

The Books of 1 and 2 Timothy, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Honoring Widows and Elders

1 Timothy 5:1-25

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This chapter is intensely practical, and that is exactly its doctrinal point: the gospel produces a particular kind of community. The church is not merely an audience that gathers for an hour; it is a family bound together in honor, purity, and mutual care (vv. 1-2). This lesson aims to give your class a high, warm view of the local congregation as a household of faith, where the old are honored, the young are guided, the vulnerable are provided for, and the leaders are both supported and held accountable. How a church treats its widows and its shepherds reveals what it actually believes about God.

The doctrinal heart of the lesson is the New Testament pattern for honoring and supporting elders, and for the ordered care of the whole congregation. Paul teaches that elders who rule well deserve double honor and material support (vv. 17-18), that charges against an elder require multiple witnesses (v. 19), and that persistent sin, even in a leader, must be rebuked publicly (v. 20). This is the church governed by Christ's pattern, neither a personality cult that cannot question its leaders nor a chaos that despises them. Help your class see the wisdom and protection in this God-given order.

Finally, the chapter presses one searching theme into every heart: genuine faith provides for its own. Paul's startling words, that the one who will not provide for his household "has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (v. 8), aim straight at the conscience. This lesson is meant to form believers who do not separate love for God from tangible love for family and neighbor, who understand that faith without works of care is no living faith at all. Aim at hearts that honor, provide, and serve as the natural overflow of the gospel.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul tells Timothy to treat older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters "in all purity" (vv. 1-2). What does this teach us about the nature of the church and the way we are to relate to one another?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the family language that opens the chapter. Paul tells Timothy to treat older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters (vv. 1-2). This is not a stylistic flourish; it is a theology of the church. The congregation is a household, the

family of God, and our relationships within it are to carry the warmth, honor, and loyalty of the best family ties.

Notice the gentleness Paul commands. He says do not sharply rebuke an older man but “encourage him” as you would a father (v. 1). Even when correction is needed, the tone is to be familial and respectful. The church is a place where truth is spoken, but always within the bonds of honor and love, never with the cold harshness of strangers.

Highlight the phrase “in all purity” (v. 2). When Paul speaks of relating to younger women as sisters, he guards the family with a clear word about purity. The intimacy of church family life is real, and precisely because it is real, it must be kept holy. Healthy families are both warm and pure, and so must the church be.

Draw the doctrinal point home. To call the church a family is to say something about God Himself, who is our Father, and about Christ, who calls us His brothers. We are not customers of a religious service; we are children adopted into one household. That truth should reshape how we speak to, care for, and bear with one another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as the family of God, with God as Father and believers as brothers and sisters (vv. 1-2)
- Honor and gentleness, even in correction, as marks of family love (v. 1)
- Purity as the guard of close, familial relationships in the church (v. 2)
- Our adoption into one household through Christ, not membership in a mere institution

Discussion Prompts

- How would treating the congregation as family change the way we speak to and about one another?
- Why does Paul insist that even correction be given with the honor due a parent or sibling?
- What does it mean to keep our church relationships both warm and pure?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul's instruction is to relate to the whole congregation as family, with respect and purity (vv. 1-2). Which relationships in the church do you find it hardest to treat with this kind of familial honor and gentleness, and why?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the family picture inward. We all find some relationships in the church easier than others. Paul's call to treat everyone, from the elderly to the young, as family exposes the places where we withhold honor, patience, or gentleness from certain people.

Help students be honest about why. Sometimes it is a personality clash, sometimes an old hurt, sometimes a difference in background or age. Naming the reason gently is the first step toward letting Christ heal it. The goal is not to manufacture warm feelings but to choose familial honor even where feelings lag behind.

Point toward a practical response. Ask each person to think of one specific person in the church they find hard to treat as family, and one small act of honor or kindness they could extend this week. Family love is built in small, deliberate choices long before it is felt.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to extend familial honor to every member, not only the easy ones
- Honor as a choice of obedience, not merely a feeling
- The healing of strained relationships within the body of Christ
- Love shown in small, deliberate acts toward difficult people

Discussion Prompts

- Which relationship in the church do you find hardest to treat with familial honor, and why?
- What old hurt or difference might be standing in the way?
- What is one small act of honor you could extend to that person this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul carefully distinguishes the widow who is “truly” alone from the one who has family to care for her, and he commends the true widow who “has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers” (vv. 3-5). What does this teach us about genuine dependence on God and the church’s responsibility to the vulnerable?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk through Paul’s careful distinction. He tells the church to honor “widows who are truly widows” (v. 3), and then defines the true widow as one “left all alone,” who “has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day” (v. 5). By contrast, the widow who has family is to be cared for by them first. Paul is teaching the church to direct its resources wisely and its compassion truly.

Draw out the beauty of the true widow’s faith. Stripped of every earthly support, she has set her hope on God. Hers is a picture of the dependence to which all of us are actually called, though prosperity often hides it from us. The widow who prays night and day is not pitiable; she is, in a sense, the model believer, leaning her whole weight on the Lord.

Address the church’s responsibility. The congregation is genuinely responsible for the vulnerable among them. This is not optional charity but a mark of the true church, echoing James 1:27, that

pure religion cares for widows in their affliction. Help the class see that ordered, wise compassion, neither neglectful nor indiscriminate, is part of the church's calling.

Connect dependence and provision. The true widow depends on God, and God largely provides for her through His church. That is how the body of Christ works: God's care flows through the hands of His people. Caring for the vulnerable is one of the chief ways a congregation displays the heart of its Father.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church's genuine responsibility to care for the truly vulnerable (vv. 3-5)
- Wise, ordered compassion that distinguishes real need (family first, then church)
- The true widow's hope set on God as a model of faith for all (v. 5)
- God providing for the dependent through the hands of His church (James 1:27)

Discussion Prompts

- What can we learn about faith from the widow who sets her whole hope on God?
- Why does Paul want the church to be both compassionate and wise in directing its care?
- Who are the vulnerable in our congregation, and how are we caring for them?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul speaks of the widow who has children or grandchildren who should "learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents" (v. 4). Who in your life has cared for you, and how might God be inviting you to make a return of love and care to them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on verse 4, where Paul says children and grandchildren should "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." The phrase "make some return" is tender. Those who poured into us deserve our love poured back.

Invite students to remember. Ask them to bring to mind the specific people who cared for them, parents, grandparents, mentors, older saints. Gratitude grows specific when we name names. Often we owe far more than we have paused to recognize.

Move toward return. Some of those caregivers are still living and may now be in need of care themselves. Others have passed, and the return is best made by caring for the next generation. Ask each person to name one concrete way to make a return of love this week, whether a visit, a call, a gift, or an act of service.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Caring for parents and family as godliness pleasing to God (v. 4)
- Gratitude expressed in tangible return to those who have cared for us
- The passing of love from one generation to the next
- Honor of father and mother as an enduring command lived out in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Who has cared for you in ways you may not have fully acknowledged?
- How might God be inviting you to make a return of love to them?
- If those who cared for you are gone, how could you pass that care forward?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul writes that “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. 8). Why does Paul speak so strongly here, and what does it teach us about the relationship between genuine faith and caring for our own?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the force of verse 8 land: “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.” These are among the strongest words in the letter. Paul is not exaggerating for effect; he means that faith which ignores the needs of one’s own family has betrayed itself.

Explain why this is so serious. The gospel is not a private spirituality that floats above ordinary obligations. It comes to earth in the most concrete way: in providing food, shelter, and care for those God has placed in our charge. A faith that talks of loving God while neglecting the people under its own roof is exposed as counterfeit. Even unbelievers, by common decency, provide for their families.

Connect this to the nature of true faith. James says faith without works is dead (James 2:17), and Paul says the same here in pointed terms. Genuine faith inevitably produces tangible love. This is not works-righteousness; it is the truth that living faith always works. Where there is no fruit of care, there is reason to doubt the root.

Apply it pastorally. Help the class see that this verse calls us to look first at our own households and relatives. Before we organize grand projects, God asks whether we are caring for the parent, the spouse, the child, the relative He has set right beside us. Faithfulness usually begins at home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Provision for one's family as an essential expression of genuine faith (v. 8)
- Faith without works of love exposed as dead or denied (James 2:17)
- The gospel made concrete in tangible care, not mere sentiment
- The household and relatives as the first sphere of Christian responsibility

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul use such strong language about failing to provide for one's family?
- How does caring for our own household reveal whether our faith is alive?
- Who in your immediate family or relatives most needs your care right now?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul describes the godly widow as one devoted to good works, hospitality, and serving the saints (vv. 9-10), and warns of younger widows growing idle (vv. 11-13). Where in your own life are you tempted toward idleness or busyness without purpose, and what good work is God placing in front of you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the contrast Paul draws. The honored widow is "well known for her good works," hospitality, and service to the saints (vv. 9-10), while the younger widows are warned against drifting into idleness, becoming "gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not" (v. 13). Paul knows that a life without purposeful work tends to fill itself with trouble.

Help students examine their own lives for two opposite dangers. One is idleness, drifting without purpose, which leaves the door open to gossip, discontent, and worse. The other is busyness without purpose, a frantic activity that accomplishes little of eternal value. Both leave the soul empty.

Point toward the good work in front of them. Paul's remedy is not endless activity but purposeful service: good works, hospitality, helping those in trouble. Ask each person to identify one good work God has placed right in front of them, and to step into it rather than drift past it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of idleness leading to gossip and harm (vv. 11-13)
- Purposeful good works, hospitality, and service as marks of godliness (vv. 9-10)
- The difference between busyness and fruitful, God-given labor
- Every believer called to visible works of love

Discussion Prompts

- Are you more tempted toward idleness or toward busyness without purpose?

- What good work has God placed right in front of you lately?
- How can purposeful service guard your heart and your speech?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says the elders who rule well are worthy of “double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching,” supporting this with “the laborer deserves his wages” (vv. 17-18). What does this teach us about how the church should regard and support its shepherds?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center on verse 17: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” The word honor here includes both respect and material support, as the following verse makes clear. The New Testament holds the office of elder, or shepherd, in high regard.

Explain the scriptural support Paul stacks up. He quotes Deuteronomy, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and the words of Jesus, “The laborer deserves his wages” (v. 18). Strikingly, Paul places a saying of Jesus alongside the Old Testament as Scripture. The point is plain: those who labor in shepherding and teaching the flock deserve to be honored and supported in their work.

Describe the biblical role of elders. In the New Testament pattern, each local congregation is led by a plurality of qualified men who shepherd, oversee, and teach the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Titus 1:5-9). They are not distant officials but shepherds among the sheep, and the church is to give them honor, prayer, and support as they bear this weighty work.

Apply it warmly. Help the class consider how they actually regard and support their shepherds. Do they pray for them, encourage them, follow their leading, and provide for those who give themselves fully to the work? A church that honors its elders rightly is a church being cared for as God intended.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Elders who rule well worthy of double honor, including support (vv. 17-18)
- Jesus’ words placed alongside Old Testament Scripture as authoritative (v. 18)
- The New Testament pattern of qualified men shepherding each local congregation (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5-9)
- The church’s duty to respect, follow, pray for, and support its elders (1 Peter 5:1-4)
- Shepherds as servants among the flock, not distant officials

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to give elders “double honor,” and how do we do that practically?

- Why is it significant that Paul quotes Jesus' words as Scripture alongside the law?
- How well does our congregation honor, support, and pray for its shepherds?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul warns Timothy, "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" and "keep yourself pure" (v. 22). Where are you tempted to act hastily, to give approval or take responsibility before you have weighed it, and how can patience guard your purity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on Paul's warning: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure" (v. 22). The laying on of hands likely refers to appointing or affirming someone too quickly. Paul links haste with a loss of purity, because rushing approval can make us complicit in trouble we did not pause to see.

Help students see the wider principle. We are often tempted to act hastily, to give approval, take on responsibility, or commit to something before we have weighed it before God. Speed feels decisive, but Paul counsels patience as a guard for our own integrity.

Make it personal. Ask where each person tends to move too fast, agreeing to things, endorsing people, or taking on burdens without prayer and discernment. Encourage the practice of holy patience: the willingness to wait, watch, and pray before committing, so that our yes is clean and our conscience stays clear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The wisdom of patience before appointing or endorsing (v. 22)
- How haste can make us share in the sins or failures of others
- Purity guarded by careful discernment rather than rushed decisions
- The value of prayerful deliberation in Christian responsibility

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to act or approve hastily without weighing it before God?
- How can patience protect your purity and your conscience?
- What would it look like to make your decisions more prayerfully this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul gives careful instructions about elders: not admitting a charge "except on the evidence of two or three witnesses," and rebuking those who persist in sin "in the presence of all, so that the

rest may stand in fear” (vv. 19-20). What do these verses teach us about how the church honors, protects, and holds accountable its shepherds, and why does this ordered care matter?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson: the church’s ordered honoring, protecting, and holding accountable of its shepherds. Paul gives three carefully balanced instructions. First, protection: “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses” (v. 19). Elders, because they lead, are easy targets for gossip and false accusation, so Scripture shields them with the same standard of multiple witnesses God required throughout His law (Deuteronomy 19:15).

Second, accountability: “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear” (v. 20). The same elders who are protected from false charges are not shielded from real, persistent sin. When an elder will not repent, the matter is brought into the open, not to humiliate but to keep the whole church in healthy reverence. The high honor of the office never becomes a license to sin without consequence.

Third, impartiality: Paul charges Timothy “to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality” (v. 21), and to it he attaches the solemn presence of “God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels.” This is no casual administrative footnote. The integrity of church discipline must be free of favoritism, neither protecting friends nor targeting enemies, carried out as before the very throne of God.

Step back and see the wisdom of this ordered care. The church is neither a personality cult that cannot question its leaders, nor a mob that delights in tearing them down. It is a family with God-given order, where shepherds are genuinely honored and supported (vv. 17-18), genuinely protected from slander (v. 19), and genuinely held accountable for unrepented sin (v. 20). This balance guards both the leaders and the flock. Remove the honor, and shepherds are abused; remove the accountability, and the flock is endangered.

Help the class marvel at how seriously God takes the care of His church. He does not leave the congregation to chaos or to the whims of strong personalities. Through the apostolic pattern He gives qualified shepherds, clear standards, fair process, and faithful accountability, all so that His family may be led, protected, and kept holy. To honor this order is to trust the wisdom of the God who designed it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Protection of elders from false charges by the standard of two or three witnesses (v. 19; Deuteronomy 19:15)
- Accountability of elders, with public rebuke for persistent, unrepented sin (v. 20)
- Impartiality in church discipline, done as before God and Christ (v. 21)
- The balance of high honor and real accountability in the New Testament eldership

- Church discipline as an act of love that guards both leaders and flock
- God's ordered, apostolic pattern for the care and governing of the congregation

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Scripture both protect elders from false charges and hold them accountable for real sin?
- How does impartiality before God keep church discipline from becoming a tool of favoritism or revenge?
- What does this ordered care teach us about how seriously God takes the health of His church?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter. Paul has painted the church as a family that honors its elders, provides for its widows, and walks in ordered love. Name one specific way Jesus is using this passage to form you, and one concrete step you will take because of it.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the chapter together. Paul has portrayed the church as a family (vv. 1-2), provided wisely for its widows (vv. 3-16), honored and held accountable its elders (vv. 17-25), and pressed home that genuine faith cares for its own (v. 8). The thread running through it all is ordered love: warmth and structure together, compassion and wisdom together.

Invite each person to look back and name what God has stirred. Perhaps it is a relative to care for, a widow or vulnerable saint to support, a shepherd to honor and pray for, or a relationship to restore to familial honor. The aim is something specific, not a vague resolve.

Press for one concrete step. Maybe it is a visit, a phone call, an act of provision, a word of encouragement to an elder, or a commitment to treat a difficult member as family. Help your class turn this practical chapter into a single act of love this week, trusting that Christ is forming His family through them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as an ordered family marked by honor, provision, and accountability
- Genuine faith expressed in tangible care for one's own
- Honor and support of God-given shepherds
- Spiritual formation through concrete acts of love within the body

Discussion Prompts

- What is the single most important thing God has shown you in this chapter?

- What is one concrete step of care or honor you will take this week?
- How can this class help one another live as a true family in Christ?