

Title: This is Church?
Text: 1 Timothy 5.9-16
Theme: Caring for widows
Series: I Timothy
Prop Stmt: Caring for widows is necessary because it demonstrates the heart of the gospel, which is the heart of the church.

Read Text:

As I prepare a sermon, I try to think of how different people will react to it. I am thinking that if you are here because you lost a bet, or you are here because of an assignment from a class on comparative religions, or you are here for the first time, the portion of the Bible that I just read, may not be what you were expecting. So, let me give you some context. If you opened up a Bible (like the one in the pew near you) and you found this passage that I read and from which I am going to speak, you would notice several things about it. First of all, it is part of a short chapter that has the number 5 on it. That obviously means that there are 4 chapters before it. There is only one chapter left and these chapters are in a portion of the Bible called 1 Timothy. You would also notice that this little section called 1 Timothy is toward the end of the Bible.

1 Timothy is a letter to a young pastor about how the church is supposed to function. The church was never designed to be a place that appears to be impressive, or a people who appear to have it all together. The church is in reality a people whose lives have been changed by the gospel. This change is an actual change of heart and belief that results in part in loving what God loves. God cares about the broken. God cares about the needy. God cares about the outcast. God cares about those who cannot save themselves. That is why caring for widows is a basic expectation for the church. Caring for widows is necessary because it is a tangible expression of the gospel. But, caring for widows is more than having a "Meals on Wheels" program once a month. Behind the details of our care for widows is a view of the church that I don't think some of you grasp yet. So, while I am going to push some of you a bit, try to hear my heart and try to be willing to be pushed, okay.

This text presents:

I. **A serious and committed view of the church.**

It is not uncommon for people to browse churches as they do fast food establishments. You may like Burger King, your kids like Taco Bell and your wife likes Jimmy Johns. So, you end up picking up a little bit at all three. Let's say that you like the music at one church, the preaching at another, the kids ministry at another and the youth ministry at a fourth. Every body gets what they want, right? But, do you see anything even remotely like that in the Scripture? Look at verse 9 and verse 11. Both of these verses talk about enrolling widows in order to care for them. If you treat churches like you do fast food, how would you obey this text? As we will see, the local church is charged with the oversight of care for the widows in its church. A church simply cannot do this unless it

has some means of knowing who is actually in the church and an actual part of it. In other words, this text is fairly clear that...

A. Membership in the body matters.

Do you see what I mean? If you attended here once, does that make you a member? If you attended here once, does that mean that you agree with all that we believe and practice? Of course not. You may attend here once and never come back. It would be wrong to say that you are a member. Ok, well, what about 2 times, 3 times, 4 times... How many times do you have to attend in order to actually be a member? Is membership simply attending? Do you not have to actually profess to believe something? Do you have to take responsibility for the life of the church? Do you not have to commit to something? Is every widow in Macomb County the responsibility of our church? How can we enroll widows if we do not have a way of knowing first of all if we are responsible for them?

I understand that many people hesitate to join a church, perhaps they simply do not want to feel obligated. But, if that is you, I really need to push on that. In describing salvation, Peter says, "once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." (1 Peter 2.10) The church is not a building that hosts events; it is a people to whom you belong. To say that you are a Christian but not be a member of a church is like saying you are married but you don't have a wife. Who do you belong to and who belongs to you? And, how can you follow this text unless you are a member of the church? Apart from meaningful membership, we wouldn't know what widows we would be responsible for, since the widows could be floating around to 5 different churches and without meaningful membership we wouldn't have a basic level of commitment in order to say that we have to be committed to care for these widows.

B. Ministry in the body matters.

In order to qualify for enrollment in widow care, the widow has to have demonstrated faithfulness in ministry to her family and to the church. Ministry is not a one-way street. She who cared for others in her family and in her church is now receiving care from her family, and if there is no family, then she receives care from her church. Again, this assumes ministry on the part of the woman and ministry on the part of the church to the woman. Who is the church? We are! You are! If you are not serving in the church and you are able then you are not helping the church do what she is called to do, which means you are not doing what you are called to do. If you are not able to serve in the church, but when you were able, you did, then the church now serves you. All that to say, ministry matters. Your ministry in the church matters and it matters if you choose to ignore this.

C. Personal involvement is assumed.

When you look at the qualifications for enrollment you see some really personal things don't you? How do you know if a woman is at least 60? She has to tell you. She has to be known. Married? Kids? Reputation for good works? I cannot faithfully preach this text if I pretend that it is perfectly fine for you to come in and sit and listen for an hour or so

every other week and not be personally involved in the lives of other people and let others be involved in your life.

D. Your church is your family.

This text is perfect example of this dynamic because it speaks of your biological family and of your commitment and responsibilities there. You are responsible to provide for the members of your household. In fact, the man who refuses to do that is worse than an unbeliever. Paul clearly recognizes that you have a mom, dad, brother, sister, wife, husband, son, daughter, etc. When you come to faith in Christ you do not ignore your biological family. In fact, the gospel helps you be a better member of your family. It is in view of that relationship that we are supposed to understand our church relationships. God designed the church to be your family.

1. Adoption is part of salvation

When you come to the point in your life when you turn from your sin and you trust in Christ because he died to save you from the penalty of your sin, you are saved. That means you are saved from the penalty of sin. You are saved from the wrath God. You are saved from hell. But you are not only saved from, you are saved to. You are saved to a new life. You are also saved to a new family. What was the first thing that Jesus said that we are to say when he taught his disciples to pray? “Our Father.” It wasn’t “My God” It wasn’t even “Our God” it was “Our Father” because when you come to faith in Christ, you are adopted by God into HIS family and you have brothers and sisters who are in the family to help you and who need your help. You have a new family. You have a new name. And in this family, you have a role to fulfill. You have your part. And if you do not do your part, we all suffer for it.

2. Body life is part of sanctification

Some of you resist joining or getting involved because of, why? Is it unwillingness to give up autonomy? Is it unwillingness to be committed? Does that make sense? Christ is so committed to the church, he died for her. Is it because people have hurt you in the past and have let you down? It will happen again. It will happen until we are all in heaven. But, God has designed the body life of the church to help you address your sin of self-protection. This text may sound intrusive to most people who do not understand the church. But the truth is, we are not called to be a bag of marbles, but a bag of grapes, where over time, each grape becomes a part of the whole. This text also presents

II. A high view of women

What you just read in this text was absolutely revolutionary in its day. While Jesus and the apostles were all men, and while only men were charged with being the elders and pastors, Christianity from its earliest days has been heavily influenced by women and has always had more women than men. Why is this so, if, as our culture says, Christianity is so demeaning to women? The facts simply do not support that. Christianity was so

attractive to women because it offered them a life and a setting that was far superior to anything that they had known.¹

Timothy is ministering in Ephesus, a Roman city. The two primary cultures of the day were the Greeks (Hellenic) and the Romans. In both cultures, women had very little say. Women were generally given away in marriage before puberty to much older men. The men could divorce them without consequence and without grounds. As a result, women often found themselves divorced (for no good reason) or widowed at a young age because their old husband had died. However, that does not mean that there were all these young widows running around. The truth was, women were in high demand because so many girls were discarded at birth. It was almost unheard of for a Roman family to raise more than one daughter. In one study of 600 Roman families only 6 (1%) had more than one daughter. The boys could live; the girls were often discarded. Further complicating matters was the fact that many women died in childbirth, or died because of complications from abortions demanded by their husbands. Outside of Rome, that is, in Italy, Asia Minor (Ephesus) and North Africa, there were 141 males per 100 females. (14:10 ratio) Unmarried younger women were almost unheard of. There was even a state policy that penalized women who were under 50 who did not remarry. The life of a woman was very difficult. The culture treated women as disposable.

Some of you may have heard of Cicero, the Roman politician, lawyer, political theorist, etc. His daughter Tullia was married when she was 16, widowed at 22, remarried at 23, divorced at 28, married again at 29, divorced at 33 and died at 34 after giving birth. Her situation was typical. Women were treated like we treat cellphones. Use them for a couple of years and then get another. It was awful. In contrast to that was Christianity. In Christianity, women were treated with respect. In many cases, there were more women than men in the church. But the men in the church who treated women with respect were oddities in the culture. The command in v.3 to honor widows was radically different than what the culture did. And because the church cared for women, women were attracted to the gospel. And the church really did care for and esteem women. Evidence for this is seen in the catacombs under the city of Rome, where many of the early believers lived, died and were buried. In a study based on 3,733 burial sites in the catacombs, the women were nearly as likely as the men to have lengthy inscriptions on their tombs. Women were honored in death because they were honored in life. In Christianity they enjoyed a much higher level of security in life and equality in marriage than they did in the culture.

So, realizing that the local church is called to be an identifiable and committed group of Christians who are lovingly serving and caring for one another and helping each other take another step in becoming more like Christ, and realizing that in this web of loving, committed relationships that women are treasured, esteemed, given positions of influence, ministry, encouragement, etc. You are now ready to work through these verses.

III. **Practical Counsel for the church** (9-16)

¹ This sentence is a paraphrase from Rodney Stark's work, *The Triumph of Christianity*.

With Social Security, Medicare, life insurance, government programs, and a friendly work environment for women, it is rare to find an older widow who needs the church's financial help. However, this specific command for the church to care for her widows is based on a larger principle of caring for those who cannot care for themselves.

A. Care for those who cannot care for themselves. (9-10)

Does this mean that we need to do more for our widows? How could we answer this unless we talked with every widow? I take this text to mean that it is not the responsibility of the widow to come and ask for help, but it is the responsibility of the church to find out how her widows are doing and if there is something that we need and ought to do. As we do that, we may find opportunities to serve our widows that we were not aware of. As members of the congregation, you may be aware of situations where a widow needs our care because we are all she has.

If we did not have some of the governmental programs in place then we would create a list of widows from the church whom the church will take responsibility to provide for their needs, because they have no other means of support. The widows who qualify to be enrolled in this ministry must be at least 60 years of age, a woman who was faithful to her husband, who has a reputation for ministry, brought up children, has shown hospitality (caring for others in her home), faithfully served other believers, cared for the afflicted and just overall, has been a woman devoted to every good work. In other words, this is a woman that the church could always depend on to serve in a variety of ways. If this woman has no children to care for her, and no way to support herself, then the church is take responsibility for her care. In turn, she is to make a pledge to remain faithful to Christ and the church and to serve the church as needs and opportunities arise. This way she gets help and she gives help. Helping people serve others is helpful to those who serve and who are served.

B. Do not provide care for those who can care for themselves. (11-16)

Someone who can care for themselves should, so they can provide care for those who cannot. Paul is saying that if the church agreed to permanently support the younger widows, then the younger widow may find herself free from the pressure of having to support herself and would be tempted to use that freedom in unhelpful ways, like sticking her nose into other people's lives and stirring things up, or worse by giving in to her loneliness and getting involved in a situation that would give the adversary an opportunity to slander.

Do not enroll younger widows on this list. This does not mean that the church does not help them, it just means that you do not agree to permanently help younger widows, because enrollment would require them to pledge to remain single and serving the church, when in reality it would be better for them to remarry and raise children and serve in that capacity. If she pledges to remain single, she may regret that pledge; so do not put her in that position. Younger widows probably have other widows in their

extended family whom they can help serve. Rather than look to the church for support, younger widows should look to get remarried so that the church can support those widows who have no other means of support and no real prospect of getting remarried. Giving people resources may be helpful and it may be a hindrance. When people depend on others to do what they could do and should do for themselves, you are not helping if you just give them things. When people, who should be working and helping others, choose not to because they do not feel like it and want you to help them, you are not helping them when you give them things. The bottom line is that everyone should look for opportunities to serve one another, but do not serve those who can and should take care of themselves.

C. Results

- 1) Benefits the truly needy
- 2) Challenges the lazy
- 3) Realistic in its scope
- 4) Guards the priorities of the church
- 5) Forces people to be involved.

In order to properly care for our widows, we have to care. This is so good. There needs to be a wide place of mercy in our hearts that causes our eyes to focus on them and intentionally connect with them. There may be some situations in our membership where we can do a better job. Between the Elders Shepherding groups, the Health and Wellness Ministry, the Titus 2.14 ministry, Grief Share and the Good Samaritan Ministry I think there are some very good ministries in place. I am blessed by what I know is going on. Some of our younger families have intentionally connected with certain widows and have adopted them. That is such a joy and to those of you who do it, you know that you always seem to receive more than you give.

Being a widow can be lonely, but it doesn't have to be that lonely. When the church serves her widows and her widows serve in return, it can be a reflection of the gospel.

Conclusion:

Ever trust Christ?

Have you joined a church?

Have you ever looked for ways to obey this text? Do you know any widows? How do you care for them? Having them over for a meal, giving them a call, having your children play the piano, or inviting them to a school play or event and just involving them in your life is just some of the beautiful ways we can be family.

If you are a widow, have you thought of how you can serve? Are there young moms you can help? Are there ways you can look after each other? I know that many of you do that, but there may be a few of you, who can leverage your position for service. That is the question for each of us. How can I leverage the position God has put me to serve others?