

The Books of 1 and 2 Timothy

Lesson 6: Honoring Widows and Elders -- 1 Timothy 5:1-25

Picture a household at the end of a long day. The fire is low, the table has been cleared, and the family is gathered close, the gray-haired grandfather in his chair, the young children at his feet, a widowed aunt being looked after by the rest. There is honor in that room, and tenderness, and a kind of order that nobody has to announce because everyone simply knows their place and their part. That is the picture Paul reaches for when he tells Timothy how to lead the church. "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" (vv. 1-2). The church is not a corporation or a club. It is a family.

And like every family, it has people who need special care. Paul gives a remarkable amount of attention to widows, women who in that world had no pension, no safety net, no way to provide for themselves. He distinguishes the widow who has children or grandchildren, who ought to be cared for by her own family, from the widow who is "truly" alone, who has set her hope on God and given herself to prayer. And he says something that ought to make every Christian sit up: "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). Real faith has work boots on. It shows up for its own.

Then Paul turns to the elders, the shepherds who lead the local congregation. "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (v. 17). Here is the high view the New Testament holds of these men: they are to be honored, supported, and protected. But Paul is no romantic. He knows elders are still men who can sin, so he gives careful instruction for charges, witnesses, and even public rebuke when sin persists. The church is a family, but a family with order, accountability, and love that is willing to tell the truth.

What ties this whole chapter together is the conviction that how we treat people, especially the vulnerable and the leaders, reveals what we really believe. You can tell a great deal about a church by how it cares for its widows and how it honors and holds its shepherds. So as we walk through these verses, let us not read them as dry rules of administration. Let us read them as a portrait of the family God is building, and let us ask the Lord to make us the kind of people who honor, provide, protect, and love the way He does.

Group Discussion: Paul describes the church as a family, with older members as parents and younger members as brothers and sisters. Where have you seen the church act most like a true family, and what made that care so real?

Personal Reflection: Paul says, "if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith" (v. 8). Is there someone in your own family

or near circle whom God may be calling you to care for more faithfully, and what would a first step look like?

Read 1 Timothy 5:1-25

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: James 1:27, true religion visits orphans and widows in their affliction; Acts 6:1-6, the early church organizing care for neglected widows; Hebrews 13:17, obey and submit to those who lead you; 1 Peter 5:1-4, elders shepherding the flock willingly and as examples; Galatians 6:9-10, doing good to all, especially the household of faith.