



A Study of 1st & 2nd Timothy

1st Timothy 5:3-16 Honor Widows...

I am reading from 1st Timothy chapter five, verses three through twenty-five. If you're using one of the pew Bibles, the passage is located on page 992...1st Timothy 5:3-16.

This is what God's Word says:

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:3**...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.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:9**...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. 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. 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.

Last week we began to look together at 1st Timothy five and the extended section it contains concerning widows. And the thing that really got our attention was just how extended the section really is. That is, we were all surprised, I think, by just how long the section is. Paul seems to devote an inordinate amount of time and space to how Timothy and the church were to manage the widows in their congregation there in Ephesus.

To put things in perspective, Paul takes two verses to talk about how Timothy and the Ephesians needed to treat older men, older women, younger men and younger women. And what he says is that those relationships ought to be characterized by gentleness. He then he finishes off the chapter by devoting four verses to the issue of making sure that teaching elders are properly paid and not unfairly treated. Now in between those two subjects, he takes fourteen verses to talk about how Timothy and the church were obligated to take care of their widows and how they were to go about doing that.

The question that we began to consider last week was, **“Why did Paul do that?”**

The answer to that question surely comes in realizing that the letters of the New Testament are occasional letters. That is almost all the letters of the New Testament

are written to address some sort of issue or problem occurring in a particular church. Gordon Fee writes this in his very helpful book, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*:

Despite their variety there is one thing that all of the epistles have in common, and this is *the* crucial thing to note in reading and interpreting them: They are all what are technically called *occasional documents* (i.e., arising out of and are intended for a specific occasion), and they are *all* from the *first century*. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belonging to all time, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is precisely these factors—that they are occasional and that they belong to the first century—that make their interpretation difficult at times.

Their *occasional* nature must be taken seriously. This means that they were occasioned, or called forth, by some special circumstance, either from the reader's side or from the author's side. Almost all of the New Testament letters were occasioned from the reader's side (with perhaps Philemon, James and Romans being the exceptions). Usually the occasion was some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.

Most of our problems in interpreting the epistles are due to this fact of their being occasional. We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were—or even if there was a problem. It is much like listening to one end of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out who is on the other end and what that unseen party is saying. Yet in many cases it is especially important for us to try to hear "**the other end**" so that we know what our passage is a responding to.¹

That is just so well said.

So the question is, "**What was the occasion which led Paul to spend so much time in 1st Timothy 5 worrying about how the widows were being managed in Ephesus?**" Well I think what I would like for us to do, is put on our detective caps for minute or two and think together about how communication works. Now I'm

not trying to be condescending here. What I am trying to point out, however, is that when it comes to reading the biblical text we often tend to turn off our brains in terms of how we hear what the text is saying.

We are a lot more intuitive when we are having a conversation than when we are reading the biblical text.

For instance, I want you to imagine for a moment that I am in my study at home deeply engaged in prayerfully working through a complex biblical passage. I want you to imagine that I have all of my scrolls and parchments spread out before me. I want you to imagine that I am barefooted, that I am wearing my very best Franciscan robe, and that the light is streaming through the stain glass windows of my study and softly bouncing off the piles of books and ancient documents on the rich walnut bookshelves surrounding me.

Wait, I think I might like to imagine that for a moment myself.

Anyway, imagine I am in my study deeply engaged in my studies when my beautiful redheaded wife comes in and breaks the magic of the moment by saying, **“You cannot believe how many leaves are in the front yard. That stupid sycamore tree has dropped almost all its leaves and they’re piled up nearly a foot high around the front porch so that you have to wade through them just to get in the front door. It actually makes it very hard to walk”**

Now Because I realize that what she has just said to me is technically what is called an occasional message (That is, it is a message based on a specific problem or

occasion) I realize as an expert student of communication that there are a couple of responses that might not be fully appreciated.

For example, I know that she will not be all that amused if I say, **“Well thank you honey. I am so grateful to know that. But to be completely honest I already knew that it is nearly winter and that the trees outside have already begun to lose their leaves in earnest. Still, I am grateful that you felt the need to inform me about the leaves in our front yard so thank you.”**

I can assure you that kind of response would not bode very well...nor should it.

Nor would it bode well for me to ask, **“Why bring that up? Can’t you see I am busy?”**

No, that would not bode particularly well either nor is that the way real communication works.

And because I know how real communication works, I know the occasion of the leaves around the front porch has created a need, the need has been recognized not by me but by her, and that now that particular need must move to the stage of finally being attended to. I know the response that is appropriate to the moment. I know the response that is actually demanded and so I say, **“Yes dear, I saw them. Thank you, however, for reminding me. I’m going to stop in about twenty minutes and go rake them up.”**

Now here’s my point. A proper response to an occasional letter or a piece of occasional communication is not **“True/False.”** It is rather **“Yes/No.”** It is not

“Well, that is true.” It is rather, **“Yes, I will.”** For some strange reason we don’t do that when it comes to reading and applying the epistolary sections of the Bible. Instead of identifying with the problem or need that has occasioned a particular biblical letter, we tend instead to simply intellectualize things and respond much like I did in my first imaginary example. We do that when we more or less wind up saying, **“Well thank you Lord for this wonderful information about just how the leaves lay on the ground there in ancient Ephesus. I assure I intend to use that information to astonish my friends and terrify my enemies.”**

Now what we ought to do instead when we come to such is to ask, **“Is there any sense in which we are we facing something of the same sort of situation that the text is bringing up here?”** If we are, we ought to become very concerned with just how we might obey what is being commanded in the passage. That may mean that we will have to think through how our situation in twenty-first century Texas differs from that of first century Ephesus.

I mean in figuring out how to apply Ephesians 5 we probably ought to take into account that none of the widows in Ephesus had access to social security benefits, or Medicare or Medicaid or any of the rest of the social safety nets available in our day or culture. On the other hand, we ought not to think that just because those things are in place today that we can ignore what the biblical text says. That is, we ought not to think that we are exempt from the responsibility to attend to such problems in our day just because of the welfare and governmental assistance programs that are in place. In fact, if anything I think we here at Grace ought to be even more attentive simply because of the kind of financial well being our church has enjoyed since its inception. The sort of extraordinary financial blessing we have enjoyed would have been completely unheard of in New Testament times. I

know that is true just as it is true that it is almost completely unheard of even in our own day. All of which points to the magnitude of the responsibility we bear. Listen to Luke 12:48.

^{NLT} **Luke 12:48**...When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.

And because that is true, it is required of us here at Grace to be especially attentive to obeying these commands regarding the care of widows or any other person in our congregation that runs into a frowning providence.

Now I do think we have an obligation both to the poor and needy in our community and even around the world. But I also think we have an even greater obligation to those who are a part of our own congregation.

If we fail to minister to those whom we can see with our own eyes, why is it that we think we are going to faithfully minister to those we cannot see?

Now that having been said, I should tell you that this underlying concern to faithfully minister to the spiritual and temporal needs of our congregation has already fashioned the philosophy of ministry here at Grace. For example, we made a decision a long time ago not to ever try to become a megachurch. We did not believe that God had called us to or gifted us for such a ministry. And along those same lines, we also made a decision to limit the size of the congregation here in this place. That does not mean that we intend to start snubbing visitors when we get to a maximum size. Rather it means that when we get to a certain size we intend to plant a daughter church rather than look for another piece of property

somewhere where we can build and even larger campus. No, we made a decision here a long time ago that we intend to restrict this particular congregation to this particular corner of Christ's kingdom. We intend to minister here and if the demographic changes so be it.

What that means on a very practical level is that there won't be multiple campuses where Kyle and Davis and I are being projected in three dimensional holographic images to minister to a congregation that we do not know or have ever even met. Can you imagine the difficulty of projecting three dimensional holographic form of this magnificent physique?

Now what we are intending to do instead is to push off a church plant and minister in that particular corner of Christ's kingdom by supporting a pastor and by training new leaders to shepherd Christ's flock. We intend to do that with the resources with which God has blessed us. We think we are obligated to do that. I think you should also know that we intend to be increasingly about that particular task. God has blessed us and allowed us to pay for our property and building in a manner that is almost unheard of in our day. That doesn't mean we won't make alterations or improvements to the campus we have here but it does mean that we intend to spend a lion's share of our resources planting churches and investing in missionary works around the world.

Now with that unplanned digression out of the way, let me turn back again to the occasion of the widows in Ephesus that Paul brings up in Ephesians 5.

Basically, the Apostle Paul makes three particular points in his instruction regarding widows. Those three points are as follows:

- (1) The Church at Ephesus had an obligation before God to take care of widows in the church.
- (2) Because the church at Ephesus had limited resources they had to make distinctions regarding which actual widows they supported.
- (3) The supporting of widows did not do away with the responsibility the widow's family had in providing for her needs.

Now what I want to do this morning in the time we have left is to show you how Paul makes these three particular points. So in that regard, I won't be going through the text in quite the same linear fashion that I normally do. That is I won't necessarily be going from verse three to four and then to five. Rather I intend to jump from one verse to the next based on how the verses address these three particular issues. I intend to do that because in a manner Paul does that himself. I do think when we finish we will have covered all of the verses but we will have covered them from a thematic perspective as opposed to a linear perspective.

Now that having been said, let's take that first proposition...the one that says the church has an obligation before God to take care of its widows.

You can, of course, see that that is Paul's overarching concern right off starting in verse three.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:3**...Honor widows who are truly widows. Paul uses the verb "**honor**" here which means in context not so much that the church ought put up pictures of their widows in the hallways or include their biographies in the church's order of service or on its Facebook page as it does that

the church ought to make sure their widows have their material and financial needs met.

Listen for example to John Stott:

The context makes it clear that the 'honor' due to widows (their *proper recognition*, **in** fact) must go beyond personal respect and emotional support to financial provision. The honor to parents required by the fifth commandment had already been shown by Jesus to include this, and the honor due to presbyters, which Paul will come to next implies the same thing. So honoring includes material provision as well.²

But notice Paul uses an adverb to clarify which widows he actually has in mind. He describes them as widows who are truly widows. Now that causes us, I think, to need to reflect on the basis for how Paul distinguishes one kind of widow from another. Aren't all widows pretty much widows? Paul didn't think so. He thinks there is a kind of widow that is a widow in such a way that they are in fact more "**widowy**" than other widows. That is, Paul thinks there are classes of widows. Choosing not to leave us in doubt as to what he means Paul explains himself first by distinguishing those that are "**truly widowed**" from those that still have loved ones or family to provide for their needs. You can see what I mean if you look carefully at the first part of verse four.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:4**...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.

You see Paul is making here a distinction between those widows who have children or grandchildren and those who do not. Now he is going to quickly turn to discuss the responsibility that these children and grandchildren have to their

mother or grandmother but initially his point is that there are different kinds of widows. There are those that have living relatives and there are those that do not. Paul believes that if a widow has no surviving children or grandchildren then she, in fact, more “**widow**” than the widow who has someone to help take care of her. He drives that point home at the beginning of verse five.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:5**...She who is truly a widow, left all alone...

You can the point he is making. The widow who is truly a widow is the widow that has been left all alone. She has no one. This the second point that tried to make in the introduction. That is, Paul is demanding that the church at Ephesus makes some distinctions in terms of which widows they support.

Now the implications for us as a church here, I think, rather obvious. We especially have an obligation to those under our care that have no one else to care for them. I think that that means that we have to know their situation. I think that means that it is the obligation of each member and of each of the elders and deacons in particular to know enough about the lives of the members of our church to know how they stand. That doesn't mean that we need to ask to see their checkbooks. It doesn't mean that we need to stalk them or stand over their backyard fence and monitor which television programs they are watching. Rather it means that we need to be engaged in their lives to such a degree that we know them well enough to know when they have material needs...whether those needs be food, shelter or clothing.

That is true for all of us in this room. All of us here have, in fact, made vows to that end. If you are member of this church, you were asked the following questions when you joined and you made promises regarding these questions.

- 3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?**
- 4. Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?**
- 5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?**

What that means is that we all have an obligation to one another based both on the clear teaching of the New Testament and on the vows that we have made to one another. We need to practice hospitality and that all of us need to cultivate relationships with one another just as it means that elders and deacons occasionally need to sit on your couch and drink coffee. It also means that if you know someone who is hurting or in need in our congregation you have an obligation before God to talk to a pastor or to your elder and make sure you let them know how things are.

It also means that if you have a need you are obligated not to suffer in silence. We have the greater obligation to know you well enough to know your needs but if you decide you want to live in complete isolation from everyone else in the church you have picked the wrong church and by that I don't mean Grace Community I mean Christ's Church. We are all constituent parts of his body.

There are no freestanding bricks in Christ's Church.

Now not only does Paul say that the church should distinguish between those who are truly widows and those who are not. He also says the church should distinguish between the kind of lives in which it is willing to invest. Notice the rest of verse five.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 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.

The widows, those that are truly widows, are those who left all alone and who depend on God by means of prayers and supplications night and day. That is they are committed to praying for their own needs and for the needs of others. The widows that Paul is not particularly interested in supporting are those that are self-indulgent...those who live solely to satisfy their own lusts.

Paul makes that point even clearer in verse 9.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:9**...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.

The widows that the church is to support are to be godly. They are to be all alone and they are to be godly. They are to be devoted to the ministry of the church and to the spread of Christ's kingdom. I do not see, as many Catholics do, a basis for the Catholic order of nuns here in the text. I take it that the list that is being referred to is a list of recognition as to which widows are to be financially supported.

Paul continues to make a distinction as to which widows should be supported and which should not down in verse eleven.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:11**...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.

Now to be honest I am not quite sure what all of the implications are for this particular section. But the point is clear enough, younger women will want to remarry and because that is true they are not to be put on any sort of perpetual financial support. I think Paul's concern is that such women might not use the support the church provides properly. I get that from the phrase that where Paul worries about them **"being idlers and going about from house to house spreading gossip."** It is possible that some of these younger widows Paul is concerned about may have in fact been lured into the web of the false teachers at Ephesus. Gordon Fee argues that the weak women referred to in 2 Timothy 3:6-7 may be a reference to these younger widows referred to here.³ Still, one thing the passage is definitely *not* teaching is that always wrong for the church to help a young widow simply because she is a young widow. I think rather the point is that the church is not to make her a permanent part of her financial support. In our day, I think the church needs to be very careful in over applying this particular text to the extraordinary number of young mothers who are abandoned by reprobate husbands. The church may need to provide such women a rescue net. It is not however to be a perpetual rescue net. Younger widows will need either to work or to remarry.

Now finally let me address the third point that Paul makes in his argument and that point is that the church's helping such widows does not negate the responsibility of that widow's family to provide for her needs. In fact, the family is primarily responsible for its widows while the church is directed to take on a secondary role. The reason for that, of course, is that the church has limited resources.

You can see Paul's point quite clearly if you back to verse seven.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:7**...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 wants Timothy to command these things. In the context, the **"these things"** refers back to verse four.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:4**...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.

You see his point. If such widows have children or grandchildren they must do their duty toward their mother or grandmother.

Paul's explain just how serious the matter when such family members fail to do what is required.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:8**...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 means if the family is composed of believers they have an obligation to fulfill their responsibility. They have the same obligation before God even if they are unbelievers, but it is especially important for those that profess the faith to do what they can.

Now the interesting thing is that here Paul extends the responsibility even to Christian women in the church at Ephesus. They are not excused from this responsibility just because they are women.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 5:16**...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.

The reason this believing woman is to do so, of course, is so the church will not become overly burdened and will in the end be able to take care of those that are **“truly widows”**...those who are all alone in the world.

Everyone must do their part.

Now I myself have seen this put into practice. When I was in Arlington we had a woman who was **“truly a widow.”** She had a number of children and after her husband died she had no one to really help her. The state did what the state was required to do and the deacons and elders in the church made a decision to undertake to do the rest.

They gave this wonderful woman enough money to keep her house going and provide for the needs of the family, and they did so for years. The deacons made an effort to keep the house in working order and they even took the responsibility

to themselves to teach the kids to do their share. The doled out projects and allowances and threatened the troublemakers and fixed the plumbing, repaired appliances, and kept cars running and they did that for over a decade. When at last the kids were nearly all grown, this wonderful Christian woman became very sick and her kids stepped up to take care of her until she died and then they continued on taking care of each other. They do so to this very day.

And all that occurred because a congregation decided to honor a widow who was truly a widow. It was a beautiful thing and it honored our beautiful Savior.

Let's pray.

¹ Gordon Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 58.

² John R.W. Stott, *1 Timothy & Titus* (BST). (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 129-130.

³ ^{ESV} **2 Timothy 3:6**...For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, ⁷ always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.