

A Black Widow in the House of God

Paul's Instructions to Widows

1Tim 5:1 Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers,

² older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

³ Honor widows who are truly widows.

⁴ But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.

⁵ She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day,

⁶ but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.

⁷ Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach.

⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

⁹ Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband,

¹⁰ and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

¹¹ But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry

¹² and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith.

¹³ Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.

¹⁴ So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.

¹⁵ For some have already strayed after Satan.

¹⁶ If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.

(1 Timothy 5:1-16)

All in the Family

It must have been **one of the most dysfunctional families** in history. The father **fell in love** with a beautiful woman, but because he had **cheated her father**, he was cheated, and after working seven long years, was **tricked into marrying her ugly older sister**. Then he decided to work for another seven years so that he might marry *both* women. The **polygamous marriage** then became a war when, after seeing that the ugly sister had given birth to four sons while she had none, the younger gave her maidservant to her husband, adding **a third woman** into the marriage, so that she might conceive through her. This enraged her sister who then threw her maidservant into the mix, adding **a fourth woman** to the marriage. Before it was all over, twelve sons and at least one daughter had been born.

As the boys grew up, they would become **adulterers**, **liars**, and **murderers**. Two would **collaborate** against an entire city because of what they did to their sister, and they would put them all to the sword after deceiving them into being circumcised. Ten would **conspire** against their youngest brother to murder him, only to have the oldest change their mind and *just* let him be kidnapped into slavery; meanwhile they would tell their father he died at the hands of a wild animal. One would give his oldest son away in marriage, but the wicked man would be put to death by God, leaving her **a widow**. Many years later, she would trick her father-in-law into having children with him as she pretended to be a local prostitute.

This is but a snippet of **the one family God chose** out of all the families of the earth to be his treasured possession, his royal priesthood. They would become known by **the new name** the father of all those sons would gain, after wrestling with the God who transformed him from Jacob (Deceiver) to Israel (Strives with God and Prevails). Anyone who thinks salvation or God's choice is based on good works has never understood this story.

Many in this family came to think that this choice of Israel over all the other nations was an end to itself, and that all that mattered was being able to **trace one's genealogy**

back to one of these twelve sons. But they forgot the promise that started it all. It was a promise given to Jacob's grandfather before he ever left the region of Babylon, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed" (**Gen 12:3**). This same promise was repeated to Jacob in a dream when the Angel of the LORD told him, "Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall *all the families of the earth* be blessed" (**Gen 28:14**). What few would realize is how those families would themselves be turned into a family, the same way the original patriarch, Abram's began—by faith (**Gen 15:6**).

Originally, this was **cloaked** in the calling of twelve disciples by Jesus of Nazareth, **all children of Israel**. Jesus then commissioned them in a missionary outreach saying, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (**Matt 10:5**). Why? Because he told them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (**Matt 15:24**).

But after the horrible **crucifixion** and equally as glorious **resurrection**, the risen Lord gathered together these same

disciples (minus Judas who had been doomed to destruction and died of suicide) and gave them a new commission, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the end of the earth*” (Acts 1:8), “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples *of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:18:20).

For several years, the Apostles stayed and preached in Jerusalem to the Jews. But God sent persecution to the city so that the Christians might be loosed from their complacency and begin obeying the commission. One day, Peter was visiting the coastal city of Caesarea. A series of visions and angelic encounters lead him to the house of a man named Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile. The great disciple’s tongue was opened, and he began to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to those who already knew some about what happened to him. But at that very moment, “The Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out *even on the Gentiles*” (Acts 10:44). In this way, the first Gentile converts to Christianity were born, and shortly thereafter, a peculiar

term began to be used of them. It was a term previously reserved only for Jews: “**Brothers**” (**Acts 15:23**). The promise to Abraham was beginning to be fulfilled.

What is a “brother?” A brother is your **closest kin**. Ordinarily, brothers are fiercely loyal, so close that their fights do no permanent damage to their relationship. They are people who cannot and will not leave one another. Even the ten brothers, when they found out that Joseph was still alive, were not able to destroy that familial bond. For they, simply put, were family.

For all their dysfunction, Israel’s household was still a family. They would do anything for one another. Though they lied, they still had the utmost respect for their **father**. He was the patriarch, worthy of all dignity and respect. Their **mother(s)** were untouchable—the wise leaders of their homes. They would kill for their younger **sister** if anyone tried to harm her. They would do nothing to their youngest **brother**, Benjamin, after their life-long torment for nearly murdering Joseph.

We have gathered here, today, to **worship God together**. We do so by that same Holy Spirit who descended upon Cornelius. But many have not comprehended that we do so not as strangers, not even as mere friends, but **as family**. The family

of God. Together, we call God “Father” (Matt 6:9). Christ is the firstborn among many “brothers” (Rom 8:29). “As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God ... you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:14-16). This is the Scripture’s universal testimony, for the NT which comes right out of the OT type of that biological family of Abraham and Jacob.

1 Timothy 5:1-16 – Context and Structure

If you do not understand or appreciate this, then the passage today will make less sense, for it begins, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a *father*, younger men as *brothers*, older women as *mothers*, younger women as *sisters*...” (1Tim 5:1-2). To understand where this is coming from and why Paul is raising this now, we must go back to the very beginning of the letter and remember its context and structure.

Paul is writing to a young man named Timothy (1Tim 1:1). Timothy is clearly someone of **high position in the church** at Ephesus (3), who has been urged from the outset to make sure that “**certain persons**” do not “**teach any different doctrine**” than the Apostolic doctrine, nor that they

devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than godliness in the church of Jesus Christ (3-4).

Paul's letter to Timothy begins as a mixture of **warning and gospel**, reminding him that in the church he is both to command against heresy and proclaim that Jesus came to save sinners. At the beginning of ch. 2, he moves to specific **instructions for the church**. He gives them instructions for corporate prayer, for proper and godly corporate worship, for how elders and deacons are to be chosen and behave, and more generally for the entire household of God to conduct themselves in a godly manner.

This more **general instruction for godliness** became the **focal point** of the letter, as the Apostle made it clear how godliness comes to God's people. It comes through the central Apostolic doctrine of the **life, death, proclamation, belief, and return of the living Christ (3:16)**. Paul then turned to specifics relating to **demonic doctrine that creates pseudo-godliness vs. true doctrine that creates actual godliness**. While some see this contrast as the center of the letter (see the left chiasm below), it is really just the specific teasing out of the more general call to godliness that occurred just before the great central hymn of the letter (see the right chiasm below).

Two Examples of the Chiasm of 1 Timothy

A. 1:1-2. Paul greets Timothy as a true child of the Faith, and blesses with grace, mercy, and peace.

B. 1:3-7. Timothy urged to command against **heresy**.

C. 1:8-11. The reason Law is established. List of sins.

D. 1:12-17. Jesus came to save sinners. Doxology.

E. 1:18-20. Wage the good war.

F. 2:1-8. Pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or quarreling.

G. 2:9-15. Instructions to women.

H. 3:1-7. Concerning bishops.

I. 3:8-13. Concerning deacons and deaconesses.

J. 3:14-16. Instructions to Timothy as a pastor in the Household of God.

K. 4:1-5. Heresies will arise.

K'. 4:6-10. Teach against heresies.

J'. 4:11-5:2. How Timothy should conduct himself as a pastor.

I'. 5:3-16. Concerning widows.

H'. 5:17-25. Concerning elders.

G'. 6:1-2a. Instructions to bondservants.

F'. 6:2b-11. Against **heresy** caused by envy and greed. Quarrelling.

E'. 6:12. Fight the good fight.

D'. 6:13-16. Keep the commandment. Doxology.

C'. 6:17-19. Store up treasure with God, so to take hold of true life.

B'. 6:20-21a. Timothy commanded to guard against **heresy**.

A'. 6:21b. Grace.¹

A) 1 Tim 1:1-2, Paul to Timothy, a true son: Grace, mercy, peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ;

B) 1 Tim 1:2-20, Timothy's charge: **guard sound doctrine** from which some have strayed:

C) 1 Tim 2:1-8, Prayers + intercession for those in authority (exercise of authority);

D) 1 Tim 2:9-15, Proper exercise/ care of church authority;

E) 1 Tim 3:1-13, Qualification of bishops + deacons;

F) 1 Tim 3:14-15, I write that you may know how to conduct yourself in the house of God;

central axis of the book) 1 Tim 3:16, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels; Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory;"

F') 1 Tim 4:1-16, Instruction for Timothy as church pastor:— 1b.4) 1 Tim 1:7b-8a, Exercise

E') 1 Tim 5:1-19, Qualifications of true widows/ treatment of elderly + elders:— 1c) 1

D') 1 Tim 5:20-25, Proper exercise/ care of church authority;

C') 1 Tim 6:1-2a, Proper honor between bondservants and masters (exercise of authority);

B') 1 Tim 6:2b-21a, Timothy's charge: **teach sound doctrine** from which some have strayed:

A') 1 Tim 6:21b, Grace be with you. Amen.²

¹ **Joseph Norris**, "Heretics in the Latter Days: The Structure of 1 Timothy, Part I," *Theopolis* (June 4, 2014), <https://theopolisinstitute.com/heretics-in-the-latter-days-the-structure-of-1-timothy-part-i/>. While seeing the center somewhat differently, Nagasawa has something similar as it relates to elders/deacons paralleling widows:

A. Fight the Good Fight (1:1 – 1:20)

B. The Christian Household and Witness, Part 1 (2:1 – 15)

C. Church Leaders: Elders and Deacons (3:1 – 13)

D. The Truth at the Heart of the Church (3:14 – 5:2)

C'. Church Leaders: Older and Younger Widows (5:3 – 25)

B'. The Christian Household and Witness, Part 2 (6:1 – 11)

A'. Fight the Good Fight (6:12 – 21)

² **Christine Smith**, "Book of 1 Timothy Chiastic Structure," *A Little Perspective* (Nov 4, 2013), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/book-of-1-timothy-chiastic-structure/>.

But what this does more than anything else, at least structurally speaking, is demonstrate that Paul is now **working his way back out** from the center of the letter, following a chiasm that will see him bring various parallels to what he has already discussed. These parallels in turn help us interpret the meaning of the second half of the letter more precisely.

Specifically for today, we are going to talk for the most part, about **widows**. Widows, of course, are **women**, and given that Paul has already discussed some things about women (esp. **2:9-15**), it is tempting to think that the parallel from earlier in the letter must be when he addressed the women. But this is not the case. Rather, the parallel is the discussion of at least **the deacons and probably also the elders** (see the above chiasms and also the chart below). Perhaps the most immediate way to see this is not by comparing the people, **but the lists**. For in both, Paul is giving “qualifications” that the people must meet to be eligible for either the office or for help (see chart next page).

As we look at **our passage itself**, it can be difficult to figure out how much of it is a single unit. Without question, the majority of the chapter deals with **widows** (**1Tim 5:2-16**). However, this leaves off **vv. 1-2**. It is possible to see these verses as an **introduction** to the widows and elders that follow, which take us perhaps to the end of chapter 5.

However, the language of “**brothers**” in **6:1-2** also seems related to **5:1-2**, and for this reason, it is perhaps best to see the entire unit as a chiasm from **5:1-6:2** (see chiasm below).

Church Leaders: Elders and Deacons (3:1 – 13)	Church Leaders: Older and Younger Widows (5:3 – 25)
Elders... able to teach... (3:1 – 7)	The elders... especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching (5:17)
Elders (3:1 – 7)	Older widows over sixty years old (5:3 – 10)
The husband of one wife (3:2)	The wife of one man (5:9)
Hospitable (3:2)	If she has shown hospitality to strangers...washed the saints’ feet (5:10)
Temperate, prudent, respectable... not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money (3:2 – 3)	If she has assisted those in distress, if she has devoted herself to every good work (5:10)
One who manages his own household, keeping his children under control with all dignity (3:4)	Be put on the list... if she has brought up children (5:9 – 10)
Have a good reputation with those outside the church (3:7)	Above reproach... Having a reputation for good works (5:7, 10)
Deacons... not double-tongued... not malicious gossips, but temperate (3:8 – 11)	Younger widows... not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention (5:11 – 13)
Deacons... faithful in all things (3:8) ... beyond reproach (3:10)	Younger widows... get married, bear children, keep house, give the enemy no occasion for reproach (5:14) ³

- A. 1-2 Older man (*presbuterō*), encourage (*parakaleō*), brothers (*adelphous*) (1), older women (*presbuteras*), sisters (*adelphas*) (2)
- B. 3-9 Truly widows (*ontōs chēras*) (3), (*echei*), first learn (*manathanō proton*), family (*oikon*) (4), truly widows (*ontōs chēras*) (5), household (*oikeōn*), faith (*pistin*), unbeliever (*apistou*) (8)
- C. 10a Works (*ergois*)
- D. **10b brought up children, shown hospitality, washed feet of saints, cared for afflicted**
- C'. 10c Work (*ergō*)
- B'. 11-16 former faith (*prōten pistin*) (12), learn (*manthanousin*), family (*oikias*) (13), *echei*, truly widows (*ontōs chērais*) (16)
- A'. 17-25-6:1-2 Elders (*presbuteroi*) (17), elders (*presbuteriu*) (19), encourage the brothers (*adelphoi parakelei*) (6:2)⁴

³ Nagasawa. He tries to make this prove too much, namely, that Paul has in mind here a specific office of the church that widows fulfilled. Others have taken this view, but there is no evidence from the text or from history that this was ever the case.

⁴ Paul S. Jeon, *1 Timothy: A Charge to God’s Missional Household Vol 3* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), ch. 2.

If we look only at the section on widows, which will take up the majority of our time in what follows, we find that it forms a nice unit that centers on what I will call **the Black Widow**, for she is a hurtful woman who ends up destroying the house of God through her own passions.

1a) 1 Tim 5:3-10, Care of **real widows/ family to provide for their own widows**;

1b) 1 Tim 5:11-12, Refuse **younger widows** as they desire to **remarry + cast off** their first faith; central axis) 1 Tim 5:13, “And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not;”

2b) 1 Tim 5:14-15, Charge **younger widows** to **marry** + some already **turned aside**;

2a) 1 Tim 5:16, Let the **believers relieve their own widows** that the church may relieve the **real widows**;⁵

But, the **key to the whole thing** is **vv. 1-2**, for it gives us the most immediate context. It is tempting to hear talk of older men and women, younger men and women (which some have interpreted as children and parents), widows, and later, slaves and masters and think that Paul have moved past the church to the individual family units. After all, this is much more like what he does in parallels such as Ephesians, Colossians, and also in 1 Peter.

Ephesians	Colossians	1 Timothy	1 Peter
Wives, husbands (5:21–33)	Wives, husbands (3:18–19)	Wives, husbands (2:8/11–15)	Wives, husbands (3:1–7)
Children, parents (6:1–4)	Children, parents (3:20–21)	Children, parents (3:1–5:25)	
Slaves, masters (6:5–9)	Slaves, masters (3:22–4:1)	Slaves, masters (6:1–11)	Servants (2:13–25)

⁵ Abbreviated from **Christine Smith**, “1 Timothy 5,” *A Little Perspective* (Sept 29, 2016). <https://www.alittleperspective.com/1-timothy-5-2016/>.

But it would be a mistake to do this. For in actuality, the Apostle is **not leaving the context of the church at all**. Instead, he is giving Timothy the proper way of viewing the members of the church ... as if they were you own father, mother, brother, and sister. This is the *family of God*.

1 Timothy 5:1-2 – Be Good to Your Family

Now that we are able to see that the church is a family, we can look at the passage. Paul begins by bringing up **older men** and then **younger men** (1Tim 5:1). The context is “**re-buking**.” A rebuke is verbal rebuttal of sharp disapproval directed at someone you think is wrong. We have just been talking about doctrine and godly living and people can be wrong about both of those.

But the interesting thing here is Timothy, as a young man, is told **not to rebuke** an older man. Why? Because he is to treat him like he would his own father. That’s the bond of the church. That’s right order. That’s respect for elders. All of this goes back to the OT, to family, to the respect the elderly deserve, and to the law of God.

Furthermore, he is not to rebuke younger men either. There’s far too much rebuking going on amongst

Christians, including Reformed people, especially on the internet, which by the way is not church. It's like **some people live to rebuke others**. Their life is incomplete without it. But even if they are your peers, you are to treat younger men as brothers. Not as Joseph's brothers treated him, nor even as he treated them later, but as you would want to be treated yourself. It's the Golden Rule.

He continues by moving to older women. Older women can also be in need of rebuke. But you are to treat them as your own mother. Younger women you are to treat as your sisters. Why? Because we are a family.

But if someone needs rebuking, **what is Timothy to do?** He is to *encourage* them. If they are doing something wrong, rather than sharp criticism, he is to direct the man in the other direction through encouragement. You encourage someone who is doing the right thing. This encouragement is to come "**in all purity**," which seems to be added especially to the women. There is to be no defilement, no evil, no cause for outsiders (or insiders) to break up the family. Rather, the church is to be the place where heaven itself comes down to earth that all people might come to see the Good and Holy God.

1 Timothy 5:3-16 – Rules for Widows

Why is He Talking About Widows?

Having introduced us to the family, Paul now spends a great deal of time with one particular member of the household—widows (1Tim 5:3-16). From our perspective all these years later, it makes little sense why he would do this. And yet, when we begin to dig just a little, it becomes apparent.

First, the meaning of “widow” (*chēra*) fits very nicely into what Paul has just said. Being derived from the word *chēros*, which means “bereft,” a widow in Greek is literally someone who is bereft, has been robbed, or has suffered great loss. Someone says, “The basic thought of the word ‘widow’ is that of loneliness.”⁶ If one is to treat men and women the way he has just commanded, how much more a widow who has been through such hurt?

Second, fitting nicely with the OT ethic about how we are to treat one another as family, we have what may just be

⁶ Edmond D. Hiebert, *First Timothy* (Moody Colportage Library series. Chicago: Moody, 1957), 91. Cited in Jacob K. Chirchir, “Care of Widows as Taught in 1 Timothy 5:3-16,” *Academia* (9-1-2014), 2-3, https://www.academia.edu/8202900/Care_of_Widows_as_Taught_in_1_Timothy_5_3-16.

the most basic of all doctrine in this regard. James summarizes it, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans *and widows* in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). I say this is “basic,” because it goes to the very heart of the kind of God that Yahweh is. “He executes justice for the fatherless *and the widow*, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing” (Deut 10:15). “You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a *widow’s* garment in pledge” (24:17). “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead *the widow’s* cause” (Isa 1:17).

Curiously, Psalm 82 tells us that this is precisely what the “elohim” in the divine council did *not* do (Ps 82:1-4). The idea that supernatural beings would be given charge over their nations to carry out justice like this is a taste so sour to many people that they deny the supernatural in this passage altogether. James White says,

The activities of these judges are plainly human. Unless one is going to assert some kind of cosmic justice play wherein these elohim are involved in judging unjustly and showing partiality to the wicked, what other context can be offered? Exactly how are angelic beings to be judged for unjust

judgment regarding the weak and the fatherless, in biblical theology? How are the bene-elohim to deliver the weak and needy out of the hand of the wicked? [Is there] some kind of group of intermediate beings who are morally involved in bringing judgment in defense of the widows? Who are these beings, and where do we get the information that they, rather than the judges of Israel, would be held accountable for the sad state of affairs in Israel that so often brought the condemnation of the prophets?⁷

In my mind, this line of reasoning stems from **the sad state of affairs** in the church which has failed to grasp that not only does God (a spirit being) do this very thing in the OT, but the “God” who does them is **the Son of God**, Israel’s uncreated equivalent of the sons of God in Psalm 82. Therefore, in taking care of widows, we are emulating Christ himself.

A **third reason** why Paul now brings up widows has to do with some kind of specific circumstances in the church at Ephesus in which **certain widows** were causing disruptions of such a manner that they appear to have been part of the false teaching that was being spread that Paul has already

⁷ James White, “Carmenn Massa and Dodging the Real Arguments,” *Alpha and Omega* (Sept 16, 2009): <https://www.aomin.org/aoblog/mormonism/carmenn-massa-and-dodging-the-real-arguments/>.

called “myths and genealogies” (1:4), “silly myths” which can be translated as “fables fit only for old women” (4:7 NAS) as well as the “doctrine of demons” (4:1). In fact, in their doing this, he says, “some have already strayed after Satan” (1Tim 5:15). And Satan, of course, takes us right to the supernatural point I just made. Ironically, those who upon first glance should be taken care of by the church were now directly responsible for its slow and steady corruption from within.

It was apparently a difficult matter to sort out what to do. Therefore, following the parallel of qualifications of elders and deacons, Paul now gives Timothy and the church qualifications for sorting out widows who have strayed after Satan from “True widows,” a rather surprising adjective that he uses three times (3, 5, 16). A true widow? Does that mean there are false widows? What would that even be, and what kind of implications would this have for us today?

True Widows

We begin in vs. 3 which is in some ways a continuation of vs. 2. “Honor widows who are truly widows.” Honoring widows is doing precisely what the law tells us to do—support, take care of, do not take advantage of, and so on. But

he gives this qualification. They must be “truly widows.” What does this mean?⁸

We are going to look at five categories of widows. The first we will look at answers this question directly. We go to vs. 5 for the answer. “She who is truly a widow” is “left all alone...” This is the emphasis on her loneliness, both physical and financial. She is not only bereaved but destitute. There is no one to take care of her, no one to provide for her. She has no means of doing so herself.

Second, she “has set her hope on God...” That is, she is a Christian. Can you see in this how the whole idea of a Christian family is so important? But it is more than just being a Christian. Her hope is set on God to provide for her. Having lost her husband, she is now being drawn into a closer relationship with her God, in whom she is placing all of her hope, both eternal and temporal. What will separate “true widows” from others is that they need someone else to take care of them. If she is relying on God to provide for her, he might chiefly use the means of the church to do it.

Along these same lines, she “continues in supplications and prayers night and day...” These supplications and prayers

⁸ The following is from Homer A. Kent Jr. *The Pastoral Epistles: Studies in I and II Timothy and Titus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958). As summarized in Chirchir.

demonstrate her **total dependence upon God** to provide for her. But they also demonstrate that she is **a godly woman**, displaying exactly the kinds of qualities that just made up the heart of our letter. The model for this is surely **Anna**, the widow in Luke's Gospel (see **Luke 2:36-38**) in her 80s who never left the temple, but worshiped and fasted and prayed there night and day. She was one of only a handful of people who was able to recognize the Messiah when he was an infant.

A **second** category of widow is one who is **bereaved, but not alone**. This is **vs. 4**. “**But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.**” In other words, she has relatives who can support her. Though the verse begins with a “but,” which contrasts it from “true widows,” I think Paul would still call her a “true widow.” The difference is in how she is to be taken care of. It will not be her church, but her own biological family. More on that later.

A **third kind of widow** is one who is essentially **living her life for pleasure**. “**But she who is self-indulgent ...**” (6). The NAS translates this as “**she who gives herself to wanton pleasure.**” The word (*spatalaō*) means “**to live riotously.**” Based on what he says later, there are hints that this **could**

have moral overtones, that she is pursuing immoral, perhaps sexual pleasure. However, the word “can be interpreted in the sense of living luxuriously, of enjoying the pleasures of extravagant living.”⁹ In other words, she has plenty of money and is able to indulge herself in pretty much whatever she wants. *She lacks for nothing.* She doesn’t need anyone to provide for her. This widow is not fitting the qualification, because she has everything she needs.

The strange addition is then made of such a widow that she “is dead even while she lives.” Though some think this must mean she is not a Christian, I agree with Calvin who says,

I think it more natural to say that a woman “is dead,” when she is useless, and does no good; for to what purpose do we live, if it be not that our actions may yield some advantage [to others]? ... For they who covet an indolent (lazy) life, that they may live more at their ease, have constantly in their mouth the proverbial saying:—

*“For life is not to live, but to be well.”*¹⁰

⁹ Daniel C. Arichea and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 115.

¹⁰ John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 125–126.

In other words, these women are **not concerned with helping the church**, but merely with **living a life of luxury** and ease with the money they inherited upon their husband's death. And so the meaning would be that in their desire to be happy in this life, they act as though they were dead to the one to come.

A **fourth kind of widow** is found in **vs. 9**. They are very similar to the first group, except that they are already “**enrolled**.” That is, these widows are put on a list to **receive support from the church**. They must meet **three qualifications**. They must be **60 years or older**, must have been the “**wife of one husband**” (9), and they have a **good reputation for doing good works** (10). The “**wife of one husband**” is an interesting phrase that parallels the elder and deacon who were the “**husband of one wife**.” (Because Paul uses this phrase here but not earlier, this is a strong indication to me that elders and deacons are only to be male.) Some have interpreted this phrase less literally and more like “a blames marital life.”

As far as the “**good works**” are concerned, Paul gives **four examples**. She has “**brought up her children**,” that is, they are not out of the house and not taking care of her. She has “**shown hospitality**.” That is, she is someone who is in

fact involved with the church. She has “washed the feet of the saints.” That is, she has not only been involved, but has shown sacrificial service to others. Like it, she has “cared for the afflicted.” These are examples of what he means by “devoting herself to every good work.”

The Church Must Take Care of its Family

Before moving on to the fifth kind of widow, let’s make an application here. Clearly, the church is to take care of widows. However, not everyone who is a widow fits this need. Some are quite well to do and need nothing. Others have family who can help them. Many aren’t Christians. As we will see, some are also young enough that they also do not need the church to take care of them. In this, we are seeing that the general command to take care of widows is nuanced by circumstances and wisdom.

Just here, it is important to notice a tremendous shift that has occurred in the church. It used to be that the church would take care of its own and not worry so much about the world. Over time, and especially in rich nations, it seems that this has flipped exactly the other way. Many Christians really don’t need the help of others. And so, it was natural

to begin reaching out to the world, becoming involved in all kinds of charitable works to help outsiders. Parachurches and megachurches have been two modern facilitators of this.

Now, I'm not saying that it is wrong to help people in the world. Of course it isn't. However, I want you to notice that the Apostle is very specific here that the *widow must be a Christian and must be involved in the church!* Part of the reason for this is put in the last verse. *“If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows” (1Tim 5:16)*. It is clear that what was happening in this situation was that some who should have been taken care of by other means were draining the resources of the church. It is not right that some who are in need suffer because others who aren't in need are draining those resources.

But more to the point, the *church is to be showing love to its family*. When one rejoices, we all rejoice. When one suffers, we all suffer. This is the point of *vv. 7-8*. *“Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”* Importantly, *Paul is not*

suddenly switching subjects, as if he is talking about fathers providing for their children. No. He is still on point. The point is, the family here is the church, and widows in need are important members of that family. If Timothy neglects this, he makes the church itself worse than the world, for it will not take care of the most needy among them.

I think about how this monumental shift in who our resources go to affects those in a wealthy nation who are in the church but who might really need help. They think that the churches job is to help *the poor outside*, because that's what they see and that's what we show and even tell them. Then, when *they* are in need, it becomes very difficult for them to ask for help. Rather than going to their family, they often end up getting help from the outside, particularly from **the government**. Yet, the church exists to provide that *to them* first and foremost. Did you know that one of the big reasons so many converted to Christianity in the early centuries was because **Christians took care of one another**? Outsiders saw this and realized that something was different, and it was a tremendous draw to Christ. They saw how they treated family. The church needs to recapture much more balance on this in the present day, because the neglect and even outright disobedience to it has led to a perversion within the

family and to Christians looking outside of their family for help. This has ramifications both for how the church operates and how the world does. In fact, I believe that the welfare state has at least some of its origin in the church neglecting its duty to its family.

The Black Widow

But there is yet **one more group of widows** that Paul singles out. They appear in **vv. 11-15**. These are “**younger widows**.” It is likely that **vs. 13** is the center of the entire unit (see the chiasm above), and as such, it takes us to the heart of the matter.

As we look at these verses, they appear much more difficult to interpret than the others. He introduces them by saying, “**But refuse to enroll younger widows**.” We’ve seen that roll, which was for older widows who were truly in need. Younger widows are not permitted to be on that roll. Why?

“**For when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith**” (**11-12**). As you think about what this could possibly mean, remember that Paul was

hardly opposed to marriage or sex or even remarriage. Don't read "passion" and "desire" here as necessarily bad things, which is all the more tempting when you see that they abandoned their faith because of this. But as Ryken says, "These terms simply refer to a woman's natural sexual desire, which is given by God and finds its proper fulfillment in marital intercourse."

But what about "faith" here? Ryken suggests it may be that "faith" is used here "in the sense of a 'pledge' or 'vow.'"¹¹ The idea would be that when their husband died, they took a voluntary oath to remain single for the sake of the church (perhaps trying to be overly "spiritual"). But their youthfulness and natural desires worked against that vow, causing them to become conflicted and eventually incurring condemnation.¹² Another option, and one that makes more sense to me, is that these widows were somehow getting involved with non-believers. In other words, Paul has in mind mix-marriages, which he elsewhere condemns (1Cor 7:39).¹³ That's interesting, because it takes us

¹¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Daniel M. Doriani, and Philip Graham Ryken, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 214.

¹² Ryken, 215.

¹³ Dillon Thornton, "Saying What They Should Not Say": Reassessing the Gravity of the Problem of the Younger Widows (1Tim 5:11-15)," *JETS* 59.1 (2016): 125.

https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/59/59-1/JETS_59-1_119-129_Thornton.pdf.

back to the whole idea of **the family of God**. Remember how Abraham had Isaac take a wife from his family; Isaac in turn did the same with Jacob, but godless Esau married foreign women? This is the NT equivalent.

But something else was happening to them, perhaps it is related, perhaps not. “**Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not**” (13). These, he says, “**have already strayed after Satan**” (15). What’s going on here? Luther tells us there are **two sins here**. “**Picking up new doctrines ... and planting that poison.**”¹⁴ The new doctrines would seemingly be those of the opponents of the gospel throughout these letters. The poison they are plantings is right there in the church. And so, like **black widows**, these young widows end up, through their wanton pleasure and idle hands, poisoning the very thing that gives them life. They kill the church.

There’s something here that needs to be said about why Paul will not permit these younger widows to be on the rolls. If this is what they are doing, spreading false doctrine through gossip, rather than going from house to house serving the saints, and if the churches were in fact supporting

¹⁴ LW 28:344.

these widows, then as Thornton says, “the faithful Christian community in Ephesus was unintentionally funding false teaching,” the very false teaching that was undermining its message and its witness in the world. In that sense, the whole church has become a black widow, inadvertently killing itself.

This is why it is so serious who and how a church decides to support. It’s like being duped into giving your money to the United Way, because you saw some commercial during a game and your heart leapt out to your wallet, when only later you could come to find out that they are a major contributor to Planned Parenthood.

The solution is to keep it in the family. This is controllable. It is testable. It has the benefit of allowing others to see how you take care of your own. Paul’s solution to these young widows is similar to that for the whole church. “So I would have younger widows marry...” (14). This obviously means marry “in the Lord,” in the family. Then, they should “bear children, manage their households,” and otherwise stop being busybodies. They should turn the passion of their youthful cravings into benefit and service rather than harm and destruction. And why? Because in this way they will

“give the adversary no occasion for slander.” Anything else is a straying after Satan.

Until the church learns to think as it once did, of each other *as family*—fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters, such a passage will have little to no meaning for contemporary Christians. But when she *understands* these deep familial roots, which go all the way back to Genesis, and when she starts to *implement* structures and behaviors and emulate the way a family is supposed to take care of its own, suddenly the implications will be felt in her midst, from *those who truly need the help*, to those who are *busy helping no one but* are now being prodded to go out and be of service to God’s people, and *to an ever watching and looking world* that can only see us from the outside and whether or not Christ actually does bring transformation to people and groups, and most of all, to God himself, the One for whom we do it all, out of thankfulness for his amazing gift in Christ Jesus. We honor him by honoring his family, especially those in real need. As this happens, perhaps we can sing anew that familiar tune, for there’s no other family on earth like this one:

*I'm so glad I'm a part of the Family of God,
I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by His blood!
Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod,
For I'm part of the family,
The Family of God.*

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