

Subject: *Caring for Widows in the Church*

Scripture: *1 Timothy 5:3-8*

The Bible is clear about God's concern for widows. In fact, God has always had a special concern for all women. This whole section is about helping women in need. God designed for men to support themselves and their wives, and then for families to care for widows within their own family. God takes special interest in women who have lost their husband, and so God's people must treat widows with the same respect that He does. Just think about what God says in His Word about widows.

Psalms 68:5 *A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.*

Exodus 22:22-24 ²² *Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. ²³ If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; ²⁴ And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.*

Isaiah 1:17 *Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.*

Psalms 146:9 *The LORD preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widow: but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down.*

God intended that widows would remarry if possible. If that was delayed or impossible they would stay in their father's house or, as in the case of Ruth and Naomi, in the home of their mother-in-law. God also made provision in the law for a kinsman-redeemer, like Boaz in the story of Ruth, to marry the widow of a deceased brother or near relative.

In the New Testament, Jesus showed compassion and concern for widows. The story about the widow's mites reveals not only His tender regard for widows, but the fact that were often poor and needy.

Mark 12:41-44 ⁴¹ *And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much. ⁴² And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. ⁴³ And he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: ⁴⁴ For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.*

Jesus told a parable about a widow and an ungodly judge that pictures the plight of widows.

Luke 18:1-5 ¹ *And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; ² Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: ³ And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. ⁴ And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; ⁵ Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.*

Although Jesus told that parable to teach the importance of being faithful and persistent in prayer, the story reveals that widows were often at the mercy of others and sometimes they were mistreated.

Obviously the church and individuals in the church were expected to care for widows with compassion. James makes a strong statement about it.

James 1:27 *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*

We know the church cared for the widows on a daily basis and this created a need for the first deacons.

Acts 6:1-4 ¹ *And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.* ² *Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.* ³ *Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.* ⁴ *But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.*

THE DUTY OF CARING FOR WIDOWS

The English word “widow” describes a woman whose husband has died. The Greek word for widow includes that meaning, but is not limited to it. It is a word that means a woman who has lost a husband or is left alone. The word does not include how she is alone, but only that she is alone. It may be due to the death of her husband, or divorce, or desertion, or imprisonment. The duty of caring for widows then extends to all women who are alone and have no family to care for them.

The church must “honor” widows. This word means to show respect for, care for, to support, and to treat graciously. It involves meeting needs with kindness and generosity and it includes financial needs. We see that the word “honor” clearly involves financial assistance from an episode in Christ’s ministry:

Matthew 15:1-6 ¹ *Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying,* ² *Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.* ³ *But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?* ⁴ *For God commanded, saying, Honor thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death.* ⁵ *But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me;* ⁶ *And honor not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.*

The church is not obligated to care for all widows, only those who are truly needy and without other means of support.

THE DESCRIPTION OF WIDOWS TO BE CARED FOR

Paul refers to widows that are “widows indeed” or truly widows (vs. 3, 5, 16). This describes widows who qualify for the church’s care. They are truly widows who have no family to care

for them and who are godly believers and worthy of being cared for. There must be an evaluation and Scripture gives the criteria for deciding who the church should support.

- True widows have no family members to care for them

Widows with children or grandchildren or other family members are to receive support from their family, not from the church. The word “first” (vs. 4) means first in priority. “Piety” is another word for godliness, a word that is found many times in 1 and 2 Timothy. Support for widows is a mark of godliness and obedience. The Bible says to honor your father and mother. One way to honor them is to repay them for all they have done for us when we were in need. Even in the unchristian, pagan world it was widely accepted that families should care for their own needy parents. John MacArthur refers to several ancient writers on this custom: Solon, Demosthenes, Philo, Aristotle, and Plato.

- True widows are genuine Christians

Such a true widow trusts in God (vs. 5, NASB, “has fixed her hope on God”). The verb indicates a continual trusting. Her ongoing attitude is trusting in God. This is the same phrase Peter uses to describe godly and submissive wives in 1 Peter 3:5 *For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands.*

The church may choose to help non-Christian widows, but it is obligated to help believing ones. Galatians 6:10 *As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.*

- True widows are godly women of prayer and devotion

Such a widow not only depends on God for her needs, but she communes with God. Night and day is an expression that means constantly or all the time. Such a widow was Anna:

Luke 2:36-37 ³⁶ *And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;* ³⁷ *And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.*

Anna was devoted to the service of God through fasting and prayer. She lived with her husband seven years and then as a widow to the age of 84. On the other hand, a widow who does not qualify for the church’s support is described in verse 6. She is physically alive, but spiritually dead. In other words, she is unsaved and her actions prove it. Paul concludes with a strong command that everyone involved, widows, families, and the church, be blameless (above reproach). The reputation of the church and of the Lord is at stake.

THE DISGRACE OF NOT CARING FOR WIDOWS

Failure for a family to provide for a widow is shameful. Even pagans care for their own widows (see Titus 1:16). The supreme example of someone caring for a widow is Jesus Himself when He was on the cross (Jn. 19:26-27). Jesus spoke from the cross to only two people: the dying thief and his own mother. While bearing the burden of our sins He was concerned about the salvation of a lost sinner and the care of his widowed mother.