

Proposition: 1 Timothy 5:3-8 gives us two guidelines for putting religion into practice. The specific issue is how to care for widows.

- 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.
 1. God is real in her life (5).
 2. She herself has a track record of giving (10).
- 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).
 1. She is to do all she can.
 2. She is to trust in God (5).
 3. She isn't to live for pleasure (6).
 - C. The church is responsible (7-8).
 1. The reason isn't merely humanitarian.
 2. The reason is the testimony of Christ.

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.

I was struck this week when I read the following story about the lion.¹ We usually think of the male lion as the mighty king of the jungle, as a powerful beast that roams his turf striking fear in the hearts of all that would set foot on his territory. To my surprise I discovered that the mighty male lion sleeps an average of 21 hours a day, and leaves most of the difficult work to the female lions. Oh, there are times when he displays flashes of his strength and dominance, but basically--in the words of the article I read--"the male lion lives off his reputation and potential as much as off his performance."

That's interesting. It also illustrates, in my opinion, the state of the American church. Let me explain. There are more than 300,000 Christian churches in America, and according to research by The Barna Report (Nov/Dec 97), more than four out of five American adults describe themselves as Christians.

Sounds impressive. Until you take a look at the hard facts. Potential is one thing, but performance is another--not only for the male lion but also for the professing Christian.

In a 1997 survey, social scientist George Barna asked the question, "Does Jesus make a difference?", and proceeded to give the following alarming answers:

Does God make a Difference?²

<u>What Christians Say</u>	<u>What Non-Christians Say</u>
The main purpose in life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment.	
53%	66%
No matter how you feel about money, it is still the main symbol of success in life.	

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

¹As told by George Barna, *The Promise Keeper*, January/February 1999, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 1

²From the Barna Report, November/December 1997

51%	54%
	There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both could still be correct.
67%	76%
	When it comes right down to it, your first responsibility is to yourself.
41%	59%
	God helps those who help themselves.
80%	83%
	When it comes to morals, or what is right and wrong, there are no absolute standards that apply to everybody in all situations.
70%	81%

Barna concludes, "Christianity is not losing influence in America because it is overmatched by challenges of the day; it is losing its impact because believers have been unsuccessful at merging faith and lifestyle outside the walls of the church (p. 6)."

In other words there is a lot of *professed religion* but little *practiced religion*. There's more talk than walk, more Sunday tears than Monday toil. This inconsistency has hurt the church far more than the Supreme court outlawing prayer in public schools, and legalizing abortion on demand, and all the other "issues" so many Christians are pointing their fingers at these days.

Please don't misunderstand me. We ought to be concerned about any violation of God's Word. But the church is its own worst enemy. If we would put our religion into practice, and if we lovingly yet firmly dealt with those in our midst who didn't, we'd have a platform from which to speak to the world. A holy church is a powerful tool in the hand of God. What's more, believers who put their religion into practice bring great delight to the Savior.

How do I know? And how can we learn to do it? We find the answer to both questions in 1 Timothy 5. 1 Timothy 5 is a "how to" section in God's Word. We find a key phrase in verse 4 where we're told God's people need to learn "to put their religion into practice."

Few things are harming the cause of Christ more than religion that is professed but not practiced. Please understand. 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 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 our religion into practice. 1 Timothy 5 shows us how.

1 Timothy 5:3-8 gives us two guidelines for putting religion into practice. The specific issue is how to care for widows. But I think the principles apply to benevolent ministry in general, and show us a tangible way to practice what we profess.

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

That's what God did. That's why He sent Jesus. And what He did we're to do.

A word 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 get over the hump by dealing with some problems. That's what this letter was all about (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 1 Timothy 5, deal with the problems by *taking a family approach*. As we saw last time, verses 1-2 tell us what to do if its a sin problem. If the sin problem involves an older man, don't rebuke him harshly, but do exhort him as if he were your father. And if it's a younger man, approach him as if he were your brother; an older woman, your mother, and an younger woman, your sister. But the bottom line is this. If there's a sin problem in the church, God commands us to deal with it by taking a family approach.

But not all problems are sin problems. Sometimes churches faced direction-problems. Like knowing how to structure a benevolent ministry. The solution? Verses 3-16--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 religion into practice. I was surprised last week when I made a list of the women in our church who have lost their mates and the number came to twenty-three!

James wrote (1:27), "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." When a church puts its religion into practice it will care for widows in distress, for widows indeed.

But not all widows are in distress. How does a church determine which widows truly need help? Here's a checklist of four qualifications based on 1 Timothy 5.³

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 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 destitute. 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 obligated to support all widows, only those who cannot meet their own needs. Some widows already have resources. They do need the church's comfort and support, but not financial assistance--which is primarily what Paul's talking about here.

Which raises a question? If in order to qualify for the church's help, a widow cannot meet her own *needs*, the question becomes, 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

³William 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).

have *food and clothing*, we will be content with that." With what are we to be content? Food and clothing--that is, 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, shelter, protection. 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 benevolent list. Why not? As we'll see next time, it's because they can and should do something about their need--which an older, destitute widow can't.⁴ A third qualification...

C. She has no family to help. Verse 4 explains, "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 by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God."

If a widow has family, the family should care for her needs. If not, the church should intervene *if* a fourth qualification is met...

D. She meets certain spiritual qualifications. Two things are true of her.

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 out English word "mono" from it, which means single. The perfect tense indicates "a permanent state or condition of being forsaken and without resources (MacArthur)."

Here's a woman who's alone. But she knows she's *not* alone. God's *real* in her life. What's the evidence of that? It's what she does--she trusts in God and talks to Him around the clock.

God has much to say in the Scriptures about widows. Psalm 68:5 says He is "a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows." Many texts indicate they are under His special care and protection (Ex. 22:23; Deut. 10:18; Prov. 15:25). He even gave His people harvest instructions to ensure widows would have food (Deut. 24:19 "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"). He 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).⁵

⁴This 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.

⁵Hendriksen, pp. 167-8.

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. Something else is true of the qualified widow...

2. *She herself has a track record of giving (10).* She's not a "sponge" as verses 9-10 indicate, "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."

Apparently the church had a "list" of widows that it cared for regularly and consistently. That's what we're talking about here.

Paul's not endorsing tit-for-tat or payback. He'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 like Warren Wiersbe's observation (229), "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." Thank the Lord for godly widows!

So when it comes to putting religion into practice, here's the first guideline. Find out who's really in need. Then what?

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

As mentioned last time, the word "widow" indicates a woman who is "bereft, robbed, who has suffered loss, or is left alone." It doesn't tell how she was left alone. One suggestion is that the word is broad enough to encompass those who lost their husbands through divorce, dissertation, imprisonment, as well as death.

When it comes to putting religion into practice, the first question is: "Who's in need?" The second question we need to ask is: "What's the most God-honoring way to meet the need?"

Be careful. Some benevolent ministries are based on sentiment, not 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.⁶

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!

⁶Ibid., p. 169.

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 about a missionary that 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. But when it comes to meeting needs, there's a second responsible party.

B. The woman is responsible (5-6). Notice three personal responsibilities...

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)

It starts with personal responsibility. The widow is to do all she can. What else is she to do? A second personal responsibility

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 suggests, "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."

Listen. There's nothing wrong with pleasure itself. A good meal, a walk in the woods, enjoying a ball game--nothing wrong with enjoying pleasure. 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 senses while ignoring eternal matters. Frankly, lots of people fall into this category. They're living from one thrill to the next. What does God think of such a person?

Concerning such a widow, commentator William Hendriksen explains (170), "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.'"

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 shouldn't receive financial assistance from the church.

John MacArthur explains why (201), "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."

Guideline #1 is to find out who's really in need. Guideline #2 is to find out the most God-honoring way to meet the need. The family is responsible. So is the person in need. And thirdly...

C. The church is responsible (7-8). "Give the people these instructions [everything said in verses 3-6], too, 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."

We live in an age when many look to the government for answers. But when it comes to care-giving, God holds the church responsible to lead the way. Why?

1. *The reason isn't merely humanitarian.* The driving force behind these instructions isn't merely to make a better society. We're to be a caring people, but why?

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 would be "blameless." Why do we want to be blameless? Because we want our lives to reflect well the One who truly is blameless--Jesus.

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.

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 roll up our sleeves and take inventory...

Implications: In order to put religion into practice...we need to take inventory...

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? Is Jesus Christ real in your life? Have you surrendered every part of your life to Him?

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 put your religion into practice?

3. *Take inventory of your church.* Do you see the needs in your church family? What about the widows, the single moms, the shut-ins? Are you willing to let God use you to touch them today? Perhaps a phone call, a card, a visit, or an invitation for dinner. Or maybe an offer to tune up her car or repair her broken stove. Let's resolve together to put our religion into practice. And next time we'll learn about a special church program for widows described in verses 9-16.