

## "All In the Family: Power, Sex and Money, Pt. 2"

Last week we spent our time on just the first two verses of chapter 5, where Paul encouraged Timothy to always see the church as a family. A big family? Yes. A blended family? Yes. Dysfunctional – sometimes. And Paul was NOT just talking to husbands and wives and the parents of children here, *but every single person in the church*. And if *we* do this – if these are the lenses by which we look at one another – then the church will be a beacon to the world for a new world order. This was a simple and transformative study for me, and if you were not here, consider getting a copy if only to keep our "family," here at Hope, on the same page.

In those verses we looked at the church as a family in terms of power and sex. This week we turn to issues of money and even social justice in the church family. Let's read **1 Timothy 5:3-16**

<sup>3</sup> Honor widows who are truly widows. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, <sup>6</sup> but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. <sup>7</sup> Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. <sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry <sup>12</sup> and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. <sup>15</sup> For some have already strayed after Satan. <sup>16</sup> 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. (ESV)

You probably wonder – some of you – what I do all day. That's good. I used to wonder what my old pastor used to do all day, too! You know, "What happens there at the church during the week?" One thing that happens here each and every week are calls from people in our community – not church community, but Mercer County – that need help. Lynn takes most of these calls, but Pastor Matt has fielded his fair share, and I have answered many myself.

In the last few months, we've heard from people who have unpaid hospital bills, a man who was in Trenton working at a job site, had a heart attack, and then upon release from the hospital needed a ride to the train station and rail fare back home to Syracuse. Another call was from a woman who said she had lost her home and had to move into a hotel over in West Windsor, and needed help paying her bill. Some requests just hit you out of left field: what do you do when a guy calls the church to help him find a wife? You know, that night, I went home thinking, "Well, *why NOT* the church? You could go to worse places looking for a wife!"

But I would say that 99% of the time, these calls are for money and material help. And as Christians, we know that we are to show compassion for others because of how compassionate God has been to us, and how lavishly he has provided in the gift of his very own son. God is always showing us his compassion, and drawing this same compassion out of us.

Think of it. Right now, you could say that God is using Haiti to rescue us, as much as we are rescuing them. At least for a time, even as a Christian, I am spending less time thinking about Tiger Woods, the problems at NBC and political in-fighting. For a time, the church gets to focus on the really big questions of life. We may not answer them all well, but in the end, we can always offer the answer of Christ's love. We can offer that love to those who are living this tragedy, but also to those on the sidelines wondering how we as Christians will react.

So we love and we give.

And yet, while God is limitless... we are limited. God is infinite. We are finite. There is a limit to the help we can give. The church is not a bottomless social or welfare agency. So how do we know who we give to, and who we don't?

Now look, you can probably look at this passage and be tempted to skip right over it. First, Paul seems to be suffering from indigestion or back pain or something... because he just sounds like he's in a bad mood. Does he really mean it when he says that if you don't provide for a relative that you've "denied the faith" and are "worse than an unbeliever?"

But second, we have all of these cultural nets like Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, retirement benefits, interest on investments, progressive living institutions, etc. So isn't this all out of date? And even if Paul was legitimately angry, if he were around today, would he not just advise folks – or these widows – to call social services?

Let's take a step back and get some context, and if we do, I think we'll see that it's not that Paul needs some alka-seltzer, or that this passage is anachronistic. In fact, I think the principles of this passage are utterly relevant today. That's my assumption. This passage is entirely relevant to our situation today.

You have to remember some key facts. The first is a very Jewish fact. The God of Israel was always understood to care for and to defend widows. The word "widows" and "widow" show up in the bible 84 times. Just after the issuing of the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, we read "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry."<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy tells us that God "defends the cause" or "executes justice" for the "fatherless and the widow."<sup>2</sup> We read last week that farmers were to leave the wheat that they had missed at the first harvesting so that the widows could take it. Every third year, their tithe was to be given to widows. So it was not a news bulletin to anyone in Jewish culture that they had a significant duty to the widow. Care for widows was axiomatic for an Israelite.

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 22:22-23

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 10:18

By this time, also, followers of Jesus Christ also knew his heart for the widow – whether by raising the son of the widow in Luke 7, or praising the widow's two mites in Luke 21. Jesus also scolded the Pharisees for dodging their responsibility to care for the widows by the use of the "Corban" exemption in Mark 7.

So under the force of all of this teaching and Jesus' example, the early church not only accepted that they were to care for widows, but actually they *excelled* in caring for the widows around them. The office of the deacon was largely developed to meet the needs of the Grecian widows in Acts 6. James, the brother of Jesus would say: "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."<sup>3</sup>

Listen to this: the apostolic church did so well in caring for widows that it over-applied the divine instruction, so that too many widows were on church welfare. Some of these widows – as v. 6 implies ("she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives") – may not even have been believers.

So again, the relevant question for today is: If the church is a family, and not a welfare institution, how should it decide who gets financial care or spiritual care, and who should not? Paul gives us an answer. He gives it to us three times. First in verse 3: "Honor widows who are *truly widows*." Then in verse 5, and finally in verse 16: "Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are *truly widows*."

You see it's not whether the church SHOULD honor widows or not, but those who are TRULY widows. It's not about *whether* widows are worthy of attention, but *which* widows need attention.

And you see this starting at verse 9 where they kept a roll, or list of widows. Look at verse 9: "Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age..." And verse 11: "But refuse to enroll younger widows..." Widows would come to the church, enroll themselves as widows, and look forward to support from the church. But to do this, you had to promise not to marry again.

Why? Well, people died earlier back then – often the men who worked outside, did dangerous work, and you didn't have hard-hats, steel-toed shoes and safety glasses. And so there were quite a few widows in Ephesus. And the church was committed to caring for these women. They had no children, no money, no family, no dowry, no life insurance policy. Nothing. If the church didn't feed them, they'd die. So they made a list to make sure someone would be responsible to see that they were cared for.

But the word got out. Other widows heard that this new Christian church – Hope Presbyterian Church of Ephesus, if you will – was giving out free handouts, women flooded in. And the burden for the church became overwhelming. How could they meet this need? And then some who came in were quite young, and of course had plans to remarry, and when they did, they left themselves on the rolls.

---

<sup>3</sup> James 1:27

In fact, this church-provided income may even have been part of what made them desirable to men, because they could count on the church to keep paying it. Not very Christian, right? And that was a problem, too. Some were faking it.

Now that's a lot of context, but I hope you see how relevant this is, and how we need guidance. Because here is the tension we have. The church's primary purpose – and I know that you know this – is to take the good news about Jesus to the world. That is our mission no matter what country we live in, no matter what political system we are under – to be missional in the work of evangelism and the spreading of the gospel. This calling is primary!

But, we are also called to compassion. We've often said it here at Hope because it is so apparent from both experience and the ministry of Jesus, that people often come to Christ *not* with their sin, but with their suffering.

But the problem is that all too often our concern for physical needs and physical problems swamps or strangles our primary task. Now it's not the fault of the needy, necessarily. They're often thinking nice thoughts: "The church will help me." "Churches have always helped me." "Christians always show compassion." "I'll turn to the church first because I know they'll sort out my problems." But sometimes they call because they think of the church as a "soft touch." Some go further and think of the church as an easy mark. Gullible.

Someone should do an intense, exegetical study on this in the gospels. My study has been only cursory. But look long and hard at those places where Jesus was surrounded by crowds – crowds often filled with the needy, poor and beleaguered, but then he would have to move on from that place... to do what? To pray and rest, and then to preach and teach in other cities.

Now the takeaway from that is this: We cannot solve all of society's physical problems in this world, because if we tried, it would occupy and eat up all of our time and energy and resources. We'd have nothing left for the work of the gospel.

This is not easy. I struggle with this, and I know your elders do, too. I know some churches that are on missions trips almost around the clock. Medical missions, building missions, poverty missions... It's good work! It's work with regard to things that Jesus cared about. But some of these churches – many – are so involved in these things that the gospel has been squeezed out of them. And they have been indiscriminate about whom they help, and the social and political agendas of those they help, such that some of these churches are promulgating the politics of these groups, and not the gospel. They have become so concerned with the things of this temporal kingdom, that they have no time to preach about the coming and eternal kingdom. When Jesus healed, it was to tell people about the coming kingdom.

Now again, I struggle with this. Some of these churches may look more relevant than ours. Some of these churches look more socially conscious. Some of these churches look like they have a greater heart for the poor. But what does Jesus say? "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> John 12:8

And that is why this is so hard. As one commentator flatly says, "you have to use discrimination to determine those to whom you do give help, and those to whom you do not." You must give to the one who is the real widow, the one who is *truly* a widow, and not to the one who isn't.

So, who are the true widows? Paul gives us 3 ways to know:

- Those with no relations to help them (v. 4, 8, 16)

V4: "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..." V8: "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." V.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."

Now here is the idea – and let's make some connections. Two years back, we went through Ephesians, where in Ephesians 5, Paul is talking about Marriage and the Church. And he compares the family that comes from making a marriage covenant, to the church, which comes from God's making a covenant with his people. And you know, it's really difficult there to tell which of these Paul is really talking about, because so many of the same things are true of both. Read it and you'll see.

So it should not be a surprise that the same writer again makes this connection. But here, the family must be well ordered, first. The human family must take the first responsibility in looking after those in need. And the reason is that the church has multiplex and ultimate responsibilities that the family doesn't have. The family – although it can be grace communicating – doesn't have the calling to spread the gospel that the church does. So we must not leave it solely to the church to deal with human need in our family if we can in any way do it ourselves. Because you see, if the church DOES intercede, and things fail, well then we bring the gospel, we bring the church, into disrepute. We are worse than unbelievers, because we should know better.

If we follow Christ, we must put a high premium on looking after our own family.

Now again, we struggle. Because in an age of air-travel and the internet, it is both easier to move away, and easier to feel like you're really still in touch. This is old-school, then, but still relevant. The bible suggests that when we were young our parents looked after our needs, and that in old age we should repay that debt by looking after theirs.

And this also means that if there are needs in THIS fellowship, THIS church, then the first thing a pastor or deacon will want to know is, is the human family itself meeting the needs of all its members? It's only when they cannot that the church should step in.

But the distinctions gets harder. Because the next one is that ultimately, **if there is to be ongoing care, the person will need to be in the fellowship.** Under the care.

- **Ultimately, the person cared for will need to be a believer.**

V. 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*, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives." He's making a distinction between the person who is spiritual, and the one who is not. Between the one who is really in the fellowship, and the one who is not.

V 10 says she must be a committed believer, "having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, and has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work." She must have the fruit of faith, in other words. She must exhibit godliness.

You see, if the church regularly supports people who don't exhibit godliness, and those supported individuals go out and they DON'T bring up their children well – they just don't care – and they are NOT hospitable, and DO NOT care for the afflicted, well then the reputation of the church will then be that Christ does not care for the weak, the meek, the poor, and the widow.

You prove that you are a member of the Christian family by the way that you live.

Does this mean that we don't help non-members. Absolutely not! Thousands of churchmen and women are helping in Haiti this very hour, and they are not asking who believes!

But what we do with people who ask is, *start with no strings attached*. Why? Because we live out the word of God: grace is always undeserved. Remember: Religion is, "I obey, therefore I am accepted." The gospel is, "I am accepted because of Christ, therefore I obey." You see, grace is always free and unmerited.

But then, we add a few strings, and conditions with time....

Why? Because God enters our lives, God's relationship to us changes. Therefore, the model is that grace intercepts our self-destructive behavior, but grace is not permissive. Think of Romans here: "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? May it never be!"<sup>5</sup> It would not be gracious for God to let us continue in our foolishness.

We're trying to communicate what God gives to his people: God says, "Your sin cannot stop my concern and love for you. But now that you KNOW I love you, you need to change." This means that if aid is continually requested, the more it is requested and needed, the more the church has to say, "We need to see your whole life." Does that make sense? We don't do a spiritual CAT scan of their life, but the more the person needs help, the more they have to open their lives up to you. It's that way with the Lord. He wants you more and more. More and more transparency, especially as we struggle.

All we're doing is following the command that Jesus gave us. Do you remember? "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."<sup>6</sup> That's how the world would know that we are his disciples. And you cannot love someone that you don't know.

---

<sup>5</sup> Romans 6:1

<sup>6</sup> John 15:12

Look I know bumper stickers say that we should perform random acts of kindness – but that makes all love irrational and meaningless. No biblical love is intentional. It has your name on it. It's a *knowing* love.

So, so far we've seen that true widows have no other family to care for them, that they are believers, and now finally,

- **that they be over 60.**

Now the first two can be easily generalized in our care for folks in the church. But this one... 60? Why that number. Well, I think Paul is generalizing even about the age. There is nothing magic about a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, but it's not a random or neutral number either. 80, I suspect, is the new 60. And here is what I mean:

What Paul is saying is that widows of a certain age must be looked out for. Why? Because this is a family, right? She is like our mother!

But there were other women looking to marry again. And if they were to do that, they would have to break their pledge. Now, there was nothing wrong with their getting married again. Paul says there's nothing wrong with this in v.14. "Let the younger widows marry." There is a pragmatic reason – don't set these women up to break their vow that they are married only to one man. But the other reason is even more significant: if these women were to stay single, and yet fully supported by the church, they would have time and wherewithal to get themselves – and perhaps weak men as well – into trouble. And that is what seems to have happened in this church.

So what does this mean for us? It's what we've always known. Satan always finds work for idle hands and idle mouths to do. My wife and I know some women who are Christians, who spend money on surgery to make themselves look 20 again, chase pro baseball players around the country, and collect beads at Mardi Gras. Very active... but idle.

Satan discriminates, right? He tends to find the restless, the idle and the out of work. He will make them busy. They will be dead, even while they live. So the church discriminates, too, because our support and giving should not allow anyone to stay restless, idle or remain out of work. We support people not by giving them fish, but the rod and tackle with which to fish. Friends, the church gives until exhaustion to the godly. But the church discriminates because the church does not give to the godless to go off and do godless things. You need to know this. God discriminates. Not everyone goes to heaven. Not everyone has their sins forgiven. Not everyone is holy, and not everyone gets a handout from the church because we cannot feed godless people to go do godless things. Because, you see, God doesn't just want you alive. He wants you holy. The church can't fund sin.

Again, this is hard! Think of it this way: you could be saying, "I know a church that runs a soup kitchen. Are you telling me because they feed prostitutes on occasion, that they are doing bad?" No! Absolutely not. We feed people no matter what.

But if all we do is fill stomachs, and we don't care about their hearts... well is being a prostitute on a full stomach enough?

We have to close. This is a very practical passage. So let's have some practical takeaways.

**Purity.** What is true of the widows must be true of us. Look again at these early verses: We have to learn to show godliness to our own household, to set our hopes on God and continue in supplications and prayers night and day. Wow, would the world and our church family change if that was our focus! We should not give sin a foothold in our hearts or home. Forget the widows, for a moment. Let's leave them to Paul. What about you? What about your home? What's on your television, your hard-drive, your bookshelf? We fool ourselves when we think that we are maintaining pure motives for watching or holding onto these things. So be wise. Luther said "You can't stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them from nesting in your hair."

**Priority.** There is always a danger to what we're doing to today. Because in preaching straight through books of the bible – especially when you come to church and you land right here, where Paul seems to be micromanaging the life of the church and the lives of widows – that you will miss his true priority. And that priority is the message of grace in the gospel. *Why* was Paul so interested in how the church ministered to widows? It was interfering with the gospel! The way the church was supporting this group of people was giving the church AND the gospel a bad name. The church was helping those who didn't need it, under-serving those who truly needed it, and running out of resources to do what it was really supposed to do – share the good news of the forgiveness of sins. We need to keep the focus of our work evangelism and the ministry of word and sacrament. Because these have eternal consequences.

**Provision.** It's because the gospel is a priority – it is because we know we have been given so much, grace that abounds – that we become reborn and renewed in God's image, so that WE give out, pour out, and provide. When we look around the fellowship here and see people in need, we give. We must! And just because we don't give indiscriminately does not mean that we don't give. No, we must. When you see brothers and sisters in genuine need, tell a deacon. Tell a pastor. Tell an elder. But tell yourself! Ask how you might be able to help. They are your family!

**Finally – the priority of your provision.** Are you providing for your own family? The priority is to provide spiritually, and then physically. We live in a culture that prioritizes the physical – the material – over the spiritual. Are you providing your family the gospel?

But then with provision, are you providing materially? There is honor in providing for your home. For your family. Are you? God says you can – to say otherwise is a denial of the faith. God promises to bless you so you will! It may not be in exactly the way you hope. But it will be in a way that you can follow Christ.

Let's pray.