

September 29, 2024

WALKING AS A FAMILY AND CARING FOR THE NEEDY

1 Timothy 5:1-16

(12 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)

By this point in Paul's letter to Timothy, you might think that Timothy's only role at the church in Ephesus is to be at war—fending off the wolves who are bringing in false teaching, immoral living, and the temptation to walk away from Christ. But it's simply not the case that Timothy is only there to fight off and run away those who are attempting to bring destruction to the church. He's also to oversee and shepherd the flock of God—brothers and sisters whom the Lord has put under his care to be fed, loved, and cared for. But how do you do that, especially when you're a young man, and the church is made up of men and women, some older than you, some younger than you, some who have genuine needs, and others who, well, don't? That's a tough group to navigate how to faithfully pastor.

Well, starting in chapter 5, Paul helps Timothy understand how he will need to navigate being a faithful pastor amidst all these situations. And as we work through the first sixteen verses of this chapter and note the principles Paul gives Timothy to guide him, I think we'll see that these same principles are easily applied in our setting (and, of course, must be obeyed). Therefore, I want to work through these sixteen verses under three principles that will guide us through the text. First, we see that we should relate to one another as family.

We should relate to one another as family

As Paul writes to Timothy about how to address those in the church, he breaks them into four categories: older men, younger men, older women, and younger women. Then, he tells Timothy how to address each group, starting with older men. He writes, "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father" (v. 1a). Now, I'll admit that this text can be confusing since elsewhere the Bible exhorts us to rebuke one another as occasion demands it. Paul will later write to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching." But the confusion should clear up by recognizing that though the same English word is used in both of these verses [rebuke], it's not the same Greek word that is being used. In fact, the Greek word translated "rebuke" in our text is the only appearance of that word in the entire New Testament. But when you look outside the NT at its usages in other Greek writings, it means something like "rebuking harshly." In other words, Paul is telling Timothy that as he pastors older men, there's no need to bring harsh, sharp rebuke, as if they're his enemies. Rather, exhort and encourage them as he would if he were speaking to his father. In other words, approach them with gentleness and respect.

Similarly, as we see Paul tell Timothy how to handle each of these other groups—younger men, older women, and younger women—we should supply the verb given here. In other words, for each group, Paul is telling Timothy not to rebuke them harshly (again, as if their enemy) but to

encourage them—younger men as he would a brother, older women as he would a mother, and younger women as he would a sister. That is to say, Paul tells Timothy to relate to other believers in his church not as if he is opposed to them but as if they are his family.

Now, I will note that he adds one more qualifier when speaking to Timothy about relating to younger women, adding that he needs to relate to them “as sisters, *in all purity*.” That is, Paul recognizes that as a young man, Timothy needs to recognize the particular temptation that he might deal with as he interacts with younger women. And we don’t have to act ignorant ourselves, since we’ve all heard of stories about a pastor being unfaithful and running off with some other woman in the church.

Therefore, Paul tells Timothy to make sure that he approaches younger women in such a way that he’s ensuring that he’s dealing with her in purity. This means that he never allows anything of a sexual nature to enter into those interactions. He is to be careful, not putting himself in compromising positions. But this does not mean that Timothy is to guard himself in such a way that he simply does not interact with younger women. Again, Paul is instructing him as to how to encourage younger women to walk in the faith. That’s going to require Timothy to interact with younger women, loving them as his neighbor—again, as he would his own sister. But Paul makes clear that the relationship must be one of purity—nothing inappropriate can characterize their interactions.

But let me add a brief side note here (especially since I promised to speak to it briefly a few weeks ago, knowing this text was coming up). The Bible teaches that sexual activity can only take place within the context of marriage. Outside of that relationship, the biblical instruction for how we relate to those of the opposite sex is found in the words Paul says to Timothy here. Christian young men should treat young women as sisters. In other words, sexual activity is not allowed. Moreover—and this is key—the Bible doesn’t establish a third category for young men and women who’ve expressed they’re attracted to one another or are in a relationship, permitting them to bring into their interactions with one another a little bit of sexual activity. My guess is that we all agree on that. So let me press us a little bit more.

I think anyone thinking honestly would be hard-pressed to argue that passionate kissing is not sexual activity. If one were to hug his sister, that wouldn’t be shocking in any way. Handholding we might think odd between siblings, but it’s clearly not sexual. But all of us would agree that passionate kissing is utterly out of place in a brother-sister relationship, right? Of course. Now let’s ask ourselves why? Isn’t it because we all rightly recognize it as a sexual activity? And so, as one charged to give an account to Jesus for overseeing your soul and who loves you, I want to charge you to draw the light short of that in your dating (non-marriage) relationships. I know of no believer who regrets having put off any bit of sexual activity until marriage, but I know numerous believers who regret bringing sexual activity into relationships before marriage. And if you want motivation to stand strong in this, just remember that the one who is your Heavenly Father and commands that there be no hint of sexual immorality among you is the one who loved you enough to send his Son to live, die, and be raised for you. So, men, let’s heed Paul’s word to Timothy—treat younger women as sisters, in all purity.

But the main note I want us to see here is that as believers, as members of a church together, we should relate to one another as family. That's how the Bible pictures us as members of a church together. Having God as our Father and the Spirit indwelling us, we've been united together, and we should always and only approach one another as family—fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters whom we love dearly. That's the first thing Paul makes clear to Timothy. Second, within this family, we should care for those who are truly in need.

We should care for those who are truly in need

This discussion of different groups in the church and ministering to them as family brings to Paul's mind a certain group in the church who need care, namely, widows. In the ancient world, a widow would have very little way of providing for herself, if any at all. The husband would be the sole provider in terms of household income, and so a woman who was widowed faced the possibility of being destitute. Consequently, Paul addresses the need for the church to care for widows in the congregation in verses 3-8 of our text. But what's interesting is that he adds some qualifications for how this is to be done. First, in verses 3-4, Paul writes, "Honor widows who are truly widows. 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" (vv. 3-4).

Paul's first qualification is to say that the church should not leap to help provide for women who have been widowed but have believing children and grandchildren who can take care of them. Paul doesn't identify that group as being "truly widows." Now, of course, he's not denying that they've been widowed. He's simply saying that these ladies don't fall into the category of what you might think of as a widow, that is, a lady who's been left behind, facing destitution. However, in the case where a widow has believing children and grandchildren, she's not been left behind without anyone to care for her. She has children and grandchildren, and they should care for her.

Paul notes two reasons a widow's children and grandchildren should care for her. First, they should do so in order to "make some return to their parents" (v. 4). In other words, it's only right for a child to care for his or her parent when that parent cared for them in their upbringing. There was a time, after all, when all of us were utterly dependent on our parents to care for us. So why wouldn't we return the favor when they get to the point that they need someone to help care for them? And, Paul adds, this is pleasing to the Lord when we do so. In fact, Paul says it more strongly, stating it negatively. It's not only pleasing to the Lord if we do so, but it's detestable if we refuse to do so. Paul writes 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." That's strong language, but how can any genuine believer refuse to provide for his or her parent or grandparent who is in need? That's the first reason we should provide for our family in need—it's pleasing to the Lord when we do and is detestable if we don't.

But a second reason why children and grandchildren should supply for their widowed grandmother or mother is so that the church won't be unnecessarily burdened. Paul ends our

text, saying 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 can imagine that over time, the church could accumulate many widows who have need. So when believing children and grandchildren care for their grandmother or mother, it is one less widow the church financially needs to provide for. And so, brothers and sisters, care for your aging parents. Meet their needs. And make sure that the church isn’t unnecessarily burdened to care for them when you can do so, knowing it’s pleasing to the Lord.

So the first qualification Paul gives for a woman being truly widowed is that she doesn’t have believing children and grandchildren to care for her. But that’s not the only qualification Paul gives for someone being “truly a widow” who should receive help from the church. Second, Paul notes that the widow should give continued evidence of belonging to Christ. Paul writes in verses 5-7, “She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach.”

Paul doesn’t want the church propping up a widow who merely gives herself to a sinful and self-indulgent lifestyle. That would be, in effect, make the church her partner in sin. Therefore, Paul requires that the widow supported by the church be one who has set her hope on God, lives in obedience to him, and serves the church through her prayers. In other words, she must be one who continues to give evidence of belonging to Christ.

This instruction from Paul to Timothy reminds us as a congregation that we need to care for those among our membership who are truly in need. He’s using the category of widows here, but I don’t think this is meant to be exclusive. Now, as Paul notes, if we have believing family, let our families care for us. And, let’s make sure that those we care for are living lives of obedience to Jesus and that we’re not propping up their sinful lifestyle. But if one of our members is truly alone, without believing family to help them, and they give evidence of continuing to follow Christ, we should be eager to make sure that their needs are met. After all, as we saw from point one, we’re family. And finally we see in this text that we should seize opportunities to minister to one another.

We should seize opportunities to minister to one another

This point isn’t as immediately obvious from the text, so let’s see if I can explain why I think this is the point we should gather from verses 9-15. I think verses 9-15 reflect something a bit different than what we’ve just seen in verses 3-8 and are not merely a continuation of talking about how to meet widows’ needs. Now, yes, Paul is continuing to talk about widows, and I believe he still has in mind meeting their needs. But when he makes reference to a widow being “enrolled” I don’t think he’s referencing merely being enrolled in the “needy widows” list the church is keeping up with. Rather, I think that he’s referring to a list of widows who have entered into something of a formal agreement with the church to remain unmarried and serve the church, even as the church may well financially meet their needs.

Let me give the reasons for why I think this is what's going on. First, Paul starts verse 9 giving an age restriction. He says, "Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age." Now, if this were merely additional qualifications for providing for widows, it seems a bit odd that he wouldn't allow the church to help the widow in her late fifties who legitimately has financial need, gives evidence of belonging to the Lord, and has no believing family to care for her. Why exclude her just because she's, say, fifty-eight-years-old?

Now, I realize that someone could turn that question around on me, asking something like this: "If verses 9-15 represent some kind of formal agreement between the widow and the church where she pledges to remain unmarried and give her time in service to the church, even as the church meets her financial needs, why would Paul exclude the widow in her fifties from that opportunity?" Well, that's a good question, but I think I have an answer.

Paul writes in verses 11-12, "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." Now, before explaining, let me clarify a word. The word translated "faith" at the end of verse 12 can also refer to something like an oath or pledge.¹ So, I don't think that Paul is referring to these younger widows being deemed as having left the faith if they marry. After all, Paul will encourage them to marry in verse 14. Rather, I think he's saying, "If younger widows make this pledge to remain unmarried and devote their lives in service to the church, then it may very well happen that they'll find themselves eventually wanting to remarry (after all, they're still young). And if they do, then they'll be abandoning their pledge they made to remain unmarried and will bring judgment on themselves in that they'll be going back on their oath [I don't think Paul means they'll be ultimately damned on the day of judgment]."

Do you see? If you see verses 9-15 as merely expanding on how to care for needy widows, these verses don't really make sense. Again, why exclude a needy widow in her fifties? And why is she doing a bad thing to get remarried if she's enrolled, especially when Paul specifically instructs her to get remarried in verse 14? But it all makes sense if you envision a program or ministry whereby widows pledge to remain unmarried so that they might give themselves in service to the church, even while the church meets their financial needs.

This also makes sense of other things. If this ministry involves the widow going house to house, ministering to others in need, then you'd think that these widows would need to meet certain qualifications, like those given to deacons and their wives in 3:8-14, and that's exactly what you find in verses 9-10. It also explains why Paul fears the younger widows (if their hearts might still be enticed to other things besides full devotion to the church) might be caught up in going house to house but not truly fulfilling ministry but rather gossiping, being busybodies and the like, as he mentions in verse 13.

¹ See *BDAG*, 3rd ed., 818.

Therefore, here what Paul is saying, it seems, in verses 9-15. As the church in Ephesus had begun something of a formal ministry where an older widow (who wouldn't be enticed to remarry and begin devoting herself to a family again) would agree to devote themselves in service to the church. They would go house to house, helping younger ladies perhaps with their children or older ladies to be cared for in their old age, and the church would (in turn) meet their financial needs. The church would happily support the ladies and be eager to receive their ministry because they'd meet the qualifications of verses 9-10. They'd have lived a life of sexual faithfulness to their husbands, built up a reputation, brought up children in the way of the Lord, been hospitable, served the saints, cared for those in need, and devoted herself to all kinds of good works.

But younger widows shouldn't pledge themselves to this kind of ministry. Rather, get remarried, have kids, manage their homes, and don't give themselves opportunity to fill their time with sinful activities that they could be tempted with if they were idle (vv. 11-14). After all, Paul was already aware of some who'd be led away from Christ after chasing such temptations (v. 15). That's what Paul is saying, it seems, in verses 9-15.

But this raises a question of, "What is this to us?" In other words, how does it help us to see the church in Ephesus had a ministry whereby older widows labored in devotion to the church and were cared for financially in turn? Does it mandate that we do the same? Not necessarily. Although any local church could. Describing what early churches did doesn't necessarily mean the biblical authors are commanding every local church in all times and places to do the same. To walk away from this text mandating that every church start a formal widow ministry program would miss the mark as much as limiting our care for those in need to only widows because Paul doesn't mention widowers or orphans or the like. This may even have been a unique ministry at Ephesus.

But I think it does remind us to seize opportunities for ministry as we have the chance. Here's what I mean. These older widows no longer had a husband to care for or children to raise, but they still had some energy and abilities, so they decided to devote themselves to care for their church community. They wanted to give themselves in undivided devotion to the building up of the church. They could've perhaps simply collected from the fund for needy widows that the church had set aside and not committed themselves to this ministry. But that would be shameful if they could serve, and so they seized the opportunity for ministry.

That's how you and I should think as well. It may be that some who are older, no longer having kids in the house, are finding themselves with more free time. Use it to serve your family here (i.e. the church). It may be that some of you are younger, with more free time than the man who's busy raising his children. Use your time to go and serve. Help people move, do lawn work for widows, etc. The elders are actually thinking through an approach now to help coordinate that work by adding another deacon, which we'll discuss in our next members' meeting. But I think you get the point, and I don't want to limit your minds on what ministry can be done. Let's merely make sure we're proactively looking for ways to serve our church family and seizing those opportunities.

The church is a family. Jesus made that clear all the way back in Mark 3:31-35. Therefore, let's approach one another as family, care for one another as family, and serve one another as family. After all, we've been the rich beneficiaries of the work of another who served us by living, dying, and being raised so that we might be children of God. Let's thank him for that glorious gift now as we come to the table. Amen.