

Proposition: In 1 Timothy 5:9-16, we discover three practical lessons pertaining to ministering to widows in the church.

- I. There's a time to help (9-10).
 - A. The church had a widows' list.
 1. They received help from the church.
 2. They provided help for the church.
 - B. The church was to enlist only qualified widows.
 - II. There's a time *not* to help (11-15).
 - A. Younger widows are excluded from the list (11-13).
 1. Such help could create an unnecessary conflict of interests (11-12).
 2. Such help could actually promote sinful living (13).
 - B. Younger widows are encouraged to make God-honoring choices (14-15).
 - III. When it comes to helping, we all have a part to play (16).
 - A. God intends for the family to take the lead.
 - B. God intends for the church to fill in the gaps.
- Three Principles for Helping People in the Church...
1. It takes more than good intentions to meet needs.
 2. Sometimes giving people what they think they need hurts them more than it helps.
 3. God is committed to His church, and we should be too.

God is serious about His church. How serious? So serious that He gave His only begotten Son. Just think about that for a moment. God, the most powerful Being in the universe, the Sovereign Creator and Lord of all, gave His own Son as a sacrifice for undeserving people, creatures He had made. He paid the ultimate price. On a cruel Roman cross, He gave His life in order to give life, *eternal* life, to all who would believe on Him. Three days later, the Living God conquered death. By His Son's resurrection, He broke the prison bars that held us captive.

But why did God do all this? In one sense, it's impossible to answer that question *why*. *And when I think that God, His Son not sparing, sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in. That on the cross my burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, how great Thou art!*

Why? Human minds cannot fathom why a holy God would demonstrate such extravagant love for sinners. It's unthinkable. It's grace. *And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood? Died He for me who caused His pain, for me who Him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?*

Why did God do this? If by *why* you're requesting a reason for such love, the reason is too lofty for human mind to comprehend--the reason flows out of the infinite character of God Himself, the One we'll adore throughout the ages of eternity.

But in another sense, there is an answer. Why did God do all this? He had a purpose in mind. He sent His Son to redeem a people that He would place into a special relationship with Himself and with each other. It's called the Church.

Beloved, it is a great privilege to belong to the Church of the Living God! God is serious about His church. How serious? Look at the cross--that's how serious. The cross is the message of the church. The cross is the hope of the church. The cross is the constant reminder that God is serious about His church. He's committed to His church. He wants what's best for His church.

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Which is also why He gave us a book like 1 Timothy. You see, if God would go to such means as the cross to establish the church, you would expect Him to take steps to guide the church, too, wouldn't you?

If you paid a considerable sum of money for an heirloom, would you bring it home from the auction and toss it on the garage shelf next to the cleaning supplies? Hardly! When you pay a great price for someone, it's only natural that you would take steps to protect it and to care for it. Which is exactly what God did.

What did God do to provide continuing protection and care for His church? He sent His Spirit to inhabit His people, didn't He? And through His Spirit He gave us His Word, an instruction manual of sorts, to ensure His church would receive the ongoing care it needed.

That's what a text like 1 Timothy 5 is all about. At the cross, God met our need. And 1 Timothy 5 shows us how He continues to meet our needs. He works through His people, through His church, to provide care.

1 Timothy 5 is about benevolent ministry. It's about caring for widows in need. How does God want His church to respond to needs? Last time, we learned He has given us two guidelines. One, we're to find out who's in need (3). And two, we're to find out the most God-honoring way to meet that need (4-8).

What's that? Just what is the most God-honoring way to meet the needs of people around us? It's not always easy to tell. But God gives us some very practical instruction in the text before us.

In 1 Timothy 5:9-16, Paul applies the two guidelines from verses 4-8 to three specific situations--the first involves the case of older widows (9-10), the second involves the case of younger widows (11-15), and the third involves the case of all widows (16). From these "case studies," we'll discover three practical lessons pertaining to ministering to widows in the church.

I. There's a time to help (9-10).

"No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty." Stop there for a moment. Notice the first of two observations concerning helping widows.

A. The church had a widows' list. "Let not a widow be taken into the number," is how the KJV puts it. Apparently, the Ephesian church maintained a list of widows. Two things were true of the women that comprised the list.

1. *They received help from the church.* I believe, though commentators differ on this, the list of widows received financial support. That was the issue Paul addressed in the previous context: verse 3, "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need;" verse 5, "The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God;" and verse 8, "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."

The "list," then, was comprised of a group of widows who received the regular, consistent, material help of the church. But they did more than receive help...

2. *They provided help for the church.* It seems as if this widow "list" had an almost official status in the church. It wasn't an office per se (as in the case of elders and deacons, ch. 3), but it was a recognized, respected group in the church.

The word Paul used sheds light. It literally means "to be enrolled and put on the list." It was used for the enrollment of soldiers. Warren Wiersbe suggests, "The early church had an official list of the names of qualified widows, and we get the impression that these 'enlisted' women ministered to the congregation in various ways."

Perhaps like Dorcas did. Remember her? Acts 9:36 indicates, "In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor." Dorcas died. Her friends sent for Peter, and verse 39 explains what happened, "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."

Apparently, the early church highly esteemed its widows. The church gave to meet needs for the widows, and the widows likewise met practical needs in the church. Like what? William Hendriksen observes (173), "Their duties seem to have been: giving good counsel to the younger women, praying and fasting, visiting the sick, preparing women for baptism, taking them to communion, and giving guidance and direction to widows and orphans who were supported by the church."

So the church had a widows' list. Now a second observation from verses 9-10.

B. The church was to enlist only qualified widows. Who qualified for the list? Not every widow did. Paul mentions eight qualifications.

One, she must be over sixty. In that culture, sixty appears to have been the age for people to retire from their activities to a life of contemplation. Plato said that was the age when men and women should become priests.

Two, she must be a "one man woman." That's the Greek phrase translated "having been the wife of one man" in the KJV, and "has been faithful to her husband" in the NIV. Does that mean a widow who remarried and lost her second husband would not qualify for such a list? No. In a moment we'll see Paul actually encourage younger widows to remarry (14). It's doubtful their obedience to his counsel to remarry would later disqualify them from inclusion on the widow list.

A "one man woman" is a woman who is totally devoted to her husband. The issue isn't just marital status. This qualification says the woman has a track record of faithfulness to the man God gave her. A widow who didn't measure up in this area wouldn't be much of a role model for the younger women in the church, and therefore shouldn't be included on this list.

Three, she must be known for good deeds, as verse 10 states. The verb means "to bear witness," and is passive, indicating what people said about the woman. She is a woman who's known for good deeds. She has a reputation in life of doing good. She's not self-focused, but others-focused. She hasn't lived for pleasure, but for God.

What kind of good deeds specifically? The next five qualifications modify the third.

Four, she has brought up children. This phrase can refer to her own children, or to orphans who needed a home. The latter was no moot issue in the first century.

Listen to William Barclay's insight into the plight of children in that day (110): "This was the great age of child exposure. When a child was born, he was brought and laid before his father's feet. If the father stooped and lifted him, that meant he acknowledged him and was prepared to accept responsibility for his upbringing. If the father turned and walked away, the child was quite literally thrown out, like an unwanted piece of rubbish. It often happened that such unwanted children were collected by unscrupulous people and, if girls, brought up to stock the public brothels, and, if boys, trained to be slaves or gladiators for the public games. It would be a Christian duty to rescue such children from death and worse than death, and to bring them up in a Christian home. So this may mean that widows must be women who had been prepared to give a home to abandoned children."

Five, she has entertained strangers. "Showing hospitality" is how the NIV renders the verb. Her home was open to strangers as well as friends.

Six, she is known for washing the feet of the saints. Foot washing, something small. That's the point. Here's a woman who's been willing to do the little things. Her ambition wasn't the limelight, but to serve.

Seven, she helps the afflicted. The verb "afflicted" literally means "those pressed." Life can "press" us in many ways, can't it? Here's a woman who's been on the lookout for those needing relief from the press, and she did something about it. She fed the hungry, counseled the hurting, visited the sick, gave hope to the grieving, and more.

And eight, she was diligent in pursuing all kinds of good deeds. We usually think of a "spiritual" person as someone who reads the Bible, goes to church, gives tithes and offerings, and prays. And those are good things, even commanded things. But so is this--meeting practical needs of family members and church family members. That's an evidence of spirituality, too.

Certainly, motive is key. It's not, "Look at me. I take meals to shut-ins. I give money to help the needy. I'm a good person." No, that's not the perspective of the truly spiritual person. Rather, it's this: "The reason I help is because I belong to the only person who's inherently good, and that person gave His all for me. He cares for me. Caring for others is what I do so others will see Him in me, all to His glory." According to verse 4, that kind of helping is "pleasing to God."

And that's what's apparent in the life of the widow who is added to "the list." Therefore, she is to be esteemed by the church. So principle #1--there's a time to help.

II. There's a time *not* to help (11-15).

Or at least not help in the *same way*. Case in point--younger widows. Concerning this group we're given two pieces of counsel in verses 11-15.

A. Younger widows are excluded from the list (11-13). "As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list."

To make sense of Paul's instruction, we need a bit of historical perspective. William Barclay can help us. He states (114), "What complicated this matter very much was the social background of the times. It was next to impossible for a single or a widowed woman to earn her living honestly. There was practically no trade or profession open to her. The result was inevitable; she was almost driven to prostitution in order to live. The Christian woman, therefore, had either to marry or to dedicate her life completely to the service of the Church; there was no halfway house."

Is the church to help widows in need? Yes. Is the church to help younger widows? Yes. But is the church to put younger widows on the "official" widows' list? No. Why not? For two reasons...

1. Such help could create an unnecessary conflict of interests (11-12). Verses 11-12 explain, "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."

Don't put young widows on the widows list. Why not? Inclusion on the widow's list meant that a widow would not only receive help from the church, but would give herself to the church in service to her Lord.

Again, Paul's not saying, "Don't help young widows." We should. We should look for ways to help single moms. That's not the issue. What verse 11 forbids is the placement of widows on the widows *list*, that is, the regular, continual support of the church. Don't create a dependency of younger widows on the church.

That *dependency* is okay for older widows because their life *is* the church and its ministry--they pray, they serve, they help. But not so the younger widows.

Indeed, to put a younger widow on such a list could create a conflict of interests. Here's an example. She may meet an eligible man and want to marry. Nothing wrong with that *unless* she's made a vow to give the rest of her life to serve the Lord in His church. Which is apparently what being on the "list" involved. Now if she marries, she's got a problem. The problem isn't marriage (which Paul actually encourages in verse 14). The problem is her *broken promise*. When she accepted a spot on the widows' list, she in essence was saying, "I want to give the rest of my life for service to the Lord," but in choosing to remarry she was renegeing on her promise.

And if a church puts a younger widow on such a list, the church would actually be contributing to the problem by creating an unnecessary conflict of interests. So don't do it, is Paul's counsel. There's a second reason given in verse 13.

2. *Such help could actually promote sinful living (13)*. "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 gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to."

Here's the problem with helping people who should be taking responsible action for themselves. It promotes *idleness*. And there's some truth in the old saying, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." And idleness gives occasion for gossiping, not to mention meddling (which is what a "busybody" does).

Notice the contrast Paul makes here between older widows and younger widows.

Older Widows	Younger Widows
They've been down the road, are well known for good deeds, and have learned the importance of hard work	They're still learning the ropes, and are prone to become idle
They're proven servants, and are self-motivated to do so (they wash feet)	They haven't proven themselves as servants yet; And if a person isn't a servant, she (or he!) is prone to be a gossip and a busybody
They've shown hospitality (that is, they've opened their own house to serve others)	They are prone to go to other people's houses, not to serve, but to interfere

Please don't misunderstand Paul. He's not criticizing women here. If you've studied his life you know he worked side by side in the ministry with many women--Phoebe, Tryphena & Tryphosa (Rom. 16), Euodia & Synteché (Phil. 4), and Priscilla (Acts 18), to name a few. Nor is he saying these things are true of *all* younger widows--they certainly aren't. Rather, what he is describing is a temptation to which young widows are particularly vulnerable (though older widows could be too, and men!).

And that's why the church is not to include younger widows on the "list." There is a time *not* to help. How is helping someone when your actions promote sinful behavior?

When Jacob gave his son, Joseph, a coat of many colors, was he helping his son? Yes, his intent was good, but what he really did was set his son up for heartache, for potential pride, and for sibling rivalry.

When a butterfly is struggling to get out of its cocoon, you may feel sorry for the poor creature, but if you want what's best for it, what should you *not* do? Eliminate the struggle. It needs the struggle to get stronger, and be prepared for life in a hostile world.

And what if you're a parent? Are you truly helping your child if protect him or her from the consequences of their choices? If I hand him life on a silver platter, am I really helping him? Better at times to teach him how to do without rather than to give, to teach

him how to work rather than doing it for him, how to say no rather than expect a yes. He'll need that lesson when he grows older. But if I foster the idea that life revolves around him, my good intent just went sour.

Yes, there's a time *not* to help. Which leads to Paul's second piece of counsel.

B. Younger widows are encouraged to make God-honoring choices (14-15). "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."

Why does Paul spend so much time talking about the younger widow issue? The last statement indicates this wasn't merely a hypothetical issue. The church had already lost some women to Satan. And perhaps, unwittingly, the church had contributed to their departure.

But no longer. The church was to encourage their younger widows to make God-honoring choices. One, to marry--notice that Paul doesn't regard celibacy as a symbol of spirituality. He encourages young widows to remarry (of course, "in the Lord"; 1 Cor. 7:39). Two, to have children--if *Christians* don't have children and raise them to live for God, who will? Three, to manage their homes--though a woman make have employment elsewhere, her primary devotion must be to her home. And four, to not give the enemy opportunity for slander.

The world demeans the impact a woman can have for Christ if she's committed to her home. But the Bible upholds this special privilege. The following illustration as told by the Scottish preacher Ian MacClaren underscores the point. It's a story about a conversation Pastor MacClaren had with a woman in his church:¹

As they were talking, she began to wipe her eyes with the corner of her apron, so Dr. MacClaren said, "What's disturbing you?"

"Oh," she said, "Sometimes I feel I have done so little and when I think about it it makes my heart heavy, because really I've done so little for Jesus."

"What have you done with your life?" he asked.

"Oh nothing," she said, "just nothing. I've washed dishes, cooked three meals a day, taken care of my children, mopped the floor, mended the clothes, you know, everything a mother does, that's all I've done."

MacClaren sat back in his chair and asked, "Where are your boys?"

"Oh," she spoke, "You know I named them all for the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You know them all and you know where Mark is. You ordained him. He went to China. He's learned the language and now he is able to minister to the people in the name of the Lord."

"Where's Luke?" MacClaren said.

"You know well enough where he is because you sent him out and I had a letter from him the other day. He is in Africa and says a revival has broken out at his mission station."

"And Matthew?" he queried.

"He's with his brother in China and they are working together. And John, who's nineteen, came to me last night to say God has laid Africa on his heart. He said, 'I'm going to Africa, but don't worry about it, Mother, because the Lord has shown me that I am to stay with you until you go home to glory, and then I'll go. Until then I have to take care of you.'"

MacClaren looked at that elderly saint and said, "Your life has been wasted, you say?"

¹as related by John MacArthur, Jr., pp. 209-10.

"Yes, it has been wasted."

"You have been cooking and mopping and washing--but I would like to see the reward when you are called home!"

Now a third lesson. One, there's a time to help. Two, there's a time not to help...

III. When it comes to helping, we all have a part to play (16).

Verse 16, "If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need." When it comes to care giving, notice the teamwork.

A. God intends for the family to take the lead. Then...

B. God intends for the church to fill in the gaps. It starts with the family. For instance, verse 16, if a believing woman has a needy widow in her family, she should help her. Then the church is free to help the widows (and others) who are family-less.

William Hendriksen offers this specific scenario (178): "Here, let us say, is a lady like Lydia, who has a spacious home. She has a servant, a friend, or a relative, who happens to be a widow. Perhaps she can provide a home for that widow, or even for more than one widow. Or else she can help the widow financially or by providing work. Let her then do her Christian duty so that God may be glorified, so that this gracious lady may herself experience in her heart the peace which results from divine approval of deeds well done, and so that the needy one may be relieved."

When it comes to helping, we all have a part to play. God has given each of us abilities for ministry. When we don't, the burden falls on the church. But if we all do our part, the church functions well. It's a beautiful thing. Needs are met, and God is honored.

Three Principles for Helping People in the Church...

1. *It takes more than good intentions to meet needs.* The seven words, "But I was just trying to help," don't replace the need for wisdom.

2. *Sometimes giving people what they think they need hurts them more than it helps.* God didn't send Jesus merely to patch up our families, nor to put food on our plates, nor to make us healthy--though we may have needs in these areas and He certainly can meet such needs. But the reason Jesus came was to address our *fundamental* need, our *real* need. What's that? It's the problem of sin.

We are sinners. We are born with a sin nature inherited from the first sinner, and we are enslaved to our sins. Our sin alienates us from God, from the people around us, and even from ourselves. What we need is exactly what God sent--a *Savior*. Jesus Christ came to save us from our sins. If God merely gave us what we wanted, we'd be healthy and wealthy sinners heading for hell. But God gave us what we *needed*, Someone who could rescue us from our destructive sinfulness.

Have you ever admitted your *real* need to God? And have you accepted the help He offers for this need? Have you trusted Christ and entrusted your life to Him?

3. *God is committed to His church, and we should be too.* The question is, are we? It's true. God is serious about His church. That's why He gives us such careful instruction for how it's to function. He's serious about the church.

Are you? Are you committed to the church, to *this* church?