

SESSION 6: GETTING OUR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES RIGHT

I Timothy 5: 3 – 6: 2

³Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. ⁴But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. ⁵The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. ⁶But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame. ⁸If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

⁹No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, ¹⁰and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. ¹¹As 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. ¹²Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. ¹³Besides, 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. ¹⁴So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. ¹⁵Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan. ¹⁶If 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.

¹⁷The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." ¹⁹Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. ²⁰Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. ²¹I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. ²²Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure. ²³Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses. ²⁴The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. ²⁵In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.

I Timothy 6

¹All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. ²Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them.

OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION

1. Paul directs what Timothy and the churches' responsibilities are to 3 more groups of people – widows, elders and slaves. Paul is concerned about support for the widows and their ministry (5:3-16); about elders' remuneration, appointment and discipline (5:17-25); about slaves and the quality of their service (6:1-2). All three groups are called to ministry (*diakonia*) of some kind, so Paul talks about their service. He adds instructions on the support of widows and elders. Paul's concerns go together: support being what we receive, service what we give. Christian community/family is a fellowship of 'giving and receiving' (Phil.4:15).

Widows

2. In many cultures over time, a married woman is defined only in relation to her husband. If he dies, she loses not only her spouse, but also financial support and social significance as well. In the Bible, widows, orphans and aliens (people without husband, parents or home) are valued for who they are as persons, and deserve special honor, protection and care. God is described as '*father to the fatherless*' and '*a defender of widows*' (Psa.68:5). Because God '*defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow*' (Dt.10:18 cf. Psa.146:9; Pr.15:25), His people are to do the same. God warns, '*Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused...*' (Ex. 22:22ff). One who withholds justice from the widow is cursed (Dt.27:19); farmers were to store a tithe of their produce for widows and orphans, and to leave them the gleanings of field and orchard too (Dt.14:28-29; 24:19ff; 26:12-13). The OT prophets were regularly complaining that the nation was exploiting and oppressing widows, instead of defending and providing for them (Isa.1:17, 23; Jer.7:5ff, 22:3; Eze.22:7; Zac.7:10; Mal.3:5).

Jesus was consistently compassionate to widows. He brought back to life the only son of the widow of Nain (Lk.7:11-12). He commended the widow for badgering the unjust judge to action, and the generosity of the poor widow who gave her two small copper coins to the temple treasury (Lk.18:1ff; Mk.12:41-41). He warned against scribes who *devoured widows' houses* while displaying religious demeanor (Mk.12:38). From the cross, Jesus commended his widowed mother to the care of John (Jn.19:26-27).

The early church stood in the good tradition of the OT and our Lord's teaching of showing concern to widows. Seven gifted leaders were appointed to supervise the daily distribution to widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1ff). James defines *pure and faultless* religion that God accepts as looking after orphans and widows in their distress (Jas.1:27).

3. In I Timothy 5, Paul's instructions on widows are in two paragraphs, each introduced by a main verb. In the first paragraph (v3-8), Paul asks Timothy to '*give proper recognition*' to the widows in need (v3); in the second (v9-16), Timothy is to '*put on the list*' or to register widows in the community.

Commentators are not agreed if Paul was referring to the same group of widows in the two segments, as there seems to be different conditions for admission into the two groups. The condition to be admitted into the first group seems to be destitution and godliness; while to the second group, it is a combination of seniority, married faithfulness and a reputation for good works. The former group is to receive financial support, and the latter opportunities for ministry. The line of distinction between the two is fairly invisible, and the two groups probably overlapped.

4. *'Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God'* (v3-4)

The widows who are to be supported must be honored (*give proper recognition* v.3). Jesus has already taught that honor of parents must include financial provision (Mk.7:10ff); and Paul teaches that honoring elders (v17) includes financial care too. Paul is indicating who should support widows, and which widows qualify for church support. It seems the church was supporting some widows whose families should be bearing that responsibility.

Bruce Winter sheds light on the social background of the Graeco-Roman world, especially of the dowry system. He says 'the dowry... provided by the bride's father, always accompanied a woman to her marriage... in the event of her husband's death... a widow was cared for by the person in charge of that dowry. Two options were open to her. If she had children, she might remain in her deceased husband's home. There she would be maintained by the new 'lord' of the household, possibly her son. She could also return to her parents, taking her dowry back to her family.' (*Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens.* p 64)

A widow who has such material support from the family did not need the church's support, since her own family had moral and legal obligations to look after her.

The church should provide financial support for those *who are really in need* (v3), or *'widows in the fullest sense'* (REB). This expression, which occurs 3 times (v3,5,16), means that such a widow is destitute, unable to support herself and having no dowry or relatives to support her. For, *'if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family...'* (v4).

Two reasons for family to assume this responsibility:

- It is a way of *'repaying their parents and grandparents...'* who cared for them when they were young.
- *'...this is pleasing to God'*

But, the church should support a widow *who is really in need*. She is one:

- *Who is left all alone*
- *Puts her hope in God*
- *Continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help* (v5)

An example of a widow in such dire straits is Anna the prophetess (Lk.2:36-37)

In contrast, the church is to exclude from her support *'the widow who lives for pleasure'* (v6). The woman who lives for herself rather than for God *'is dead even while she lives'*. The self indulgent life is in reality spiritual death, while death to self is in reality spiritual life.

Several commentators suggest that the widow who *lives for pleasure* is one who, lacking dowry, relatives or profession, has no alternative to prostitution.

Paul tells Timothy to put in place a social program for the care of a group in the community that may be easily neglected or hidden. This is to be instituted: *'Give the people these instructions...so no one may be open to blame'* (v7). He reiterates the responsibility of family, but now in stronger, negative terms: *'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'* (v8). Paul adds two more arguments for families to assume responsibility:

- To express and not deny the faith
- To relieve the church

5. *'No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds'* (v9-10). This paragraph introduces new concerns. Another *list of widows* is raised, but with different qualifications. Age seems to be an issue here, and those making the list must pledge to remain single (v12). Some commentators indicate there is evidence that such an identifiable group existed in the early church. Luke refers to *'all the widows'* in Joppa as if they were a known or registered group. Dorcas was possibly one of them, and she was *'full of good works and acts of charity'* (Acts 9:36, 39, 41). Paul's references to a list suggest the beginnings of a defined group. Some scholars go so far as to suggest there was an officially recognized order of widows in Ephesus (J.N.D. Kelly in *The Pastoral Epistles*; A.T. Hansen in *The Pastoral Epistles*)

At the beginning of the 2nd C, Ignatius sent a greeting to *'the virgins who are called widows'* in Smyrna, but it was not till the end of the 2nd C that Tertullian gave evidence that an order of widows existed. At that time and in the 3rd C, registered widows gave themselves to prayer, nursed the sick, cared for the orphans, visited Christians in prison, evangelized pagan women, and taught female converts in preparation for their baptism. (*Widows in Encyclopedia of Early Christianity and Assistance and Charity in Encyclopedia of the Early Church*)

In this list of widows, Paul lists 3 qualifications for registration:

- **Seniority:** *'No widow may be put on the list...unless she is over sixty...'* (v9). She is unlikely to wish to re-marry.
- **Married Fidelity:** *'has been faithful to her husband'* Not that she has not re-married, since Paul counsels younger widows to re-marry (v14), but rather that she has been faithful.
- **Good Works:** *'well known for her good deeds'* (v10), which includes *'bringing up children'* meaning to *'care for them physically and spiritually'* whether her children or orphans; *'showing hospitality'* to

travelers, a quality required of other leaders too (3:2); *'washing the feet of the saints'*, following in the example of Christ to perform menial service in love; *'helping those in trouble'*, referring to all kinds of affliction or distress, including persecution; *'devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds'*, included as a catch-all to denote humble and unselfish service. These widows are to be fully available for such service, necessitating a decision to remain unmarried.

6. It makes sense then that younger widows do not qualify for this list of women who pledge to serve. Paul gives two reasons:

- Younger women become restive in their single state and would naturally want to re-marry: *'...when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry'* (v11). When natural sexual impulses become stronger than their commitment to stay single and serve the church, they *'bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge'* (v12).
- There seems to be uncertainty if they will be able to focus on responsible service. Instead, *'they get into the habit of being idle and going about ('gadding about' NRSV) from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to'* (v13).

Gordon Fee identifies these young widows with the 'weak-willed women' whom false teachers have won over (2 Tim.3:6-7). They go about disrupting house churches (*going about from house to house*) with their unorthodox teachings (*saying things they ought not to*). There is no way to verify this reconstruction, as Paul only says they are wasting their time in frivolous talk.

Paul's counsel for younger widows is that they re-marry. When they do so, they would have their hands full, and be free from the temptation to be idle gossips and gadabouts. They will be able to *'have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander'* (v14).

7. Paul turns back to the first group of widows, and insists for the third time that the church should not be burdened by those who can and should be helped by family: *'If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need'* (v16).

Paul's instructions are clear on two principles for discharging social responsibilities. Firstly, **discrimination** is called for; that is, no blanket assistance is to be given to all. Widowhood itself is not a qualification for support. Provisions are to be limited to those in genuine need. Alternative means of support should be exhausted before the church gives aid. Social responsibility is not to encourage personal irresponsibility.

Secondly, **dignity** must be given to beneficiaries. It is interesting to identify the two groups of widows in Paul's instructions, one needing support, and the other offering service. There must be some overlap of the two groups. Ideally, health and strength permitting, the supported and the serving widows should be the same people. Widows, as others who are helped, should receive

according to their needs, and to give according to their ability. To be served and to serve would raise the dignity of, and not demean, beneficiaries.

Elders

8. The church's social responsibility is not only to the widows, but also to the elders who rule and teach. Social responsibility is not seen only in a condescending manner, to the poor. We also have responsibilities to those who serve, lead and teach us. Paul now addresses how elders are to be treated. He has already declared that pastoral leadership is *a noble task* (3:1), and has given the qualifications for assuming leadership (3:2ff). Here, Paul gives instructions on elders' remuneration, discipline and ordination.

'The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching' (v17)

John Calvin says, 'From this passage, it may be inferred that there are two kinds of presbyter', one who administrates (*directs the affairs of the church*) and one '*whose work is preaching and teaching*'. This is the basis in the Reformed Church for the distinction between 'ruling elders' and 'teaching elders'. However, not all ecclesiastical traditions agree with this. In chapter 3, all presbyters had to be able to teach (3:2), and to take care of the church (3:5). It may be that the purpose of the adverb *especially* is not to distinguish preachers from rulers, but rather to identify them and give them a further description. Hence, 'the elders who direct the church, that is, those who preach...'

9. Paul gives 5 principles to guide how we are to treat our leaders:

a) Appreciation

Paul did not think Christian leaders only need commendation from the Lord. He realizes that humans are prone to discouragement and need to be affirmed. So elders who do their work *well* '*are worthy of double honor*'. That includes adequate remuneration ('double stipend' REB); 'honor' being used of a physician's honorarium (Bauer's *Greek-English Lexicon of N.T. and Other Early Christian Literature*, or BAGD). Did Paul mean double that of a registered widow or of another kind of presbyter, or double what he had been receiving before? It certainly means that elders who are effective should receive both respect and remuneration, both honor and an honorarium.

Paul appeals to biblical authority for what he says. '*For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain" and "The worker deserves his wages."*' The argument goes: If God is concerned that working animals are fed, how much more concern must he have for church workers? In the second quote, Jesus was giving a charge to the Seventy, saying '*the worker deserves his wages*' (Lk.10:7). While the comparison of elders to oxen and farm hands may appear denigrating, the point underscored is that hard work performed conscientiously deserves to be rewarded. The tension is between an elder who must not be *a lover of money* and genuine appreciation that will take tangible forms.

b) Fairness

From elders who perform well, Paul speaks of elders who fail. What is to be done when, firstly, an elder is accused of something, and secondly when he is found guilty?

'Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses' (v19)

This OT procedure, especially in a capital charge, is maintained when accusations are leveled at a leader. Whereas two or three witnesses were required to sustain a charge and secure a conviction in the OT, here two or three witnesses are required not only before an accusation is sustained, but even before it is entertained at all! John Calvin says, "None are more exposed to slanders and insults than godly teachers." Smears, gossips and accusations can destroy a leader's ministry. Every charge must be endorsed by several responsible people before it is listened to.

'Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning' (v20)

When an accusation against an elder is 'actually proved' (JB Phillips), and if the elder concerned who has been privately admonished refuse to repent but 'persist in sin' (RSV renders the present tense), then the sadness and scandal of a public expose cannot be avoided. The public rebuke is a deterrent that must be the last resort. It is a safe rule that private sins should be dealt with privately, and only public sins publicly. It is neither right nor necessary to make what is private public, until all other possibilities have been exhausted. Fairness demands that Timothy must not listen to frivolous accusations, but must take serious situations seriously.

c) Impartiality

'I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism' (v21)

Invoking his apostolic authority, Paul charges Timothy to '*keep these instructions*', that is, the principles of treating elders with absolute fairness and without any hint of injustice. He uses two negatives: '*without partiality*', literally 'with no pre-judgment', not jumping to conclusions of guilt or innocence; and '*to do nothing out of favoritism*', not to grant favors to relatives or friends without regard to gifts or godliness. This is a warning against being held beholden for whatever reasons.

d) Caution

'Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.' (v22)

Some commentators see this verse as referring to the restoration and reinstatement of a penitent offender after the public rebuke of v20. Eusebius records the re-admission of penitents by the laying on of hands as an old custom of the church. Gordon Fee understands the whole paragraph as the

disciplining of false teachers, seeing v22 as giving ‘some guidelines...for their replacement’.

It seems more likely that Paul is referring to ordination, since the Pastorals contain two references to this through the laying on of hands (I Tim.4:4; 2 Tim.1:6). The best way to avoid choosing an errant elder (that requires public rebuke in v20) is to screen candidates carefully. He urges Timothy ‘*not to be hasty*’, to take time to apply the criteria for eligibility in chapter 3. Otherwise, if a mistake is made in selecting an elder and a scandal arises, Timothy will ‘*share in the sins of others*’, or find himself ‘implicated in other people’s misdeeds’ (REB). On this and other matters, Paul advises Timothy to ‘*keep yourself pure*’.

‘Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses’ (v23)

Some think Paul’s advice to ‘*keep yourself pure*’ also means to ‘keep yourself fit’; considering Timothy’s delicate constitution might impede his ministry. Others see this as a modification of v22: ‘Keep yourself pure but don’t go to the extreme asceticism of the false teachers (4:3).’

Wine has medicinal value, especially for gastric ailments, and was widely prescribed as ‘tonic, prophylactic and remedy.’

e) **Discernment**

‘The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. In the same way good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden’ (v24-25)

People are not who they first appear to be. Their good or evil takes time to surface. Some people’s sins are conspicuous. Others’ do not appear till later (*trail behind them*). In the same way, the good in some is obvious as they are done in the open. But there are those who quietly do good; it is a matter of time before they come out of anonymity. What is needed in Timothy, and in leaders, is discernment. Time is required for accurate assessment of character. Attractive personalities often have hidden weaknesses. Unprepossessing people often have hidden strengths. Timothy must learn to discern between the seen and the unseen, the surface and the depth, the appearance and the reality.

The 5 Principles in Choosing/Treating Leaders:

- a) **Appreciation:** Affirming Outstanding Performance
- b) **Fairness:** Not listening to Unsubstantiated Accusations
- c) **Impartiality:** Avoiding Favoritism
- d) **Caution:** Not Reaching Hasty Decisions
- e) **Discernment:** Beyond Outward Appearance

Slaves

10. A third social relationship Paul addresses is that of slaves’ behavior towards their masters. Jesus demonstrated the dignity of a slave’s work by washing the feet of his disciples. He called himself a servant (Lk.22:27) and a slave (Phil.2:7, literally); said his followers must be ‘the slave of all’ (Mk.10:44).

While describing slavery as oppressive (*yoke of slavery*), Jesus did not call for its abolition. It is apparent that to dismantle slavery immediately would have brought about the collapse of society. It was Paul who enunciated principles which undermined the concept of slavery that led eventually to its abolition (e.g. 1:10). Paul writes about the radical transformation of relationships brought about by the Gospel, so that slave and slave owners become brothers (Phm.16; I Tim.6:2). Here in our text, the slaves addressed are Christians. In v2, the slave owner is Christian, but he is apparently not in v1.

'All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them' (6:1-2)

Irrespective of behavior, masters are *worthy of full respect* because they are humans made in the image of God. Not respecting their masters may bring *'God's name and our teaching... (to) be slandered'*.

Slaves with Christian masters *'are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers'*. Evidently some slaves were guilty of a twisted reasoning that permits them to take advantage of Christian masters. *'Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them.'*

The two 'because' clauses are parallel: Because their masters are brothers, slaves must not show them less respect. Instead, because they are believers and beloved, they must serve them even better.

APPLICATION

1. The family is the foundation for a healthy society. So many abuses in society can be avoided if our primary responsibilities in the nuclear and extended family are discharged conscientiously. While the place of widows has dramatically changed in our societies (with differences across cultures), there may be hidden peoples with paralyzing needs in our communities. Can we identify any in our culture who are left languishing because of dysfunctions in our families, discrimination in our society or purely unchristian personal perspectives? Who are the modern widows and slaves?

- Domestic Help
- Other Foreign Menial Workers
- Children who do not make it in our school system
- Singles

2. Which of the 5 Principles in treating our leaders is/are most challenging in your experience? Why? Are there any example(s) of how the challenges were resolved, or how the problem was aggravated?

3. How should Christian work ethics look like in our world that seeks to exploit? Are there boundaries that would prevent us from being taken advantage of by our employers, and vice versa?