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1 Timothy 5:3-16

Tenth Message

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# WHO CARES FOR WIDOWS?

*SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH*

One night a couple of months ago, I left one of my favorite homes in this area to return home around 11 o'clock. I was tired, but I was spiritually refreshed by the fellowship I had enjoyed while meeting with some brothers in Christ that evening. I fell into bed exhausted, knowing that I had an early breakfast appointment next day. During the night I was awakened by a commotion outside, but I soon fell asleep again. When I got up at 6 a.m., however, I saw several police cars in front of my home. The police had cordoned off the area, and yellow tape was strung around the intersection. A few moments later, I learned why. About 100 yards from my front door a blue tarp lay draped over a body. A 22-year-old mother of two children had been abducted by her boyfriend a few days earlier in the very parking lot of the restaurant where I was due to have breakfast. He had stabbed her to death, and dumped her body near my home.

As a father and pastor who is trying to cultivate life with my wife and three daughters in my home, and seeking to establish community and life in the homes and restaurants of this area, I could not help but sense the bitter irony of the situation I was witness to on my street. Just a few yards away, hidden under a tarpaulin, lay the sad and bitter fruits of a dark, twisted, hurting world. I was shaken by the experience, and I was saddened to think that my home could have been a refuge for the young woman whose body was now lying in the street. Almost on my own doorstep I was confronted yet again with the realization that establishing loving homes is probably the most important work of evangelism that the church can be involved in.

As we have been discovering in the past few weeks, the apostle Paul in his first letter to Timothy has some foundational truths to share regarding family life. Here he 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 were to be built up spiritually by the Word, and they were to be tied together in bonds of love. Pastors should treat older members with the same honor they accorded fathers and mothers, while younger people were to be accorded the dignity of being treated as equals, just as sisters and brothers treat one another as equals in a loving family situation.

Within this context of his instructions regarding the family, therefore, in the text to which we come today, Paul turns his attention to a special class within the church, that of widows.

Let us begin by reading the complete text. First Timothy 5:3-16:

**Honor widows who are widows indeed, but if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family, and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. If any woman who is a believer has [dependent] widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed. Now she who is a widow indeed, and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God, and contin-**

**ues in entreaties and prayers night and day. But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, [then] he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, a one man kind of woman, having a reputation for good works; if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, if she has devoted herself to every good work. But refuse [to put] younger widows [on the list], for when they feel sensual desires in disregard to Christ, they want to get married, incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. And at the same time they also learn [to be] idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper. Therefore, I want younger [widows] to get married, bear children, manage [their] household, to give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned to follow Satan. If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, let her assist them and let not the church be burdened so that it may assist those who are widows indeed. (NASB)**

The apostle begins this section by saying that widows should be granted honor, and he gives clear guidelines on how Timothy should set about doing this.

## I. How to honor true widows (5:3, 9)

**Honor widows who are widows indeed...let widows be put on the list...**

Godly concern and care for widows had deep roots in OT teaching. The Psalms indicate that this is a key concern of the heart of God. Note these lines from Psalm 68, for instance:

**A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows,  
Is God in his holy habitation.  
God makes a home for the lonely. (Ps 68:5-6a)**

God made provision in his Law for the care of widows. 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. In the book of Isaiah, the care of widows actually became part of the primary definition of true religion in Israel:

**Learn to do good;  
Seek justice,  
Reprove the ruthless;  
Defend the orphan,  
Plead for the widow. (Isa 1:17)**

We find there is no change in this principle in the New Testament. Here is what James says in his epistle: "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit [care for]

orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

The church is a family, says the apostle, therefore we should give widows the same honor that we grant parents. And what does that “honor” entail? The OT is clear. Since your parents were the source of your life, do for them in their old age what they did for you when you were born: they brought you into the world and cared for you; they had a shelter all prepared for you; they held you, fed you, loved you, clothed you and even helped you go to the bathroom. The Scripture says that in their old age, parents are given social weight when their children do these things for them. Prepare a room for them, receive them with as much joy as when they welcomed you at birth, feed them, clothe them, love them and hold them, until the day you lay them in the grave. This is what gives aging parents esteem in the community.

The first century church took on this role of supporting widows. Women who had lost their husbands were put on a list and provided for financially. Beginning in Acts 6, we see that the apostles personally undertook this task until they sensed that it had become a distraction. Then they appointed deacons to do this work, and thus the office of deacon was born in the church. This practice was continued in the church in Ephesus, but a problem arose when a number of erring younger widows in their new-found freedom became gossips and busybodies. They fell prey to false teachers (some may even have become sexually involved with them), and began spreading false teaching while they were being maintained on the church payroll. The church was losing its impeccable reputation in the community as a result. This is Paul’s concern, and this is why he instructs Timothy on how to address this situation. Limit this honor to widows who are indeed widows, says the apostle.

Next, Paul goes on to list some guidelines to correct any abuses in this regard.

## II. The characteristics of a true widow (5:4-10, 16)

### (a) No surviving family (5:4, 16)

**Honor widows who are widows indeed, but if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family, and to make some return to their parents; for this acceptable in the sight of God...If any woman who is a believer has [dependent] widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.**

The home is the place where one learns responsibility. Thus Paul directs that widows who have surviving families not be put on a list for financial help. Such a practice would usurp the responsibility of surviving family members. The church should not rob the family of this school of godliness, for the training ground for true worship of God is a domestic apprenticeship. Furthermore, putting these widows on the list would limit the church’s ability to assist those who were truly needy. It is the children’s responsibility to take care for their elderly parents. While it might not always be convenient, this is what the godly insist on doing.

David in the OT is a good example for believers. He had a deep love and concern for his parents. When he was anointed to be king, his entire family came under Saul’s threat, so his parents abandoned him. Yet when his family came to David seeking protection, while he was in the cave of Adullam, he embarked on a dangerous river crossing to entrust his father and mother to the King of Moab so they would be cared for (1 Sam 22:3; Ps 27:10). Jesus is an even bet-

ter example. While he was hanging on that tree, he saw his mother nearby. Looking toward John, his disciple, he said to his mother, “Behold your son.” And to John he said, “Behold your mother.” The text goes on to say, “from that hour the disciple took her into his own household” (John 19:26-27). At the point of his own greatest need, Jesus was concerned for his mother and he made provision for her. So although it may not be convenient for you to care for your parents, in the Bible such care is seen as one of the high water marks of spirituality.

Here is Paul’s second guideline.

### (b) Age—must be elderly [60 years] (5:9)

**Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old...**

The apostle gives Timothy apostolic authority to draw the line with regard to age. In the first century, 60 was the cultural norm for old age, and the age when remarriage was considered to be out of the question.

And now the third guideline, concerning character traits.

### (c) Character (5:5-7, 9-10)

**Now she who is a widow indeed, and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God, and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach.**

Support the widow, says Paul, who has learned to be dependent on God, the woman who “has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties night and day.” This is the same language that David used in the psalms. It is instructive to remember that most of the psalms were written while David was out in the wilderness, bereft of family. We recall his cry: “my mother and father have abandoned me; don’t you abandon me!” (Ps 27:9-10). God had become his father! At times, David wept through the night not because he was lonely, but because he was overjoyed that the heavenly Father was becoming his father. So too the widow in her wilderness of death and abandonment learns through the psalms to allow the Lord to become her husband. Marge Sterling is one of our newest widows. Even before her husband Bob died, she told me that God was already becoming her husband. He was doing things for her that Bob used to do, and her love for her heavenly Father was being enlarged as a result. Let us never forget that a widow’s prayers have a tremendous impact on the work of the kingdom of God on earth.

Joel Werk, our High School pastor, told me that on his recent visit to Romania, he and his father and second cousin were reflecting on the spiritual legacy of their great-grandmother. She had four sons, all of whom were dead to the things of the Spirit. The pain she felt over this led her to pray night and day, and every one of the 12 offspring of these men became Christians. In Bucharest, two of them were with Joel as they shared the gospel with young Romanians. My friend told me that he was so moved by this remembrance of his great-grandmother’s prayers that he could hardly speak.

A widow, says Paul, is to be dependent upon God. And it is required that she was faithful to her husband. The text says that she is to be the “wife of one man.” The phrase is adjectival and it would be better translated “a one man (kind of) wife.” If Paul meant “married only once,” the younger widows he instructs to remarry would be disqualifying themselves from being put “on the list” in the future. The text is asking, “Was she a faithful wife?” The purpose behind the church’s subsidizing of widows was to build bonds of faithfulness

with people. If a widow wasn't faithful to her husband, how could she be faithful in the church?

And third, a widow was to be a servant at home and in the church.

**Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, a one man kind of woman, having a reputation for good works; if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, if she has devoted herself to every good work. (5:9-10)**

If she had children, was she a good mother who willingly undertook the labor and hardship required to raise children, or did she abandon them so that she could live in a world of ease and pleasure? If she didn't care for her own children, how could she be expected to care for spiritual children or for those outside the church?

Was she "hospitable to strangers"? Was her home always open to guests, knowing this is God's most effective tool for evangelism? Christians in the first century did not go around knocking on strangers' doors and handing them tracts to evangelize them. No, what they did was open their doors to the traveling stranger and offer him their hearts. I feel this kind of hospitality needs to be recovered in the church. We need open homes and open hearts to welcome the needy and the hurting.

And did she "wash the feet of the saints"? This can be taken in either a literal or symbolic sense. In either case, the practice is a badge of humility. The widow would take it upon herself to not only welcome her guests into the home but to cleanse them as a servant would. In the Scriptures, the washing of feet was a symbol of bringing correction and cleansing. And this is what a home is to be—a secret place of cleansing. When David's servants came to Abigail, announcing David's invitation to take her as his wife, the Scripture says, "she arose and bowed with her face to the ground and said, 'Behold, your maidservant is a maid to wash the feet of my lord's servants'" (1 Sam 25:41). And we know that on another occasion, Abigail had already washed the feet of David and with her soothing and temperate words cleansed him of his anger. A home should be a secret place of cleansing, a place where the hurting can be ministered to by washing with the Word of God.

And had the widows on the list for support in Ephesus "assisted those in distress"? Did they have a vision more encompassing than their own immediate family? Such a woman did not live merely for her own flesh and blood. Her home was a place of refuge and a shelter. In our culture she would be concerned for unwed mothers. She would fight for the unborn, the homeless, the sexually abused; and she would provide shelter for refugees. A widow who filled these qualifications—a woman who was alone in the world and ready to do good deeds—should be cared for by the church.

So Paul's advice is that Timothy trim his list. And here were the prerequisites: a widow who was being supported by the church should have no surviving family; she should be of a certain age; and she should demonstrate godly character.

Next, there must be no compromise in any of these areas, the apostle declares, as compromise would result in great danger to the church.

### III. The danger in compromising these specifications (5:8, 11-15)

#### (a) In regard to a godly lifestyle (5:6)

**But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach.**

The participle means, "one who indulges herself and leads a life of luxury and ease" (Calvin). If this warning is neglected, the body ends up subsidizing a lifestyle of indulgence, with the result that reproach falls upon the church in the eyes of the world. The church should not subsidize ungodliness. Just think what effect this admonition would have if it were applied to the world of the televangelists! Christians should never give money to support indulgence, says the apostle.

#### (b) In regard to "no surviving family" (5:8)

**If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, [then] he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.**

The church is not to allow its desire to care for widows to come in the way of individual responsibility. If we neglect our parents we are neglecting the highest commandment in human relationships, and the world will rightly call us irresponsible. This was what was going on in Jesus' day. The greedy Pharisees told their followers to inform their parents that their possessions were "corban," meaning, their goods had already been devoted to God (Mark 7:11). Of course, what the Pharisees were really asking for was that everything be turned over to them. They were "worse than unbelievers," according to Jesus. It is important to note that by saying this, Jesus was not condemning unbelievers. On the contrary, he was pointing out that if unbelievers care for their widows, how can believers fail to do the same? To do less than the world does is a denial of the faith.

I feel very grateful indeed that my wife is the epitome of responsibility in this regard. Even her name, "Emily," means "industry." When we celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary this past June, I remember thinking that the quality I find most admirable in her is her loyal love for her family. Growing up, she did not experience this in her own family. Her parents were divorced and she had to go out on her own. But she has returned to her family what they never gave her. She has cared for six family members, all the way to their graves: her grandmother, two of our children, her mother, father, and sister. When her father was diagnosed with cancer, she immediately moved him to an apartment right across the street from our home and he ate every meal with us. As she was caring for him, her sister was diagnosed with AIDS, and Emily cared for her also up to her death. During all this time she had to say no to a lot of ministries—there were many things she could not do in the church—but there was no question that this was what we had been called to do as a family. I am reminded of what Boaz said to Ruth, "All the people of the city know that you are a woman of excellence."

Finally, Paul warns that putting younger widows on the list for financial care could be detrimental to their spiritual life.

#### (c) In regard to age (5:11-15)

**But refuse [to put] younger widows [on the list], for when they feel sensual desires in disregard to Christ, they want to get married, incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. And at the same time they also learn [to be] idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper. Therefore, I want younger [widows] to get married, bear**

**children, manage [their] household, to give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned to follow Satan.**

Here, the apostle's argument is that sensual desires might cause some of the younger widows in Ephesus to want to marry, thereby denying their promise to serve the Lord. Being included on the list for support probably was accompanied by a vow to serve God singlemindedly all their days. Perhaps their idleness caused them to become involved sexually with false teachers, and thus they incurred condemnation because of their previous pledge to follow Christ.

Paul is making the point that setting someone aside at an early age provides them with too much free time. Instead of cultivating a productive lifestyle, it might lead to aimlessness and idleness. Supporting people who are too young can be extremely detrimental to their character because they have too much freedom and too little responsibility. Rather than providing opportunity for the edification of others, such a practice could lead to their disruption through gossip and slander. This practice brings the church into disrepute in the eyes of the world. God wants homes to be busy and orderly, working hard to aid the many distresses that are obvious all around us.

What is the antidote to this? Younger widows should marry, raise a family and manage a home, says Paul. This is hard counsel, but it is good advice. Managing a home is a natural yoke that disciplines us in godliness. The gift of a godly husband, for instance, affords protection to his wife from the enemy.

In Luther's time, monasteries and nunneries were sources of great idleness, and sexual impurity was rampant in these places. The Reformers solved this problem by emptying the nunneries and marrying off the nuns. One nun named Catharina von Bora almost became engaged to a former student of Wittenberg, but the man changed his mind and instead married a rich woman, to Catharina's great grief. Then Luther arranged a match between Catharina and another gentleman, but she refused, and intimated 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." Asked why he married Catharina, he said, "I wish to please my father, to tease the Pope, and to vex the Devil!" Recovering the home for pastors was a step of tremendous importance in the kingdom of Christ. It is because the home, as we have seen, is the primary place where discipline and godliness are learned.

Thus Paul warns Timothy that compromise in any of these areas is detrimental to the church family and to the process of learning responsibility, with the result that the church suffers reproach in the eyes of the world.

I feel strongly that certain presuppositions leap from this text, principles that are unknown and therefore unpracticed by our modern-day church. I will list four of them.

## **IV. Implications for the modern church**

### **(a) The importance of purity over activity**

It seems that Paul is far more concerned about the character of the church as the vehicle for evangelism, than the number of full-time Christian workers the church can boast in. Purity is more important than activity! Note how carefully the apostle points out that the church will be brought into reproach if these guidelines are disregarded. Many detriments go hand in hand with this idea of the

church being asked to support people who are too young and too immature. We must be careful when we are presented with so many appeals to our young people to go into full time Christian work which may bypass some of the natural yokes of discipline (such as raising a family and carrying out 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 to be set aside for ministry. The church was not meant to be a welfare organization. Being supported was not a right but an honor that was 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 value of the home**

The home is the primary place where responsibility is to be learned, the crucible where the flesh is put aside. 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. Personally, I am grateful that I have a home, an industrious wife, and three children who keep me busy so that I have less opportunity for idleness and sin.

And the home is an excellent platform for ministry. It is 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. Here at PBC/Cupertino we feel constrained by the limited size of our building, but we should not be constrained in the number of homes that are available and open for ministry. My prayer is that we will have hundreds of open homes in our congregation that will be centers for ministry and caring.

### **(d) The importance of women**

Who makes the home? Who gives aid to strangers, counsels the broken-hearted, creates shelters for the poor, and prays for the redemption of this land? There is no doubt in my mind that it is the women among us. This is why we would like to see more and more women set aside so that they are free to minister full-time in this regard.

What about retirement? you ask. My answer is that we must never seek to retire from this school of life. Perhaps you have heard the story of the three theologians who were debating when life begins. One said life begins at birth, and the second said no, life begins at conception. The third answered, "You're both wrong. Life begins when the kids leave home and the dog dies!" This third viewpoint seems to be the prevalent one today. People can't wait to retire so they can begin to "live." Just when they have the most to offer, they forsake all the natural relationships they have built over a lifetime and join up with a bunch of old fogies who have nothing better to do than gossip over a game of bridge or lie about their golf scores. How can we retire and insulate ourselves from the world when we are liable to wake up in the morning and find a body on our doorstep? May God grant that we will never cease building homes that will be a refuge for the alien and the stranger, for the downtrodden and the downcast, to His glory. Amen.

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