

1 Timothy 5:1-8 “Caring for Widows—Putting the Gospel on Display”<sup>\*\*1</sup>

Main Idea: 1 Timothy 5:1-8 shows us how caring for widows is linked to putting the gospel on display. We’ll see two guidelines for putting religion into practice.

Putting the Gospel on Display: Taking a family approach to ministry (1-2)

1. Take a family approach to confrontation (1-2).
2. Take a family approach to care-giving (3).

I. Guideline #1: Find out who's really in need (3).

- A. She is part of the church family.
- B. She cannot meet her own needs.
- C. She has no family to help.
- D. She meets certain spiritual qualifications.

II. Guideline #2: Find out the most God-honoring way to meet the need (4).

- A. The family is responsible (4).
- B. The woman is responsible (5-6).
- C. The church is responsible (7-8).

Implications: In order to put religion into practice...

1. Take inventory of your own life.
2. Take inventory of your own family.
3. Take inventory of your church.

*Scripture Reading: James 1:19-27*

On this Mother’s Day I’d like to address a very important, often neglected subject...

*The care of widows.* It’s not mere sentiment that makes the topic vital. It’s the opportunity of putting the gospel on display.

The truth is, when the gospel is believed, it will be displayed. As in, when people truly receive the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior, they will make Him known through the way they live.

James 1:27 says, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: *to look after orphans and widows in their distress* and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

Few things are harming the cause of Christ more than religion that is professed but not practiced. Granted, a person can't practice what he doesn't possess. I'm not talking about works-salvation. The Bible clearly teaches that a person is saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ, not works (Eph. 2:8). But true saving faith *works* (Eph. 2:10).

And if we've been saved, if we belong to Jesus Christ, then we'll want to put the gospel that brought us salvation on display. How? 1 Timothy 5 shows us how in a very timely way.

The book of 1 Timothy is all about church life. It shows a church how to put the gospel it embraces on display for the world to see.

That’s where the subject of treating widows comes in, as we turn to 1 Timothy 5:1-8. We’re going to see two guidelines in verses 3-8 concerning the care of widows.

But first, let’s take a look at the context in verses 1-2, a context that exhorts us to take a family approach to ministry.

Putting the Gospel on Display: Taking a family approach to ministry (1-2)

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<sup>\*\*</sup>Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous development of this passage, see the 1 Timothy series at WBC in 1999, also 5/14/06 PM.

Verses 1-2, “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”

I considered entitling this message, “*A Church Full of Mothers (and fathers, brothers, and sisters too)*,” for that’s what we have if we belong to the Lord’s church. Jesus said in Mark 10:29-30, “No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel <sup>30</sup> will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.”

And that’s what we have as followers of Jesus, a hundred times as many brothers, sisters, mothers, and children as when we entered the world. We are family at WBC. And we are to treat each other as family, which of course, needs some explanation since we don’t know, apart from divine grace, how families are supposed to treat each other.

So we’re told here, a couple of basic family principles that should govern the way we relate to each other in the church.

1. *Take a family approach to confrontation (1-2)*. There is no such thing as a problem free church, nor family for that matter. So when there’s a problem, what should happen?

First, consider the person with whom you have the problem. Is he older or younger than you? Is the person of the same sex or the opposite sex?

You say, “Does that really matter? People are people, aren’t they?”

This is Relationships 101. Think back to your childhood. Did you talk to your dad the same way you talked to your kid brother? I spoke to my brother in ways I would never have addressed my father. We learned something in our families that the Lord wants applied in the church.

If I see something that’s not right in the life of an older man, I don’t approach him as if he were my kid brother. “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father.” If there’s sin, yes, exhort. You must speak speak truth and encourage this older man to do what our mutual authority, the Lord Jesus Christ, says. But speak to him as you would your father.

And if it’s a younger man? As you would your brother.

If she is an older woman? Treat them as mothers, says our text. And younger women, as sisters. And with absolute purity, Paul adds. Give special attention to purity when you’re relating to younger women in the church.

So yes, we have a church full of mothers on Mothers Day, and fathers, and brothers, and sisters too. My mother went to heaven two years ago, but I’m thankful to have many who hold the place of mother in my life, and father, and brother, and sister.

This is so practical. You say, “I don’t have any children. Mothers Day is hard for me.” Or you say, “I lost my mom years ago, and this day brings great pain.”

And your pain is real, and the Lord invites you to express your sense of loss to Him. But that’s not all. He wants you to see this. He has given you something. Look around you. If you belong to Christ, you have many mothers and children. This is your *forever family*.

That brings us to a second family principle for the church.

2. *Take a family approach to care-giving (3)*. “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.”

So if the church is a family, and it is, then if a fellow church member is in need, I need to take a family approach to responding to that need. So I have many mothers in this church. What if one of them loses their mate and is all alone? What should the rest of us do for this one we relate to as a mother?

I found an interesting website this week, [www.wife.org/widowhood](http://www.wife.org/widowhood). Here are the first two sentences on the page: “Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce, and 35% end in widowhood, usually with the death of the husband. On average, women will be on their own financially for one-third of their adult lives.”<sup>2</sup>

So what should we do as a church in light of this reality? We find the answer beginning in verse 3. Two guidelines for providing care to widows.

### I. Guideline #1: Find out who's really in need (3).

That, of course, is what God did. It's why He sent Jesus. He saw who was really in need, and did something about it. And what He did we are to do, for in so doing, we put the gospel on display.

I need to say something else about the context. 1 Timothy was written by the apostle Paul to his ministry associate Timothy. Timothy was serving as a pastoral trouble shooter in the church at Ephesus (1:3). The church already had elders--Paul had personally disciplined and trained them in the past (Acts 19:9-10; 20:17ff.). Timothy's job wasn't to lead the church so much as it was to help the church address some problems.

That's what this letter was all about. Paul says in 3:14-15, "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God..."

There is no problem free church. So what's a church to do when it faces problems? According to 5:1-2, deal with the problems by *taking a family approach*.

But not all problems are sin problems. Sometimes churches face “how to” problems. Like knowing how to structure a benevolent ministry. The solution? Verses 3-16 tell us, take a family approach!

And here's how to start. Guideline #1—find out who's really in need.

Verse 3 instructs, "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need." The AV puts it, "Honor widows that are widows indeed."

Caring for widows is a wonderful opportunity to put the gospel on display. Last week I made a list of the women in this church who have lost their husbands as a result of death or divorce and are now doing life on their own. It's not a small number. *Fifteen*.

So in light of this, what are we to do as a church? This is so practical. “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.”

So there are widows, and there are widows who are really in need. *Widows indeed*, as the AV identifies them. Granted, all widows have needs, as do married women and men too. But not all widows are in distress.

So how does a church determine which widows truly need help? God gives us four qualifications in this passage.<sup>3</sup>

**A. She is part of the church family.** Remember the context. Paul's talking about problems within the church. A church is obligated to care for its own. Though we may

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wife.org/widowhood/>

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen suggests there are two categories of widows in 1 Timothy 5: *distressed widows* (verses 3-8) and *widows employed by the church* (verses 9-16).

choose to help non-believing widows, we are commanded to assist "widows indeed" who are within the church family. We find a helpful principle in Galatians 6:10, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

**B. She cannot meet her own needs.** She is a widow who is "really in need (3)." Paul repeats the same phrase in verse 5, "The widow who is really in need," and again in verse 16, "So that the church can help those widows who are really in need."

The church isn't instructed to support all widows, only those who cannot meet their own needs. Some widows already have resources,<sup>4</sup> and while they do need the church's comfort and support, they do not *need* financial assistance. And that's primarily what Paul is talking about here.

This raises a question. If in order to qualify for the church's help, a widow cannot meet her own needs, then the question is, what is a *need*?

A person came by the church a few years ago--in this case, a man--and said he *needed* help. We offered him some food, but he left mad because it wasn't as much as what he wanted.

What's the difference between a *need* and a *want*? It's not always easy to tell.

Paul helps define what a "need" is in 6:6-8, "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have *food and clothing*, we will be content with that."

Food and clothing. Those are our basic necessities.

Jesus' emphasis was similar in Matthew 6:25, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will *eat* or *drink*; or about your body, what you will *wear*. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"

Then Jesus pointed to the birds and the lilies to show how God cares for such needs, and concluded (31-32), "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you *need them*."

We're not to live for food, drink, and clothing. The accumulation of such things in life isn't to be our passion. But we need them. In fact, our heavenly Father knows we need them. So what are we to do? Verse 33, "Seek first his kingdom and righteousness, and *all these things* will be given to you as well."

That doesn't answer all the questions, but it helps. A need is a basic necessity of life--food, drink, clothing to cover our bodies, a roof to cover our heads. And a widow indeed is a widow who does not have the where-with-all to provide such things.

You'll notice in verse 11 that younger widows don't qualify for the church's benevolent list. Why not? It's because they can and should do something about their needs, which an older, destitute widow can't do.<sup>5</sup>

A third qualification...

**C. She has no family to help.** Notice verse 4, "But if a widow has children or grandchildren [KJV has "nephews," but the Greek term *ekgona* means "one born of, a descendant, a grandchild"], these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice

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<sup>4</sup> Dorcas in Acts 9:36 was "always doing good and helping the poor."

<sup>5</sup>This is a general guideline, not a hard and fast rule. For instance, if the younger widow has children, she faces unique challenges as a single mom. There may be things she could do to care for herself that would jeopardize her children--like working countless hours but forfeiting her responsibility to nurture her children. Certainly, a church that's putting its religion into practice will get involved in practical ways.

by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God."

So if a widow has family, the family should care for her needs. The text quite specific. The family should *learn*, says Paul. This isn't necessary easy to do. Families need to learn how to make the transition from having a mother who is on the giving end, to a mother whose presents needs place her on the receiving end.

Then, learn *first of all*. This is priority. Our love must begin at home.

*To put their religion into practice*. To show piety, says the AV.

*By caring for their own family*. And not just mom. *And so repaying their parents and grandparents*. If those who have given to us are in need, we who have benefitted from their care are to return the care.

And why? *For this is pleasing to God*. So the horizontal action flows from a vertical motivation.

So if there's a widow who is part of the church family who has needs she cannot meet, the solution begins with her family. Her family should meet her needs, by God's design.

What if there is no family? Then the church should intervene after considering a fourth variable.

**D. She meets certain spiritual qualifications.** You'll notice two things must be true of this widow in order for her to be placed on the church's benevolent list.

1. *God is real in her life* (5). "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."

Notice she's "left alone" ["desolate" in the KJV]. The Greek term is from *monoo*. We get our English word "mono" from it, which means single. The perfect tense indicates "a permanent state or condition of being forsaken and without resources."<sup>6</sup>

Here's a woman who is alone. But she knows she is *not* alone, for her God is with her and He is *real* in her life.

And there's evidence for this reality. It's what this woman does, for she trusts in God and talks to Him around the clock. She "continues in supplications and prayers night and day," says the ESV.

God has much to say in His Word about His personal care for widows. Psalm 68:5 says He is "a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows." Many texts indicate widows are under His special care and protection (Ex. 22:23; Deut. 10:18; Prov. 15:25).

The Lord even gave His people harvest instructions to ensure widows would have food. Deuteronomy 24:19 says, "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow".

God said He would bless those who help widows (Isa. 1:17-18; Jer. 7:6), and punish those who hurt them (Ex. 22:22; Zech. 7:10; Job 24:3, 21).<sup>7</sup>

The widow indeed knows this. She knows she's not alone. She takes God at His Word and places her hope in Him. He's real in her life. And while her faith is personal, it is not merely private, for her trust in God is evident to her church family.

It must be for her to be considered for the church's ongoing care list. And there's something else the church should see as well.

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<sup>6</sup> According to MacArthur.

<sup>7</sup>Hendriksen, pp. 167-8.

2. *She herself has a track record of giving (10)*. We see this a few verses later in the text, verses 9-10, "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 saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds."

So Paul mentions *the list*. Apparently the early church had a "list" of widows that it cared for regularly and consistently. That's what we're talking about here. Paul's not saying we never help someone in need if they haven't helped us first. That's not grace. That's not the way God dealt with us. He sought us when we weren't interested in Him. He gave us Jesus because He is merciful, not because we are deserving.

But that's not the issue in 1 Timothy 5. Paul's talking about the widows that would receive *continual* help from the church. I'll call it a "widows team." The "widows team" is made up of widows who belong to the church, are unable to meet their own basic needs, have no family members who can help, and qualify spiritually. We may help others as well, but we must certainly not neglect this group of widows.

Indeed, verse 5 indicates such widows are invaluable to the church. They give—through their praying and serving—far more than they receive. I appreciate Warren Wiersbe's observation, "It has been my experience in three different pastorates that godly widows are 'spiritual powerhouses' in the church. They are the backbone of the prayer meetings. They give themselves to visitation, and they swell the ranks of teachers in the Sunday School."<sup>8</sup>

Yes, thank the Lord for godly widows!

So here's the first guideline for putting the gospel on display as we care for widows. We must find out who's really in need. The gospel is about need. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. Not for the self-sufficient, but for the needy, the helpless, the destitute.

When the church sees the destitute, it does what God has done. It takes action. But what kind of action? There's a second guideline in our text.

## II. Guideline #2: Find out the most God-honoring way to meet the need (4).

The word "widow" speaks of a woman who is "bereft, robbed, who has suffered loss, or is left alone." But it doesn't specify how she was left alone, so the word is broad enough to encompass those who lost their husbands through divorce, dissolution, imprisonment, as well as death.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to putting the gospel on display, the first question is: "Who's in need?" The second question is: "What's the most God-honoring way to meet the need?"

And we must be careful. Some benevolent ministries operate on the basis of sentiment more than Scripture. In the long run, they add to the problem rather than help it. According to the Scriptures, there are three responsible parties.

**A. The family is responsible (4).** Notice verse 4 again (KJV), "If any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to show piety at home." According to a Dutch proverb it often seems easier for *one* poor father to bring up *ten* children than for *ten* rich children to provide for *one* poor father.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wiersbe, p. 229.

<sup>9</sup> Observation by John MacArthur; <http://www.gty.org/resources/study-guides/40-5209/caring-for-widows>

<sup>10</sup> Hendricksen., p. 169.

Again, as mentioned earlier, a couple of key terms stand out. One is "learn." It implies this isn't natural. We are sinners, and as sinners we are born with a self-focused bent. We need to learn how to bend the bent. And that's what the gospel does.

Another key term is "first." First indicates priority. Where's the first place people ought to be able to see Christ in our lives? In our families. I read once about a missionary who chose to come home from the field to care for her sick, elderly parents, and took some flack for it. She heard, "We're supposed to love God more than father or mother!" Yes, but we're also to care for our parents, and our ministry begins at home.

When it comes to meeting needs, there's a second responsible party.

**B. The woman is responsible (5-6).** To do what? Three things.

1. *She is to do all she can.* Though implied here, it's stated explicitly elsewhere. Galatians 6:5 says, "Each one should carry his own load." In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul counsels, "And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle." He elaborates in his second letter (2 Thes. 3:6-10), "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'" (see also verses 11-15)

So it starts with personal responsibility. The widow is to do all she can to provide for her needs. What else is she to do?

2. *She is to trust in God (5).* "The widow...puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help."

Notice when she prays--not just during the day but also at *night*, perhaps especially at night. During the night times when her soul is vexed, she prays. And for her prayer is not a "now and then" affair, for she "continues" in prayer. Her prayer life is evidence that she trusts in God.

A third responsibility...

3. *She isn't to live for pleasure (6).* "But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives." Paul uses a rare Greek verb here. "To live for pleasure" (*spatalao*) means to abandon oneself to pleasure. It depicts a worldly-minded, self-indulgent person.

In his blunt way, radio Bible teacher J. Vernon McGee put it this way. "If you go over to a widow's house and find that she is having a cocktail party, I would say that she is not the widow to help. It does not matter how prominent her son, or her sister, or her brother might be in the church, she is not to be helped."

Now there's nothing wrong with pleasure itself. A good meal, a walk in the woods, enjoying a ball game, nothing wrong with enjoying such pleasures. But *living for* pleasure, there's the problem.

The issue is ambition. Paul has in mind the woman whose purpose in life is pleasure—it's what she lives for—satisfying herself, gratifying her five earthly senses while ignoring eternal matters. Honestly, lots of people fall into this category, for they're literally living from one thrill to the next.

What does God think of such a person?

Commentator William Hendriksen explains, speaking of such a widow, "Though physically alive, she has actually died and is therefore now dead to all higher interests. Of course, she never was a real Christian, but she used to pay her respects to *religion*. She went to church, and seemed to listen to the reading of the Word. Her lips used to move in prayer, and she was even emotionally stirred at times. Today, however, all *that* belongs definitely to the past. She is dressed in her gayest attire, and her purpose is 'to have fun' and, perhaps, 'to make a good catch.' It is not necessary for Paul to add, 'Do not honour such widows.'"<sup>11</sup>

But the church should help everybody in need, shouldn't it? Yes, but sometimes giving people what they *think* they need isn't helping them. A widow who's living for pleasure rather than God surely needs something, but it's not what she thinks.

John MacArthur explains, "Far from being supported by the church, such women need to be abandoned to the consequences of their sin. Their desperate situation may then lead them to repentance. In the meantime, kingdom resources must not be used to support a sinful lifestyle. The truth that such widows are not to be supported is so obvious that Paul does not bother to command it."<sup>12</sup>

Our first guideline is to find out who's really in need. Our second guideline is to find out the most God-honoring way to meet the need, and we've learned that the family is responsible, and so is the person in need. Thirdly, of course...

**C. The church is responsible (7-8).** Notice verses 7-8, "Give the people these instructions, too [everything just said in verses 3-6], so that no one may be open to blame. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

Friends, there was no social security in the first century. No government assistance programs for the destitute. Which meant there was a tremendous opportunity for local churches to put the gospel on display.

When it comes to care-giving, God holds the church responsible. Why?

1. *The reason isn't merely humanitarian.* In other words, the driving force behind these instructions isn't merely, we better care the needy today if we want others to care for us when our time comes. No, this really isn't about us, although that's the by-product.

2. *The reason is the testimony of Christ.* Notice the purpose statement in verse 7, "So that no one may be open to blame." The goal is to see the church collectively and our lives individually be "blameless." And why do we want to be blameless? Because we want our lives to reflect well on the One who took our blame away, Jesus our Savior.

Acts 6 indicates that the early church took this matter seriously. The Jerusalem church had a benevolent ministry with its widows. But as the church grew, so did the number of widows. And some feelings got hurt when Grecian Jews felt their widows weren't receiving as good of care as the Hebraic Jews (1). So the apostles intervened. They proposed the following, balanced solution.

First, they took steps to ensure the primacy of the ministry of the Word in the church. They said (2), "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." As a church, we are not merely a humanitarian organization. Our primary, God-given task is evangelism.

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<sup>11</sup> Hendriksen, p. 170.

<sup>12</sup> MacArthur, p. 201.

But that doesn't make us exempt from social responsibility. It was out of the widow controversy that the church first developed a deacon caring ministry. The apostles said (3-4), "Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

See the balance? The early church devoted itself to the ministry of the Word *and* the ministry of *works*. In that order. It preached the Word and practiced the Word. It was concerned for spiritual needs and social needs. And the driving force behind both was the testimony of Christ.

So what must do? Let's talk about some implications...

Implications: In order to put the gospel on display and put religion into practice...

1. *Take inventory of your own life.* Can people see Christ in you? Certainly to show Christ you must know Christ. Do you know Him?

God sent His Son into the world to save the lost. Who are the lost? Every person born as a descendant of Adam and Eve. They disobeyed God and passed on to us their rebellious nature, and we too have rebelled against God. So we all enter the world lost, destitute, and without hope, under the wrath of God.

But God in His mercy has provided a way for the destitute to become His royal children. His Son, Jesus the Christ, came and paid the penalty for our rebellion, dying the death we deserve on the cross, then conquered death on the third day. Now God Almighty offers forgiveness and a place in His forever family for all who will receive His Son as their Savior and Lord.

Has God rescued you, my friend? Has He placed the royal robe of His Son on your shoulders and made you His joint heir? If not, repent and call on Him now. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.

And if you have experienced that miracle, can others see the evidence? Are you generous like He's been with you? Do you meet needs like He did with you?

2. *Take inventory of your own family.* Do you see needs there? Is God wanting to use you to meet some needs there? Do you have a parent or grandparent that needs your help? Maybe there's a single mom in your family. Will you allow the Lord to put the gospel on display through you?

3. *Take inventory of your church.* Do you see any needs in your church family? Have you been thinking about our widows, single moms, and shut-ins? Are you willing to cooperate with God in meeting some needs this week?

You say, "I don't know what our widows need." Then ask them. Invite one of your "mothers" to your house for dinner this week, and find out what life is like for her. Or ask one of our single moms if she needs help replacing her heat pump filters or getting her oil changed.

May God help us to put the gospel on display.