in a ministry of help to others. And last, she must have "devoted herself to doing good in every way." A woman who fulfilled all of these qualifications would commend herself and the whole Christian cause to the unbelieving community in powerful ways.

My wife Elaine was born across the bay in El Cerrito. Just a few months later her father died; her mother was left a widow, all alone, with no family around. But right across the street lived a dear godly woman, named Mrs. Rasmussen. She took that family into her heart, surrounded them with love and ministered to their needs. At that time my wife's mother was a Catholic and Mrs. Rasmussen was a Protestant, but that made absolutely no difference to this woman. She took them in. She prayed for them, loved them, ministered to them and encouraged them. When they left finally to go to live in Montana, she kept in touch with them by letter all the rest of her life. When Elaine and I were married and came back from Hawaii after the war, we stopped to see her. Her face was alight with the Spirit of God. She was cheerful, even though at the time she was bound by arthritis to a wheel chair. She was still an angel of mercy to the whole neighborhood; everybody loved her. What a godly woman! I am sure she turned hundreds of people to Christ by the power of her devoted, lovely, serving life.

This is what the apostle is urging upon widows. What a ministry opens to them! They now have time to do some of the things they have longed to do all through the busy days of raising children, taking care of their husbands, etc.

But some widows were not to be supported. Paul tells us why, in Verses 11 and on:

But refuse to enrol younger widows; for when they grow wanton against Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. {1 Tim 5:11 RSV}

That, perhaps, is the basis in Scripture for the appearance in history of orders of sisters, such as the Roman Catholic church has. This verse may have inspired such. The movie *The Sound of Music* is the story of Maria, a novitiate who wished to join an order of sisters and devote herself to a celibate life of service to others. But Paul would have refused to have taken in Maria because she was too young! He understood the pressures on a young woman to have a family, a husband, and children. "Don't enrol them," he says, but encourage them to marry again. Thus he indicates his understanding of the pressures upon young women.

In the biblical order only those who had already been married, who had already fulfilled their obligations and their desires along those lines, were to be enrolled in this special order of celibate persons, not younger women. This was quite contrary to younger women's urges and desires. Even though, in a moment of grief at the loss of a husband a young woman might desire to remain celibate the rest of her life, after a while that might change. That is what the apostle is facing here. He says that if she does, then she has to break her promise and he does not want her to do that. So the two reasons he gives here are, first, "they would prove unfaithful to their first pledge," which they made in a moment of deep commitment but were unable to live up to -- easily at least; and then, the second reason, given in Verse 13: They would tend to become "freeloaders," as we would call them today.

Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. {1 Tim 5:13 RSV}

Life does not seem to have been very different in those days than it does today! Young women with lots of time on their hands, being supported by the church, might tend to fill their hours going about from place to place, drinking endless cups of coffee, telling all the news of the neighborhood -- and getting far too involved

in other people's business. Today we call this a soap opera! That is what the television soap operas are about -- people who ought to be busy doing other things becoming all tied up in somebody else's affairs. No Christian woman should give herself to this practice, the apostle warns.

She is to be busy in other ways, Paul says.

So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us. For some have already strayed after Satan. {1 Tim 5:14-15 RSV}

That passage must give fits to the feminists of our day. It urges women to stay home, marry, bear children, take care of their households, and in doing so they will remove the opportunity for the devil to attack and destroy the Christian church.

The home has always been the foundation of society. I am not saying that a woman cannot work, if that is needful, but even today it is interesting to see that many of the secular writers are facing the fact that getting a job so as to increase the income does not really solve the basic problems of a home, it brings in more problems. Ultimately no more money is available because the additional costs of baby-sitting, a second car, and other necessary expenses mean that no more money is actually coming in; the standard of living remains about the same.

The terrible deprivation of children with working mothers, however, is impossible to estimate. I know that when a child comes home from school to an empty house something dies inside of him. It is a very serious matter to take mothers out of homes and put them to work. Unless it is necessary for them to help sustain the basic income of a family it is an unwise thing to do. Paul recognizes that. He shows that the enemy is quick to seize such a situation and use it to break up a marriage, a home, destroy the children and change the relationship between a husband and wife. We are surrounded by the evidence of that today.

We cannot improve on the wisdom of the Scripture. Here the apostle was clearly urging the younger widows to reestablish their homes, to be there as mothers, fulfilling the greatest responsibility and the greatest privilege a woman can fulfill.

The final summary is found in verse 16:

If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her assist them; {1 Tim 5:16a RSV}

This was a word addressed not only to male relatives but to female relatives also. If they, married women, had widows on their side of the family who had no one to take care of them they were responsible to do so. "Let them assist them," Paul says,

... let the church not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are real widows. {1 Tim 5:16b RSV}

Brief as it is, three times in this passage the apostle has underscored the responsibility to take care of older people. It is not always necessary to have them live in the home, though that is the usual and probably the best relationship, but sometimes physical requirements might mean that they be taken care of elsewhere.

It is also clear, as William Barclay points out in his commentary on this passage, that this lays a responsibility not only on family members to take care of the older parents, but on the older parents to be the kind of people who can live at home with their younger children. There is a dual responsibility here. Sometimes older parents can be so crotchety, grouchy, complaining, and interfering that it is not possible for them to live in the home. Scripture allows for adjustment of these principles to fit the situation; each family must decide for itself. But basically it is clearly underscored that it is the privilege, indeed the responsibility of families to take care of their older parents.

We see this again in Verse 4:

If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. {1 Tim 5:4 RSV}

God is interested always in the helpless, the weak, the lonely, the discouraged; and one of the major obligations of Christians is to minister to those needs. That is why the church exists; that is why Christian love has entered into our lives, that we might meet the needs of those who would otherwise be neglected, lonely, despairing. The apostle says it is something God is pleased with. Also it is only fair return for those years when the children were helpless and their mothers and fathers dedicated themselves to taking care of them, getting nothing back from the children at all.

Verse 8 adds some steel to this:

If any man does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. {1 Tim 5:8 RSV}

That is a hard word. Such a man is not living like a Christian at all. The secular writings of this 1st century show that in the Roman, the Greek and the Jewish world, families were always expected to take care of their older parents. In fact, in Athens a statesman was not allowed to speak in public if he had any blot on his record in this regard; if he was not taking care of his older parents he was not allowed to perform as a politician or a statesman. It was widely accepted throughout the whole Roman world that it was a shocking and disgraceful thing to not meet the emotional needs of parents, and the financial needs, too, if necessary. So again we are reminded three times that this is the responsibility of the family, not the church.

No family action more fully reveals the glory of Christian grace than to see children lovingly supplying the needs of their older parents -- visiting them, making them feel comfortable, loved and wanted if they have to be supported outside the home, or opening their homes and allowing them to be a central part of their life. I am grateful that my wife's mother lived with us for twenty-seven years in our home, and was loved and enjoyed as part of our family during all that time. Now, because of her failing health, it is necessary for her to be in a nursing home, but we visit her very often, we never let her feel lonely and unwanted.

I have been in rest homes that were horror pits, where older people were abandoned by their families -- some of them Christian families. Month after month went by and no one went to visit these older people; they drifted off into senility. These homes, where people simply exist, are like animal cages.

There is a great ministry open to many in the congregation who have time to visit these homes and be surrogate children to older parents who have no one to look out for them. This is a wonderful, loving ministry for some to undertake.

The apostle closes by saying that God takes note of these things; he is concerned about the weak and the helpless.

It is interesting to observe today that economic conditions are now forcing families to face up to these obligations. On the *Today Show* the other day, a family from the Midwest was interviewed. The children had grown up and established their own homes, while the parents were living alone in the big old house. The house was too big for the parents to keep up and they were contemplating selling it, but then economic pressure began to force the children, who had moved away, to find some way of solving their problems. They all ended up mutually agreeing to move back into the old home -- the parents, children, and grandchildren. They worked out loving arrangements -- a certain part of the house was kept free for the grandparents to escape to when the clutter and noise became too much. This family recaptured elements that were lost by the independent desire of each family to have a home of its own.

We have lost so much of the interrelationships between generations. God is forcing us, by economic means, to face up again to the need to live together and to enjoy one another.

That probably accounts, primarily, for the long-running success of *The Waltons*, the story of an entire family -- grandmother, grandfather, father, mother and children -- all living together. There is nothing more beautiful in this world than a family that has learned how to love and live together. It is God's masterpiece.

This is what the apostle is urging and seeking to preserve in this 1st century, and what, by principle, we ought to learn to preserve in our day as well.

Every family has to face these problems, and work them out as best they can, in terms of their own situation. No one has a right to judge others in this area. Let us look to God to give us wisdom to know what to do and how to do it, so that we might make the family a central part of our nation's life again.

Title: The Care and Feeding of Widows

By: Ray C. Stedman

Series: Studies in First Timothy

Scripture: 1 Tim 5:1-16

Message No: 14

Catalog No: 3777

Date: Unknown Date in 1981

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