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1 Timothy 5:3-16

Twelfth Message

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WHO CARES FOR WIDOWS?

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

On Graduation Sunday, parents take great delight in seeing their children walk across the stage, basking in the honor and praise. As a proud father, I always get a lump in my throat on these occasions, whether it's pre-school, high school, college or graduate school. But as we contemplate our graduates, it might be good to consider who the Lord would have us stage before the world.

Paul is instructing Timothy on the practical side of how to restore the church in the city of Ephesus. Two key things, says Paul, were necessary to accomplishing this: the priority of the Word of God, and the creation of a family atmosphere in the church. Members are to be built up spiritually by the Word and yoked together in bonds of love. Within this context of the family, Paul turns his attention now to a special class within the church, that of widows. John Stott gives voice to a widow's plight:

Too often a married woman is defined only in relation to her husband. Then, if he dies, she loses not only her spouse but her social significance as well. In Scripture, however, widows, orphans and aliens are valued for who they are in themselves, and are said to deserve special honor, protection and care.¹

I. The Divine Mandate to Care for Widows

A. Old Testament roots of compassion

Godly concern and care for widows has deep roots in Old Testament teaching. The psalmist declares that compassion for widows and orphans is at the very heart of who God is:

**A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.**

God sets the lonely in families... (Psa 68:5-6a)

To protect widows from exploitation and starvation, God decreed in his law that at harvest time, a portion of the yield of fruit trees and vineyards was to be left so that widows, orphans, and aliens could gather the gleanings and eat with dignity. Every third year, a portion of the tithe was given to the widows "so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied" (Deut 26:12). The prophet Isaiah testified that caring for widows was an essential part of the definition of what it meant to be the "true Israel":

**Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow. (Isa 1:17)**

In the New Testament, Jesus is a living example of the Father's compassion toward widows. Luke's gospel has the poignant story of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17). She not only lost her husband, but now also her son, and with it all hope of future support. As Jesus approached the city, Luke tells us that "his heart went out to her," or more literally, he was "stirred to the core with compassion." The verb *splanchnizomai* comes from a root meaning "inward parts," "loins" or "womb;" and then "seat of feelings, or passions." In the New Tes-

tament, this verb is used only in relation to Jesus (with the exception of three parables²) to describe a divine depth of compassion that instantly responds with acts of mercy:

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. (Luke 7:13-14)

Jesus raised her son from the dead and "gave him back to his mother," lest she be bereft not only of family, but also of any possibility of future financial support. Jesus' compassion and actions model the responsibility the church has to financially care for its widows. As James affirms in his epistle, "pure and faultless" religion is "to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (Jas 1:27).

Given that the church is an extended family, Paul says we should give widows the same honor we grant to our parents, which means providing for them in their old age.

B. The abuses to generosity

To fulfill the divine mandate, the early church mobilized itself to meet the needs of widows in their community. Women who had lost their husbands took a vow of consecration to serve Christ and the church and were then enrolled on the church's support list. However, as anyone who attempts to administer charitable funds knows, it becomes necessary to impose guidelines to prevent abuses of the system. Generosity is fraught with danger. When money is given to those who deserve it, others less deserving feel they have the "right" to be supported as well. But with limited funds, hard choices have to be made lest the church become a welfare state, or worse yet, subsidize ungodly behavior that would tarnish its reputation in the world.

Abuse was rampant in Ephesus. Many younger widows who had been enrolled and set aside to serve the church were becoming gossips and busybodies. Some fell prey to false teachers, perhaps even being sexually involved with them, and began spreading false teaching while they were being supported on the church payroll. So Paul spells out some practical guidelines defining what constitutes a "true" widow, adding some corrective measures to respond to current abuses. Paul's chief concern is to restore the church's reputation by making sure the church community subsidizes only those who are worthy of support.

II. Defining a True Widow (1 Tim 5:3-10)

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day

to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give the people these instructions, so that no one may be open to blame. Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord's people, helping those in trouble, and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. (1 Tim 5:3-10 TNIV)

A. No surviving family

Though the church is an extended family of the home, God's decree is that ministry should never violate our responsibilities to the home. In contrast to cults that demand complete allegiance, to the exclusion of one's family of origin, Jesus calls us to live responsibly in both realms. It is never right to abandon our responsibility to support our parents, using God's call as an excuse. Jesus exposed this practice among the Pharisees, condemning it as blatant wickedness (Mark 7:11). Therefore Paul directs that widows who have surviving family members do not qualify for financial assistance. Giving financial would usurp the responsibility of their children, who owe a debt of honor to their parents. If there were any doubt about the gravity of Paul's words, he reminds us that "Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (v 8). Paul's words are a severe rebuke to our culture, which glories in its youth and abandons the elderly.

But Christians are to provide the same kind of care for our parents that they gave us at birth. When they can no longer care for themselves, we are to prepare a room for them and receive them with as much joy as when they welcomed us home from the hospital. We should feed, clothe, and hold them with the embracing love that we received, until the day we lay them in the grave. It is not a task to be shunned or done grudgingly, but a time of supreme holiness that binds family members together and seals them in love.

I owe a great debt to my sister Andrea in this regard. Just after her retirement from a superb teaching career, rather than living a life of ease, she devoted the last seven years to caring for my parents, first for my father, who died in 2001, and then my mother, who passed away last summer. As my mother was in her last months, my sister's husband began to decline, and she had turned her attention to his care until he passed away last month. She not only oversaw all the arrangements for each of the memorial services, she also hosted our family, friends, and relatives in her home. During her husband's final days, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, but postponed surgery until after the funeral so that she could fully honor her husband. Her sacrificial service during these last years strengthened our family in the bonds of love.

The burden to care for the elderly becomes more pronounced in our modern world as medical technology has extended our life span by decades. How should we approach the future? Like a good parent, Paul told the Corinthians that he did not want to be a burden to them when he came to visit for, "After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children" (1 Cor 12:14). John Stott puts the application in the plainest of terms:

This is a plain biblical warrant for a life insurance policy, which is only a self-imposed savings plan for the benefit of our depen-

dants. It is not a contradiction of Jesus who told us to "take no thought" for the future, since he was prohibiting worry, not prudence of forethought.³

Paul's second guideline is age.

B. Age

The apostle gives Timothy the authority to draw the line with regard to age. Sixty was the cultural norm for old age, the age when remarriage was considered to be out of the question, and when the weakening effects of years would leave one incapable of providing her own support. The widow that Paul has in view is quite alone and without any means of financial support.

C. Character

And yet, age alone was not sufficient. As Quinn observes, godliness is not automatic, therefore the third guideline concerns a widow's proven character.

The widow's state, like the married state, does not of itself magically produce holiness or automatically put a claim on the congregation. The "real" widow is ultimately a work of God, existing simply and solely for the sake of God, and to that extent makes real claims on the generosity of the church.⁴

Here we learn that support for the widows had a greater purpose than merely giving aid to the destitute. Aid was indeed given, but for the purpose of magnifying a widow's character and ministry to the highest level. The church is not a welfare organization but a counterculture designed to magnify the majesty of meekness before the world.

Widows are mentioned six times in Mark and twelve times in Luke-Acts, not only as objects of concern, but also as icons of godliness. It is as if God uses the grief of abandonment to forge rare, gem-like qualities that magnify his holiness on earth. For as Paul suggests, when widows are truly left alone, they perhaps like no one else learn to put their hope in God "existing simply and solely for the sake of God."⁵ Once they were put on the list, they took on a role as significant as that of elders and deacons, bearing witness by their vow to the beauty of singular devotion to God and of our permanent union with Christ.

The first widow Luke mentions is Anna (Luke 2:36-38). She had been married but seven years when she lost her husband. After he died, she gave her life completely to the service of the Lord at the temple, worshipping night and day with fasting and prayer. After 84 years of faithful service, she became an icon of priestly intercession for God's Messianic kingdom and was honored by God to welcome his son Jesus to his spiritual home:

Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38)

As a prophet, Anna reignites age-old prophecies, which for centuries lay dormant until the appointed time of the Messiah and his song. And now, like her Old Testament counterpart Hannah, she bursts into thanks, rejoicing that the new age had come, "for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem" (Isa 52:9). The rare verb that Luke uses to describe Anna's thanksgiving (*anthomologeomai*) occurs only one other time in the LXX of Psalm 79:13. It describes the "praise" which God's people will continually give when God acts to vindicate his people and restore them from exile:

**Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
will praise (*anthomologeomai*) you forever;
from generation to generation
we will proclaim your praise. (Psa 79:13)**

So Anna becomes an icon of devotion to God, of relentless intercession for God's people, and of ecstatic praise that rejoices in God's faithfulness to fulfill his promises. The reward of relentless prayer is also modeled in the parable of the widow who is able to secure justice with an unrighteous judge through her persistence, in Luke 18:

If tears were proverbial with widows, so were their petitions for justice and aid against their oppressors, and the unremitting persistence of the widow, in this parable, for justice on earth becomes a mirror of the way in which one must storm heaven, too, with petitions.⁶

Living in a world where the rich and famous seem to have a monopoly on influence, we would do well to reflect on the gospels' canonization of widows. If we are ever tempted to downplay their influence, Jesus' statement about the widow at the temple treasury comes like a slap in the face:

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on." (Mark 12:41-44)

Taking his seat opposite the treasury, Jesus observes the spectacle before him. Crowds of people press forward to contribute their gifts to the temple. Each contribution resounds with a loud clanging noise as the coins are thrown into the trumpet-like receptacles. And everyone knew when the rich made their weighty deposits: the noise would ring out across the entire courtyard.

Onto the scene comes a poor widow. Her poverty could very well have come about because the scribes had devoured her estate. Yet she is not bitter. She hasn't come to the temple for justice, but to worship. Pressing forward, she throws in two lepta, the smallest coins in circulation, about 1/8 cent apiece. They barely make a trumpet sound. She had but two coins. She could have kept one, but she threw in both. This consisted of her very life, for she loved God with her whole heart and gave him her complete adoration. Such faith so deeply touches Jesus he hurriedly calls his disciples to instruct them about her faith. To their surprise they learn that she, not the rich, was the greatest contributor to the treasury.

What moves God is not the amount of the gift but the amount of trust and love which the gift symbolizes. The gifts of the rich were not burdensome to them. What were they but a generous tip taken out of their surpluses? The poor widow's gift, although tiny, was symbolic of her complete surrender to God. With those two weightless coins she cast herself wholly into his arms. Her glowing example, though nameless and small, has motivated more selfless giving to the kingdom than all the wealth of the rich.

For widows to be considered for support, therefore, it was essential that they have a reputation for godliness, demonstrated by their devotion to God, loyalty in their marriage, and a proven ministry to the church, evidenced by their generous hospitality and sacrificial

service. Washing the feet of the saints was the first kindness extended by a host to a guest. Either he or a slave would remove a guest's sandals, bathe his dusty feet in warm water, and dry them with a towel. Following the example of Jesus, who took on this role for his disciples, this became a metaphor for humble service. A widow worthy of support must not only possess such humility, but her concerns must also have a broader horizon than her immediate home, for she is "helping those in trouble."

In Acts 9:36-41, there appears to be a group of widows in Joppa who gathered to assist the needs of the poor by sewing garments for them. One of their number, Luke tells us, "was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor" (v 36). Her life and ministry were so vital to the community that when she fell sick and died, the disciples sent for the apostle Peter to do for her what Jesus had done for the widow's son in Nain:

Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. (Acts 9:39-41)

The raising of Tabitha demonstrates not just the value of her life, but also the supreme value of her ministry to the community. Just as the gospels and Acts lift up widows as icons of faith, generosity, and devotion, so now every local church should similarly exalt the widows in their midst who are such examples.

Next, Paul turns his attention to give instructions to the younger widows.

III. Instructions for Younger Widows (1 Tim 5:11-15)

As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to. So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan. (1 Tim 5:11-15)

Paul warns that putting younger widows on the list could be detrimental to their spiritual life, for two reasons. First, because they were young, sensual desires might cause them to want to marry, thereby forsaking their earlier vow of consecration to the Lord. And second, setting someone aside for full time ministry when she was young might lead to irresponsible behavior. With a wealth of free time and too little responsibility, young widows in Ephesus were becoming busybodies, turning charitable visits into idle gossip. Such behavior quickly turns meddlesome and disruptive, giving the devil a strong foothold within the church. So Paul advises that these younger widows should marry, raise a family, and manage a home. This is hard counsel, but it is good advice. Managing a home is a

natural yoke that disciplines us in godliness. Plutarch remarks that “a woman...should be stable, domestic, and difficult to remove from her place.”⁷

In Martin Luther’s time, monasteries and nunneries were sources of great idleness and sexual impurity. The Reformers dealt with this problem by emptying the nunneries and marrying off the nuns. One nun, Catharina von Bora, became engaged to a former student of Wittenberg. But after he had proposed, to Catharina’s grief he changed his mind and married a rich woman. Luther then arranged a match between Catharina and another gentleman, but she refused, intimating to a friend that she would not object to marrying Martin himself. Luther confided to a friend, “Suddenly, and while I was occupied with far other thoughts, the Lord has plunged me into marriage.” When asked why he married Catharina, he said, “I wish to please my father, to tease the Pope, and to vex the Devil!”⁸

The restoration of marriage for church leaders and the elevation of the home during the Reformation were perhaps as significant a contribution to Western civilization as was the return to the authority of the Scriptures. This is a needed word today, in our fast paced society that leeches the home of all its vitality as we run from event to event.

IV. Concluding Word (1 Tim 5:16)

If any woman who is a believer has widows in her care, she should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need. (5:16)

Paul concludes with an appeal to a group of wealthy women in the church who had extended hospitality to widows less fortunate than themselves. He urges this group to stay the course and continue to care for these widows so that the church can concentrate its support on the true widows who had no one to support them.

V. Implications for the Modern Church

A. The importance of purity over activity

It seems Paul is far more concerned about the godly character of the church as the vehicle for evangelism than the number of full-time Christian workers the church can support. In a word, purity is more important than activity. When we are presented with so many appeals from young people to go into full time Christian work, we must always ask the question, Is this the genuine call of God, or is there a danger of bypassing the natural yokes of discipline, raising a family, and laboring in a job, that God has put in place for the purpose of godliness?

B. The basis of full-time ministry

In the first century, church funds were very limited, thus funding was provided only for those who were considered worthy of being set aside for ministry. The church was not meant to be a welfare organization. Being supported was not a right but an honor achieved by few through a long and faithful record. The purpose behind supporting widows, or indeed other believers, was to grant them even more freedom to participate in an already established ministry.

C. The importance of the home

The home is the primary place where responsibility is to be learned, the crucible where the flesh is crucified. The family is God’s yoke, designed to discipline us in the ministry of caring for others. Idleness, by contrast, presents the devil with a tailor-made opportunity to do his handiwork.

And the home is an excellent platform for ministry, a refuge from the storms of life, a place of counsel for the confused, an education center, and the chief location for evangelism. Ministry should not tear at the fabric of your home; it should enhance it.

D. The majesty of meekness

As many of us participate in a graduation of some sort this time of year, we need to take thought for whom we award our greatest applause. There is a trend in contemporary Christian circles that suggests we gain influence by being successful in the world’s terms, whether it is academics, athletics, or wealth. So we drive our children to compete at the highest levels, to get into the best schools, to achieve the best jobs, and then perhaps some day, the world might take notice and grant them their fifteen minutes of fame. The trend is dangerous because it is idolatrous.

Who would God have us stage before the world? Our widows! Though they have no surviving family to depend upon, no wealth to glory in, no status to commend them, they quietly display the majesty of meekness, that rare quality that reflects the glory of the One they serve.

**He was despised and rejected by others,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. (Isa 53:3)**

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 128.

² The verb *splanchnizomai* in these parables (Matt 18:27; Luke 10:33; 15:20) expresses “divine compassion” by a lord for his servant, a father for his prodigal son, and the Samaritan for the man who fell among the thieves. In each case the individuals are mirrors of divine compassion.

³ Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 131-132.

⁴ Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 430.

⁵ Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 430.

⁶ Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 428.

⁷ Quoted in Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 445.

⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume VII: Modern Christianity, The German Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 243-244.