

Truth for Today

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Paul's First Letter to Timothy: 1 Timothy 5:1-25

I guess that if we were to ask the question "Which chapters best sum up the Christian faith?", then I suppose that top of many people's lists would be chapters such as Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 13 or 1 Corinthians 15. Perhaps few would even consider 1 Timothy 5, but as we shall see today the subject matter of 1 Timothy 5 goes to the very heart of practical Christian living.

With a general election soon upon us, many conscientious Christians will be asking themselves to what extent they have a duty to shape the society in which we live, and how this can best be achieved. Some would see the enlargement of the state, so that it can provide everything for all, as the right expression of social Christianity. Others may feel that the empowering of the individual, so that one can ensure individual responsibility, as the best way to improve society. However, there is a third way, and we shall, with God's help, look at aspects of this today. Prayer, and the practical application of a vibrant and living relationship with Jesus Christ will change society for the better, more than a thousand votes ever could.

It has been said that "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has just not been tried." There is some truth in these words, and 1 Timothy 5:1-25 brings us to real everyday Christianity. 1 Timothy 5 can broadly be divided into four sections:

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| 1. Right relations in the church | 1 Timothy 5:1-2; |
| 2. Right treatment for older widows by the church | 1 Timothy 5:3-10; |
| 3. Right actions for younger widows in the church | 1 Timothy 5:11-16; |
| 4. Right attitudes concerning the elders of a church | 1 Timothy 5:17-25. |

1. Right relations in the church (1 Timothy 5:1-2)

"Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, the younger women as sisters, with all purity", 1 Timothy 5:1-2.

Paul calls Timothy to behave in a way that will neither give opportunity for some to despise his youth, nor give offence. As is typical of Paul, what he calls others to do we see he has himself done. In 2 Corinthians 6:3, Paul says, "We give no offence in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed." In 2 Corinthians 6:4-10 he goes on to show how this would be done in practice. At all times, Paul would behave so as to commend his ministry, and he would have Timothy do likewise. Sometimes, when we are doing "our bit", we tread on the toes of others and cause bad feeling between our fellow believers. There is none of that here. Timothy, perhaps in his early 30s, was to address older men in the church with respect. How much reverence would be due if I had to correct a fault in my own natural father? How much more so when the matter concerns a spiritual father! Younger men were to be treated as brothers, older women as mothers and younger women as sisters. The church is to live together as a family. In the way that it functions, in its tender expression of care for one another, the church is to reflect the ideal family.

Too often there has been a "them and us" mentality. Young Christians view older ones as out of touch and reluctant to change. Older believers see younger Christians as lightweight and uncommitted. That is not how a natural family works, nor is it right for the Christian family. Since we are all so immensely precious to God, then we should value each other deeply.

As a child, I remember all too clearly having my faults pointed out to me by my older brother and sister. Did I love them any the less for it? Of course not, because they were family and there is a robustness in family love. For sure, I did not always take their advice, but deep down I knew they cared, and that made all the difference. Between us, we all need to practise a weekly ministry of care and practical consideration for one another, so that when difficulties do arise we are able to deal with them because we know our brothers and sisters care for us. But there is one other point here. Younger women were to be treated with all purity (1 Timothy 5:1). Timothy was not to abuse his position of authority. Indeed, his position in the church at Ephesus made him more liable to be compromised. We are all part of the church of God. His character should be lived out in us. It is His honour that is at stake. Nothing must be done that

could, in any way, reflect poorly on our Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Society constantly cheapens moral uprightness. Paul warns Timothy to be on his guard against this.

2. Right treatment for older widows by the church (1 Timothy 5:3-10)

Who said that Christianity was all pie in the sky? The church was to have an especial care for those who were most in need of care. Honour here, as elsewhere in this chapter, is to be understood in the widest sense. It does involve financial support, but that is only one facet. It involves the provision of company and help, and the recognition of the particular ministry widows are able to exercise.

Three things in 1 Timothy 5:5-10 characterise those widows that were to be honoured:

- a. Widows were without any financial support from the state;
- b. Widows were trusted in God; and
- c. Widows in the home

a. Widows were without any financial support from the state

First of all, it must be remembered that widows were without any financial support from the state. Paul points out that it is the immediate family that has the prior responsibility to care for a widow. Only those that had no other family were to be supported by the church. The resources of the church, whether in money or time, belong to the Lord, and are to be wisely stewarded. They were not to be used to remove the responsibility of others. A widow's children, and even her grandchildren, are first called upon to shoulder their responsibility. How this flies in the face of what the world does today! How many people today cry out, asking what is the state doing to care for the elderly. How loud are the complaints that it is insufficient.

Paul commands Timothy to remind believers that it is their frontline Christian duty to care for their own family. What an opportunity we have today to show the world the better things that belong to Christ! Let us state again, it is the responsibility of children, and grandchildren, to care for their elderly relations. This may be within the family home, or, by mutual consent, in residential care, but the onus to ensure sufficient housing, company, diet etc. rests not with the state, nor even on the church, but within the family. It is not incidental that the first commandment given with a promise of blessing was "Honour your father and your mother", Deuteronomy 5:16 (see Ephesians 6:1-3). Only where there was no other family was the church then to take up this task gladly.

In passing, it is instructive that the role of grandparents is mentioned here. What a tremendously valuable resource grandparents are! How often young children in particular will learn from grandparents what they might rebel against learning from their parents. One can only wonder how much Timothy benefited spiritually from his grandmother Lois (see 2 Timothy 1:5), and how much pressure was lifted from the shoulders of his parents by her wise support. There has never been a greater need for spiritually active grandparents than today, when the traditional family is so under attack.

b. Widows were trusted in God

The second characteristic of these older widows was that they trusted in God. The whole direction of their lives was to come from God. Closely linked to this was the fact that their lives were to be marked by prayer. I remember during my university days meeting an old lady for the first time. Though I did not know her, she knew me, because she used to pray for me, and others, for hours each day. That sort of prayer life can only be sustained by a careful interest in the lives of others. What a valuable ministry this is! Again today, how much we need the saints of God to spend hours each day in prayer. Necessarily, this is a ministry particularly suited to the elderly.

So, in 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul tells Timothy to remind the church of their duty. Jesus had spoken out against those who had, under the guise of spiritual service, neglected their duty (Matthew 15:5). Paul plainly states that to neglect to care for one's own family is to deny one's faith. 1 Timothy 5:9-10 indicate which widows were to be cared for by the church. They were to be over 60, a relatively more advanced age than it is today. To them, it would suggest all hope of remarriage was passed. She was to have been faithful to her husband and to have been busy with good works. The order in which these good works is brought before us is instructive.

c. Widows in the home

- i. Widows brought up children
- ii. Widows showed hospitality and service

i. Widows brought up children

First, and foremost, is bringing up children (not necessarily her own). There is no more important a task than raising children for God. Scripture does not insist that a mother should stay at home, and raise her children, so nor should we. That said, we do not honour and praise highly enough those who choose to sacrifice a career, and all the benefits which that entails, in order to concentrate wholeheartedly on raising children. Though the state may not recognise the work these women do, and often the church does not value them enough, rest assured that one day there will be a reward, far greater than any pay cheque, when the Master says, "Well done! Good and faithful servant..." (see Matthew 25:21).

ii. Widows showed hospitality and service

Secondly, these widows have been characterised by hospitality, then service to other believers and, finally, a general benevolence to others. Such godly habits do not die easily, and one can safely assume that these features would still be present in the lives of these deserving widows. How much such a widow would have to give to the church in return!

3. Right actions for younger widows in the church (1 Timothy 5:11-16)

Having dealt with the matter of the older widows Paul warns Timothy against including younger widows on a list for support by the church. Such widows faced two dangers. Firstly, many in that society turned to prostitution in order to keep themselves. Thus Paul urges them to marry again to guard against this. Secondly, if the church pledged to support them, some, on being widowed, may have pledged themselves to work in the church in a way that when they were married they had not been able to do. The church was not to encourage this course of action, as few are truly given the gift of celibacy that Paul outlines in 1 Corinthians 7. Later, if romance blossomed again, then that pledge to Christ would have to be broken. Paul suggests, then, that those who were widowed while still young, should look to remarry, and then to have children and to rule the home.

In 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul uses a military metaphor. The word in the original Greek likens the home to a military base of operations. What an exciting way for us to view our homes! We are in enemy territory, and shall be until the day that Jesus returns for us to take us to His Father's home. Is my home a base of operations for Him to use in reaching out to an unsaved world? Far from being anti-marriage, Paul sees the home created from such a marriage as the ideal base from which the work of God could spread. How honouring to Christ it is when these directions are pursued! But let us for a moment assume that younger widows were to be supported by the church. With no need to earn a living, and no other formal commitments, the risk is high that such a widow would tend towards idleness. Worse might follow, as opportunities for gossiping and interfering would tempt at least some. As always, simple obedience to the word of God not only honours Him, but is for our own good.

There is no obvious reason why the woman only is mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:14-16, as the instructions should apply equally to both brothers and sisters in the church. William Kelly, perhaps better translates the verse "If any believing hath widows, let such an one relieve them, and let not the assembly be burdened, that it may relieve those that are really widows" (*W. Kelly, An Exposition of the Two Epistles to Timothy*) Men and women alike have family responsibilities. That said, I suppose that it is often the woman who will shoulder the greater burden, in practice, in the honouring and care for older relatives.

4. The Right attitudes concerning elders in the church (1 Timothy 5:17-25)

The distinction between the "elders" in 1 Timothy 5:17-25, and older men in general, in 1 Timothy 5:1, needs to be made. From the New Testament account, elders appear to have been chosen only by the Apostles, or those who had been delegated to do so by the Apostles. Elders were to exercise their authority over a particular local church. The work which they performed is not to be confused with the gifts the Lord Jesus gives to individuals (Romans 12:6-8), who exercise their gift in more than one local church.

At a time when the whole Bible had not been written, these elders were to exercise an especial care for the spiritual wellbeing of a church. No wonder they were to be worthy of double honour! (1 Timothy 5:17) Let us be careful here. We are not saying that they are to be paid double! Undoubtedly some elders would be well off financially. To pay such individuals at all would be dishonouring, as it could only increase the risk of soul-deadening materialism. On the other hand, the elders were to be able to concentrate on their work of maintaining godly order in the church, in public and private, without financial worries to distract them. These men were to be valued and accorded due reverence. How

often those that rise to prominence are subject to backbiting and malicious rumour. No, double honour would guard against the risk of this. In passing, it is worthy of note that Paul himself shunned the support he could rightly have claimed (see Acts 20:33-35). It is also noteworthy that Paul quotes from Luke 10:7, confirming the Gospel account of his companion, Luke, as part of the divinely inspired word of God.

Accusations against an elder were only to be considered if they were made by at least two or three witnesses, 1 Timothy 5:19, (see also Deuteronomy 19:15). Necessarily, elders would, at times, have had to discipline others in the church. This might have left them open to all kinds of grudges. To prevent the work of an elder becoming impossible, divine authority insists on multiple witnesses before a complaint against an elder could even be considered. If proven, however, the judgement was to be made publicly. There was not to be any sweeping under the carpet within the church. God's honour had to be seen to be maintained. How immeasurably damaging it is when those in positions of authority within the church abuse that trust. How solemn, then, the words that Paul uses in 1 Timothy 5:21. Timothy was reminded of the fact that all he did was in full view of God, Father and Son, as well as the angels. This is not the first time that Paul reminds his readers that practical behaviour should be affected by the fact that we are watched by an angelic host (1 Corinthians 11:10). We fool ourselves into believing that all that matters is what can be seen. We need to remind ourselves that we live in a spiritual world, and that we are engaged in a spiritual warfare (see Ephesians 6:10-20).

Associations that Timothy was to keep

Next Paul moves on to the associations that Timothy was to keep. The outward righteousness which should mark an inward commitment to Christ is emphasised. Timothy was not to jump on any spiritual "bandwagons". Soberly and carefully, he was to weigh the actions of others. The act of laying on of hands indicated a "oneness", an agreement with, the one who had the hands laid on (1 Timothy 5:22). Timothy was to beware of hasty decisions to associate himself with others. These are wise words for us today, when so often the latest fad or whim is adopted with much vigour. Later, they are often shown to be hollow or dishonouring to God.

Timothy was to keep himself pure, physically and spiritually. How difficult this is! This takes real spiritual energy. It takes daily prayer and time spent with the Lord. How easily a poster, or advert on TV, or a misspoken word from another can give rise to impure thoughts or actions. That which is impure surrounds us, but we are not to give in to this world's siren charms. No, we are to keep ourselves pure, though doubtless we can also assist each other. The responsibility lies with me to do what is right.

This was to be no pretentious outward purity which left the soul untouched. So Paul could reassure Timothy that he should take "a little wine, for his stomach's sake" (1 Timothy 5:23). The care of the elderly Apostle for his younger spiritual son is so refreshing. Yet even in this highly personal touch the danger of alcohol is noted. It is a "little" wine. So much misery, so much waste, so much pain is still caused by our rejection of the simple word, "do not get drunk with wine" (Ephesians 5:18).

Outward appearances

In closing the chapter, Paul sums up the matter of outward appearances (1 Timothy 5:24-25). God alone knows the end from the beginning. He is able to see the secret sins as well as the visible ones. He, too, knows the many tasks done for Him, but unnoticed by everyone else. Timothy was not to make hasty decisions on first appearances. Instead, he was to wait for guidance from the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul's wise advice to Timothy has stood the test of time. We, in our day, are to be active in maintaining the honour and glory of the One who "loved us and gave Himself for us" (see Galatians 2:20).

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