

Helping Widows

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Concern for the underprivileged and vulnerable has always mattered to God. Three such categories in every society in every generation are immigrants (strangers), orphans, and widows. This study pertains to the third group.

Under Old Testament Law, if you wanted to get on God's bad side, then mistreat a widow (Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 24:17; Psalm 94:6; Isaiah 1:17; Malachi 3:5). He saw Himself as the judge and supporter of widows (Psalm 68:5; 146:9; Proverbs 15:25). In the New Testament, concern for widows was an emphasis of the early church (Acts 6:1–6; 9:36–43). It is essential for pure religion (James 1:27; Galatians 6:10).

In writing to Timothy, Paul considers the question of who should receive support from church funds (1 Timothy 5:3–16). (To “honor” widows meant to assist them financially.[1]) A key principle is “do not let the church be burdened” (5:16). Paul gives three filters for the church to use before “enrolling” widows in an ongoing support program (cf. Acts 6:1–6). (“Taken into the number” is important in understanding 1 Timothy 5. It means “to be enrolled and put on the list.”[2]) These would not necessarily be filters for other benevolent situations (Galatians 6:10; James 1:27).

First Filter: Family (1 Timothy 5:4, 8, 16).

Does the widow have family to take care of her needs? God's

rule was a widow should not get help from the church if she can get help from her family. It is a duty of children to take care of their parents in their old age. If she had no living (or loving) children, then grandchildren^[3] were to step in (5:4). Widows had every right to expect this, for this is God's plan. "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1–3), includes benevolent responsibilities. If anyone refuses to provide for his own extended family, especially his household (spouse, children, parents), he "is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8).

How does this principle apply? Ancient societies did not have retirement pensions, Social Security, or nursing/assisted living homes. Today these make it less likely that families will have to step in, but it does not relieve the obligation when there is a need. We must honor parents and grandparents by providing for their needs. Paul did not specify how families should relieve widows.

- Some may simply give money to the widow.
- Some children may take the widow into their home. Yet not every Christian family is able to take in another person, and not every widow wants to live with her children.
- Some choose to move into the widow's home temporarily or take turns with other siblings in staying with her.
- Where there is sickness or a handicap, children may need to pay for professional care either in the widow's home or in a nursing facility.

The golden rule helps in making such choices (Matthew 7:12).

Second Filter: Age (1 Timothy 5:9, cf. 5:6, 11–15).

Has she reached sixty years of age? The dangers of travel, the ravages of disease, war, and dangerous jobs could rob a young wife of her husband. Since younger widows might be inclined to

seek male companionship in view of a future marriage, Paul excluded them from support. He presupposed (instructed) that younger women could marry or support themselves. Making it to sixty years old was rare in the first century. A woman who did reach sixty was not likely to remarry, though many marry after sixty today since lifespans are much longer. This restriction limited the number the church helped.

Paul's commandment is that the younger widows marry, raise godly families, stay at home, and be careful not to give Satan opportunity for accusation. "Younger widows" in this context would technically be any woman under sixty, but no doubt Paul's instruction to marry was geared more toward the twenty-nine-year-olds than the fifty-nine-year-olds. (A woman in her fifties would not "bear children" if she remarried, 5:14).

Paul lists reasons for refusing to support younger widows financially (5:11–14). Because of their age, they were naturally attracted to men and would want to marry again. Paul seems to imply (5:12) that each of the widows enrolled pledged herself to remain a widow and serve the Lord in the church.

Further, Paul implies that that generally, younger widows, if cared for by the church, would have time on their hands and get involved in sinful activities (5:13). They were likely to become self-indulgent (5:6). The term "pleasure" (*spatalosa*) means "to indulge oneself beyond the bounds of propriety, live luxuriously" (cf. James 5:5). Idleness leads to such sins as gadding about from house to house, gossip, and being busybodies.

Moving from the negative, Paul listed positive things he wanted younger widows to do to be approved (1 Timothy 5:14–16). Paul's point seems to be that we should not give aid to those who waste it. His solution was for widows of a marrying age to remarry and have families if possible. While not every person has to get married, marriage is natural for most people. Why remain lonely if there was yet opportunity

for a husband and a family? Of course, all of this would have to be “in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39).

“Be fruitful and multiply” was God’s mandate to the first humans (Genesis 1:28). The normal result of marriage is a family. Those today who refuse to have children because of the sinfulness of the world should consider how difficult the times were in Paul’s day. If Christians do not have children and raise them to live for God, who will?

Ineligible Widows

- Younger
- Lives for pleasure
- Sensual desires overcome her
- Gossips and busybodies

Just as an elder is to have a good reputation with outsiders (1 Timothy 3:7), and servants are not to bring reproach on God’s Word (1 Timothy 6:1), so wives are to have a good influence.

Satan (the adversary) is always alert to an opportunity or occasion to invade and destroy a Christian home. The word occasion is a military term that means “a base of operations.” A Christian wife who is not doing her job of “guiding the house” gives Satan a beachhead for his operations. While there are times when a Christian wife and mother may have to work outside the home, it must not destroy her ministry in the home. The wife who works simply to get luxuries may discover too late that she has lost some necessities. It may be good to have what money can buy if you do not lose what money cannot buy. Paul wrote that Christian women are to be “discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed” (Titus 2:5).

Third Filter: Character

Paul wrote, “Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God, and continues in supplications and prayers night and day . . . Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work” (1 Timothy 5:5, 9–10).

Family support frees the church to use its funds to care for widows who have no family. “Widows indeed” were elderly widows in a state of helplessness and hopelessness. This was before hospitals, retirement pensions, Social Security, or nursing homes. They had no husband to support them; they had no children to care for them; they had no means of making a living. They were “desolate” (kjv)—without human support, left all alone (5:5, 8).

Paul warned Timothy against using the “charity” ministry of the church to encourage people to be idle (1 Timothy 5:13). The church certainly ought to assist those who really need help, but it must not subsidize sin. Some refuse to work, or they waste resources, and then ask the church to support them. God says if a man will not work, neither should he eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). If lazy people can get handouts, why bother to go to work? Too much of God’s money, sacrificed by faithful worshipers, is wasted by well-meaning Christians. Such decisions are rarely easy.

Paul gives the requirements for widows being “taken into the number”—to be supported by the church (1 Timothy 5:5, 9–10).

Eligible Widows

- Paul wrote, “Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. And these things command, that they may be blameless” (5:5–7). The church could not care for all the widows in the city, but it should care for believers who are a part of the fellowship. We should “do good to all . . . especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). Luke 2:36–37 gives an example of this kind of woman. One preacher said his experience was that godly widows are “spiritual powerhouses” in the church and that ungodly widows create great problems for the church. They demand attention, complain about what the younger people do, and often get on the telephone and gossip.
- Faithful to her husband. “Has been the wife of one man” is literally a “one-man woman.” That is, she was not promiscuous. She must have a good marriage record (1 Timothy 5:9). We have met this requirement before, for bishops (1 Timothy 3:2) and for deacons (1 Timothy 3:12). The implication is that the widow was not a divorced woman. Faithfulness to one’s marriage vows is important in the eyes of God. We know that this is not referring to remarriage, because Paul addresses that in 1 Timothy 5:14.
- “Brought up children.” This could refer either to a widow’s own children or to orphans who needed a home. If it refers to her own children, then they would have to have died; otherwise the church would not support her. It is likely that the reference here is to the practice of rescuing abandoned children and raising them to know the Lord.
- Well known for her good works. “If she has lodged strangers” refers to hospitality (5:10). The Greek term

xenodocheō refers to welcoming strangers, and seems like *philoxenos* (“loving strangers,” 3:2). “If she has washed the saints’ feet” does not refer to a special ritual, but to the common practice of washing a guest’s feet when he arrived in the home (Luke 7:44). Hospitality is important—it was especially so in those days when travel was dangerous and safe places to sleep were scarce. It could refer in general to serving others in lowly tasks as Jesus intimated at the last supper (John 13). It was not beneath this woman’s dignity to take the place of a humble servant. “Relieved the afflicted” could cover many kinds of ministering to the needy: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, encouraging the sorrowing, for instance.

In return for care from the church, widows were to serve the church rather than themselves, contributing to stability and peace within the church and setting a good example.

References

[1] The word “honor” in 1 Timothy 5:3 means “to fix the value,” as in our word “honorarium,” an amount paid to a speaker for services.

[2] For example, it was used of the enrollment of soldiers.

[3] Nephews (kjv).