

1 Timothy – The Household of God

This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare (1 Timothy 1:18 ESV)

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14-15 ESV)

Benevolence

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1 Timothy 5:3-16

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 5.

For as long as we've been married, we've always lived in a single floor apartment. And we love it! We love being close! We love tripping over each other! You're never lonely when you're a family of five on a single floor. But one of the challenges of our setup is that floorspace is like gold! It's rare, it's precious, and it's led to many battles. When you live in close quarters, clutter is your enemy.

And, if clutter is your enemy, then Christmas is when you go to war! You watch with horror as your son opens up an indoor ball pit from his grandma. Before you can keep him ripping off the packaging and forever eliminating the possibility of a return, you see out of the corner of your eye that your daughter has unwrapped a life size stuffed pony and a plastic drum set that's somehow louder than a real drum set! Those thoughtful gifts make your living space unliveable for the entire month of January.

Here's the point: Sometimes helping hurts. Sometimes, if we're not thoughtful about our generosity, we do more harm than good.

In our passage this morning, Paul is pressing in on a particular relationship that Timothy will need to give thought to – his relationship with the widows in the church. Paul is calling on Timothy to

be generous! But he wants to make sure that Timothy adds wisdom to his generosity so that he doesn't hurt with his helping.

We have a lot of ground to cover this morning so let's get right into our passage. Look with me to 1 Timothy 5:3-16. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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.

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. (1 Timothy 5:3-16 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In this passage, Paul is outlining some *specific* instructions for Timothy's *specific* situation – namely, the large number of widows needing support in Ephesus. But I will argue this morning that the general principles that underlie this passage are universally applicable to benevolence ministry in every church everywhere.

Before we go further, I want to take a second to define the term “benevolence ministry”, because, if you didn't grow up in the church, you might not have a clue what I'm talking about. Technically speaking, “benevolence” is another word for “goodness”. The church adopted that word and used it as a catch-all for its financial support of those in need. So, for example, our church has a line in our local mission budget called “benevolence.” When a local family's house burned down this

year, we gave them a gift from benevolence. When people in our church come into financial hardship, we support them through benevolence.

Timothy knew that he needed these instructions. Before we jump in, I want to make sure that you understand that you need them as well. We are surrounded by urgent need. We are commanded by Christ to serve with mercy and generosity. We need to understand and apply these principles so that our helping doesn't wind up hurting the people that we minister to. We need this. So, let's turn our attention to the text and consider these guiding principles for benevolence ministry.

Guiding Principles For Benevolence Ministry

The first principle we find in this passage is that:

1. Benevolence must never undermine the role of the family

Paul is clearly concerned about this potential danger because he warns Timothy about it THREE times in this brief passage. In verses 3-4, Paul writes:

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. (1 Timothy 5:3-4 ESV)

It's important that the church doesn't rob the family of the opportunity to give back to their mother. She has cared for them. She has sacrificed for them. And it is *pleasing* in the sight of God for the children to likewise make sacrifices to care for her. If the church's "help" is undermining the role of the family, then the church isn't "helping" at all!

But what happens if you have a family that doesn't want to provide for their widowed mother? Apparently, this was a live issue in the Ephesian church. Paul gives this strong warning in verse 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. (1 Timothy 5:8 ESV)

Verse 4 stated the argument positively. Verse 8 now states it negatively. Not only is it pleasing in the sight of God when children sacrificially care for their needy mothers, it is also an abomination when they don't.

While Graeco-Roman culture had no welfare program, there certainly *was* an expectation that children would care for their widowed mothers. When a woman married, her father would send her out with a small investment called a “dowry¹.” That dowry would stay with her so that she would have a means of support if anything were to happen to her husband. In such cases, the expectation was that she would move in with one of her children who would then use the dowry to help provide for their mother.

In short, even in the unbelieving Roman culture, it was assumed that a widow who still had living children would be taken care of. That was the cultural norm.

But apparently in Ephesus, there were some “Christians” who were taking advantage of the church. “Why bother with the hassle of caring for my mother? The church will do it for me!” To that group, Paul says, “If you have a relative that is in need, and you refuse to provide for her, then you have *denied the faith*. You are *worse than an unbeliever*.” Paul doesn't beat around the bush.

We begin to understand some of the urgency of this principle when we scroll down to verse 16. There Paul explains that, when families neglect their God-given responsibility to care for their own, the church loses the ability to provide for those who are really in need. Paul explains:

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.** (1 Timothy 5:16 ESV)

“You need to step up and care for your mom, because there's a widow over there who doesn't have any kids. You need to assume *your* responsibility here so that we can assume *our* responsibility over there.” You can understand why Paul was so passionate. People were starving

¹ For a detailed discussion of the dowry, see John Stott, *Guard the Truth – The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 130.

to death. If we want to minister effectively to those who are in need, then we need to make sure that we don't undermine the role of the family.

With that said, Paul turns his attention to those widows without family support, and he gives Timothy specific instructions as to how to provide for them. In these instructions, we find our second principle for benevolence ministry:

2. Benevolence must never rob a person of dignity

Look with me at verse 9:

Let a widow **be enrolled** if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband (1 Timothy 5:9 ESV)

We'll get into some more of the specifics of this verse in our next point, but here I want to zoom in on the words "be enrolled".

There is debate amongst Bible scholars as to what Timothy is referring to here. It could be that, when Paul tells Timothy to "enroll" certain widows, he simply means that Timothy should formally add their names to a list of widows who are receiving ongoing support from the church.

However, when we look at church history, it appears that this "enrollment" meant something more. In the second and third century, for example, we see the development of an "order of widows" in the church. These were widows who were hired by the congregation. They were responsible for prayer, visitation, caring for the sick and the orphans, and teaching other women.²

It seems likely that Paul was addressing *something like that* in these instructions. The widows who were in greatest need and who had demonstrated a track record of godliness and faithfulness were enrolled. They were essentially brought onto the church's regular payroll. In this way, the church creatively found a solution to address the crisis in their city. They provided long-term, ongoing support for many widows who had nowhere else to turn.

² See William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – World Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 300-302.

But notice that they didn't demean them with a handout – they dignified them with a responsibility. John Stott says here:

Christian relief should never demean its beneficiaries, but rather increase their sense of dignity.³

Whatever benevolent needs we address as a congregation – whether we are ministering to widows, working with those experiencing homelessness, or helping a family after a job loss – we need to be careful that our attempts to help don't rob people of their dignity. We will need to think very carefully about how we can enable those receiving support to give back in proportion to their abilities.

That was the second principle in the text, but the third is found in the very same verse. Look with me again at verse 9, only this time we will read to the end of verse 10:

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. (1 Timothy 5:9-10 ESV)

Here, we learn that:

3. Benevolence must always be distributed with prudence and priority

This passage almost feels offensive at first glance, does it not? Paul is telling Timothy to be unapologetically discriminatory in his distribution of support. If Timothy is going to have any hope of really making a difference in Ephesus, then he is going to have to learn the art of saying “no” to some people. He will need to be prudent – to ask the right questions. He will need to prioritize – like a nurse doing triage in the crowded emergency room.

³ John Stott, *Guard the Truth – The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 135.

The church in Ephesus was limited in its resources. To be clear, so too is the church in Orillia. They couldn't put every widow in the city on the church's payroll. Therefore, Timothy was to ask probing questions and to make sure that those limited positions of full-time care went to the women who deserved them.

So, for example, he was to show priority to the older women. This was because the younger women would have had more options available to them. They would have had an easier time finding another husband, and more energy to work to provide some income. Timothy needed to factor that in as he decided who would receive support and who would not.

He was also to prioritize the women who had a track record of faithfulness. They were to be women who had demonstrated fidelity to their husbands while they were alive. They were to be the kind of women who were faithful in their parenting. They should have a track record of hospitality and of serving others and their lives should be marked by good works. We see this same idea in Paul's letter to the church in Galatia. He wrote:

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and **especially to those who are of the household of faith.** (Galatians 6:10 ESV)

To be clear, Paul *does* call upon the church to do good to ALL. I'm sure that there were many unbelieving widows in Ephesus who received support from the church, and that is as it should be. Amen? Amen. But the *greatest* support was to be reserved for those living faithfully in the household of God. I wonder if you can say amen to *that*?

We are inclined to bristle at this principle. If anything, we gravitate in exactly the *opposite* direction. But God's word calls us to give priority to those who are in the household of God.

Why is that? One reason must flow out of the reality that we are a family. If it is an abomination for a biological son to ignore his destitute mother, then it is also an abomination for a spiritual son to ignore his destitute mother. If a member of this church were homeless, and none of us took them in, that would be an abomination, wouldn't it? So that's certainly one reason.

I suspect another reason why God has designed the church to function this way is for our witness. The love and support shown *in here* should be a compelling witness to the world *out there*. When we come around each other in times of need, that ought to leave an impression on our unsaved family and friends.

Another reason for this prioritization of the household of faith surely stems from what Paul warns against in verses 11-13. Look there with me:

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. (1 Timothy 5:11-13 ESV)

One of the reasons why most of our benevolence goes to people within the household of God is because – and this is our fourth principle:

4. Benevolence must never enable sin

These verses are a bit confusing at first, because it almost appears that Paul is condemning remarriage for widows. But that can't be the case because he goes on to say in verse 14:

So I would have younger widows marry (1 Timothy 5:14a ESV)

Why, then, does Paul say in verse 12 that the younger widows' desire to remarry will bring them under condemnation? Most commentators believe that the women who were enrolled in this order of widows would have taken a vow not to remarry. They would have vowed instead to devote themselves to service of Christ and the church. Therefore, Paul says, enrolling younger widows was a bad idea because they would face the temptation to break their oath and to remarry – thus abandoning their vow to Christ. I think that's likely what Paul was warning against here.

But remarriage wasn't Paul's only concern for these younger women. Apparently, there were also some on the church's payroll who were using their time to wander from house to house spreading

gossip in the city. They were roaming the streets and causing trouble – and all of this on the church’s tab! So, Paul tells Timothy:

So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and **give the adversary no occasion for slander.** (1 Timothy 5:14 ESV)

I have blown by this passage 100 times, but I was really struck by it as I prepared the sermon this week. William Mounce captures the scene vividly:

The picture it paints is of the enemy gaining a toehold in the church because of the widows’ misconduct, and from this toehold making his attack upon the church.⁴

Just think about that for a moment. Paul is saying here that we can give the devil a foothold to do damage in our church and in our city THROUGH OUR BENEVOLENCE! If we are not prayerful and intentional, our “helping” – our CHARITY – can actually function like a weapon aimed right back at the church! Have you ever thought about that? Apparently, the Ephesians hadn’t.

Because of their carelessness, the church in Ephesus was *funding* one of primary agents that was tearing them down! With part of their offering, they were funding the preaching of the gospel. But with the other part of their offering, they were paying people to wander around from house to house spreading rumors, being lazy, and setting fires that the church would need to try and put out.

This problem wasn’t unique to Ephesus either. Paul had to give a similar rebuke to the Thessalonians:

For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. (2 Thessalonians 3:10 ESV)

In Thessalonica, there were some men who had become convinced that the world was about to end, so they decided not to work anymore and to lounge around all day living off the generosity of the church. But Paul wouldn’t have that in Thessalonica, he wouldn’t have it in Ephesus, and he won’t have it here! The church should not be funding sin! The church should not be funding

⁴ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – World Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 297.

laziness! The church should not be funding gossip! If our helping is enabling people to spend the entire day moseying about, stirring up trouble, then our helping *is* hurting. As John Stott says here:

The church's sense of social responsibility is not to encourage irresponsibility in others.⁵

Because that kind of help doesn't help anyone except the devil! Our benevolence must be marked by prudence and priority because our benevolence must never enable sin.

Now, if we were to conclude right here, then I suspect we would all walk away asking, "Why bother with benevolence at all?" If we just gave it up all together, then we would never undermine the role of the family. We would never risk robbing someone of their dignity. We wouldn't have to bother with prudence and priority. We would avoid the pitfall of enabling sin! That sounds easier, doesn't it? Let's offload this to the government! Let's hand it off to parachurch organizations! Right?

Well, according to the word of God, that's not an option for us. Having acknowledged the challenges and pitfalls that accompany benevolence ministry, I want to conclude where Paul begins. The clearest and most significant principle that we discover in this passage is that:

5. The church must be benevolent

Paul tells Timothy in verse 3:

Honour widows who are truly widows. (1 Timothy 5:3 ESV)

Because, as complicated as it can become, the household of God can never – must never – turn a blind eye to the need that exists all around us. The church must be marked by her mercy. In fact, one of the primary reasons – humanly speaking – why the church grew so rapidly despite serious opposition was because of the compelling witness of the church's care and concern for the needy. Ruth Tucker – a church historian – presents a letter written by a Roman emperor in the 4th century:

⁵ John Stott, *Guard the Truth – The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 135.

Emperor Julian, a Hellenist, was concerned that members of his own religion not be outshone by Christians whom he referred to as "atheists": "Atheism has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them."⁶

When we get this right, the culture notices. Our mercy ministry should set us apart from the world. Jesus taught us to minister to the whole person. He taught *and* he healed. Writing to the early church, the Apostle James explained:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27 ESV)

In the same way that Jesus went to the lost, the sick, and the destitute, so too did his church reach out in love, charity, and HONOUR to those who had been neglected by the world. And the witness of the gospel spread dramatically as a result.

Our passage for this morning is a needed reminder that our word ministry must always be accompanied by good works. In fact, our fifth core value as a church states:

5. We deeply believe that our Gospel presentation should balance word and deed, in a faithful and culturally relevant manner.

Word and deed. Preaching and reaching. Spiritual needs and physical needs. We must minister to the whole person. Amy Carmichael was a missionary in India. She was used mightily by the Lord, but she had many critics. They accused her of placing too much emphasis on meeting the physical needs of the people that she was ministering to, to which she replied:

... one cannot save and then pitchfork souls into heaven... Souls are more or less securely fastened to bodies... and as you cannot get the souls out and deal with them separately, you have to take them both together.⁷

⁶ Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 27.

⁷ Amy Carmichael as quoted by Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 241.

That's exactly right, isn't it?

It was complicated in Ephesus. There was so much need. The system was being exploited. There were enough theological problems to keep Timothy tied up for a lifetime. But Paul wanted Timothy to know that there could be no faithful ministry in Ephesus if the situation with the widows was not addressed. You cannot faithfully preach the gospel while turning a blind eye to the poor. Such a ministry is antithetical to the ministry that Jesus modelled for us. When we stand before him and give an account for our ministry here at Redeemer, we want to hear him say:

‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:34b-40 ESV)

Redeemer, we are the recipients of such a wonderful grace. While we were spiritually poor, Jesus made us rich! He took our place on the cross and he gave us life! Each and every one of us is a walking, talking, monument of mercy!

And that mercy should overflow.

It should overflow to widows; to the homeless; to the immigrant; to the orphan; to the neighbour; to the city. Through our generosity, the aroma of Christ should follow us everywhere we go.

So, as we conclude, how are we doing with that? Are we generous with our time? Are we generous with our talents? Are we generous with our treasure? Do we resemble the King who left heaven's throne to lift us up out of death? When we stand before Him, will there be any record of us ever serving him?

And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:34-40 ESV)

In a sermon preached in the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus challenged his church with this word. I think it is an appropriate challenge for us as we conclude this morning. He said:

While we may, let us visit Christ, let us heal Christ, let us feed Christ, let us clothe Christ, let us welcome Christ, let us honor Christ. ... Since the Lord of all will have mercy and not sacrifice... let us offer to him through the poor who are today downtrodden.⁸

To that end, let's pray together.

⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus as quoted by Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 63.