



## “THE MINISTRY TO WIDOWS”

### 1 Timothy 5:3-8

**Theme:** *The godly take a special interest in caring for those in need.*

**Introduction:** One of the first controversies in the early church was the imperfect care provided to widows. In Acts 6, there was a “complaint” that arose from the apparent inequities that existed between the “native Hebrew” widows and the widows that were “Hellenistic” (or from regions outside of Israel). Daily, the church would provide food for these women who had no one else to take care of them. In this way, the church became the answer to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Such imperfect care of widows remains a perpetual problem in the church. A busy Church can regularly overlook women who are alone. Yet, Paul provides the church with remedial instruction on how a church can ensure that widows are being cared for. Although this specifically addresses the needs of widows, it should be expanded to include all those who are alone and in need. Our text teaches us, “***The godly take a special interest in caring for those in need.***”

- I. The Attitude toward Widows – 5:3
- II. The Assistance of Widows – 5:4, 8
- III. The Attributes of Widows – 5:5-10
- IV. The Allure of Widows – 5:11-15
- V. The Attentiveness to Widows – 5:16



## I. THE ATTITUDE TOWARD WIDOWS – 5:3

### A. The Esteem for Widows

1. As Paul has exhorted Timothy to concern himself with his integrity and doctrinal purity, God’s primary concern is for the overall health of the Body of Christ.
2. It has been said that a church is only as strong as its weakest member – thus, no person who names Christ as their Savior is incidental to the spiritual family, the Church.
3. Paul has informed Timothy that the spirit with which he must defend the church from false teaching is to be one of charity, compassion, honor, and

respect.

4. In confronting older men, younger men, older women, and younger women, Timothy must practice the essential virtues of an authentic spiritual leader.
  5. Now Paul addresses the approach to women who have been abandoned alone – whether by the death of one’s spouse, the departure of the husband through separation or divorce, or even the detainment of one’s spouse as a prisoner.
  6. When they are to be admonished, it must be with **“honor”** [τιμάω] – a term that causes Paul to launch into a discussion of how a church ought to reach out to widows.
    - a) *This term “honor” means showing high regard for her and “setting a price” on her value.*
    - b) *It speaks to the opposite of indifference or disregard for them, as if they do not matter.*
    - c) *The term speaks of an attitude of respect and monetary demonstration of their value to the church - cp. [v. 17](#) [cognate noun of our verb].*
  7. Jesus modeled this kind of concern and honor for widows when He was dying on the cross – cp. [John 19:26-27](#).
  8. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s special affection for widows was recorded:
    - a) *God declares Himself to be the advocate for widows - cp. [Psalm 68:5](#).*
    - b) *God ensured the widows would have provision - cp. [Deuteronomy 24:19-21](#).*
    - c) *God promises to bless those who honor widows - [Jeremiah 7:5-7](#).*
    - d) *God punishes those who abuse widows - cp. [Exodus 22:22-24](#).*
    - e) *God defines “pure religion” as concerning oneself with the care of widows - cp. [James 1:27](#).*
  9. One of the things we sought to do when our children were little was to challenge them to find a widow at church that morning and talk to them – to find out something interesting about them they would share when they got home from church.
- B. The Eligibility of Widows**
1. However, not just any widow should be treated with such “honor” – she must be among those **“widows indeed.”**

2. The text reads: “Honor widows as those who are ... widows!”
3. The term **“widow”** [χήρα] – conveys a person who is deprived of the provisions, protections, and consolations of her husband.<sup>1</sup>
4. This term **“truly widows”** or **“widows indeed”** refers to widows who are qualified to receive such **“honor”** because of their reputations, engagement in the church, and so on, as we will see in the following several verses.
5. Not all widows are alone or need assistance – because their families are present, their husbands left them with adequate resources, or they are young enough to remarry, find gainful employment, etc....
6. Nevertheless, any widow should be spiritually comforted and cared for by the church, as should anyone in need.

## II. THE ASSISTANCE OF WIDOWS – 5:4, 8

### A. The Church’s Obligation

1. The understanding is that the church stands prepared to assist a woman destitute or abandoned by her family.
2. The assumption is that these widows are abandoned because of their commitment to Jesus Christ, and their families are antagonistic to Christ Jesus.
3. Often families, because of sin, selfishness, and shame, develop such animosity toward mothers or grandmothers that they refuse to assist them with their needs.
4. This aberration from godliness is addressed in v. 8.
5. No Christian, let alone widows, should be ignored by the church but cared for spiritually and provided for financially as the needs exist.
  - a) *We’ve cared for a variety of needs that widows have had – both spiritual and physical.*
  - b) *We’ve repaired septic issues, structural issues, accessibility issues, and so on, as various widows have needed care.*
  - c) *When COVID struck, the pastoral staff went to widows’ homes, stood outside their houses, worshipped with them, read Scriptures, and prayed.*
6. We’ve had occasions when a “widow indeed” received a monthly stipend from the church to help provide for her expenses and allowed her to

<sup>1</sup> When my father was the Executive Director of IFCA International, my mother, Carol, founded a magazine for widows called Chera Fellowship which provides articles aimed at addressing the peculiar needs of widows.

engage in various ministries within the church.

## B. The Children's Obligation

1. However, Paul informs Timothy that the principal provision for widows needs to come from their families - *“but if a widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety regarding their own family and to make some return to their parents ...”*
2. The church should not be unnecessarily burdened with the care of widows – it ought to come from her family – *“... for this is acceptable in the sight of God.”*
3. *“acceptable”* [ἀπόδεκτος] – describes what is welcome or pleasing to God.
4. However, families who neglect or ignore the need of a parent are denounced by God as demonstrating by their neglect the lack of reality to their spiritual vitality – *“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”*
5. Since God's purposes for widows are so explicit, anyone who knows Him knows His particular interest in compassion for widows.
6. Thus, to neglect widows is the display one's unfamiliarity with God.
  - a) *Daily calls, frequent visits, Access to medical files online, and financial assistance as needed.*
  - b) *Sons particularly have the responsibility to step in for their fathers in being attentive to their mothers - listening to their struggles, encouraging them with kind words, giving gifts on anniversaries, Valentine's Day, their birthdays, and even hugs and kisses mean so much when they are alone.*
7. Such behavior is a direct violation of God's heart and thus is described as a condemnation – *“... he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”*
  - a) *“denied the faith”* [τὴν πίστιν ἤρνηται] - refers to refusing to consent to the obligations accompanying the faith.
  - b) *“worse than an unbeliever”* [χείρω] - such conduct is morally *“worse”* or *“more severe”* than what is even expected by unbelievers, many of whom care faithfully for their mother/grandmother.
8. This statement should not be interpreted as stating that someone loses salvation if they fail to care for their parent correctly.
9. The responsibility of children is *“... to make some return to their parents”*

[ἀμοιβή] or repayment – a reference to a debt owed to the widow for her sacrifice in providing life to them.

10. Whereas the church is not obligated to care for every widow but only for those who qualify, a child or grandchild must care for their mother/grandmother comprehensively.

## Part 2

We return to our text to continue looking at how a church must carefully pursue the stewardship of caring for widows. Paul clearly indicates that widows are a premium class of saints whose care indicates the integrity of a church's commitment to the truth. Despite a church's responsibility to honor widows, they will still need to be confronted when their orthodoxy or orthopraxy deviates from the truth. Shepherding widows is not defined by merely providing for their physical needs, their consistent living in submission to God's Spirit is part of what a church must ensure.

Last week we looked at the principle that summarizes this section – that *“the godly take a special interest in caring for those in need.”* Our text provides us with five main principles, two of which we considered last week. They include:

- I. **The Attitude toward Widows– 5:3**
- II. **The Assistance of Widows – 5:4, 8**
- III. **The Attributes of Widows – 5:5-10**
- IV. **The Allure of Widows – 5:11-15**
- V. **The Attentiveness to Widows – 5:16**

In v. 3, the **“Attitude toward Widows”** the church must exhibit is clearly stated. We also saw in verses 4 & 8 the **“Assistance of Widows”** expected for both families of a widow and then when abandoned, by the church.

In the continuation of teaching, Paul emphasizes that not every widow is qualified to be the focus of honor in the care the church provides. Let's look at ...

### III. **THE ATTRIBUTES OF WIDOWS – 5:5-10**

#### A. **She Is Alone – v. 5a**

1. Paul now explains what a *“widow indeed”* is – *“Now she is a widow indeed who ... has been left alone.”*
2. Her family has also abandoned her so that no one is stepping up to care for her.

3. **“alone” [μονῶν]** – describes a person who is solitary or without anyone to whom to turn for assistance and protection.
4. A widow can be regularly engaged with people in ministries at church, Bible studies, ladies’ meetings, church assemblies, social engagements, volunteer work, and recreational pursuits, only to return home to an empty house so quiet that the clock ticking sounds obnoxiously loud.
5. It is possible that she didn’t have children or that her children are pagan and dismissive of her because of her faith.
6. The church should advocate for her – representing the Lord Himself who cares for her.

#### **B. She Is Assured by the Lord – v. 5b**

1. Additionally, a **“widow indeed”** is a woman who **“has fixed her hope on God ...”**
2. A **“widow indeed”** has nowhere else to go but to the Lord – He is the One to whom she looks with hope.
3. The specific content of her **“hope”** is that God promises not to abandon the widow, and she looks to Him for provision – **Jeremiah 49:11**.
4. Of course, this also implies that she is a woman who trusts Jesus as her Savior and Lord, engaged in worship, service, and fellowship with the saints of the church.
5. This will be displayed by a woman who refuses to isolate herself in perpetuated mourning but does her part in encouraging her soul through the mean of grace provided by the Lord through the church.

#### **C. She Is Appealing to the Lord – v. 5c**

1. Another characteristic of a widow qualified to receive assistance and “honor” from the church is that she is not passive in her hope but actively calls out to the Lord for His provision – **“... and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day.”**
  - a) **“entreaties” [δέησις]** – *an urgent request exclusively offered to God for the meeting of a need. This demonstrates that she is not expecting anything from the church but is looking to the Lord to provide however He might choose.*
  - b) **“prayers” [προσευχή]** – *a term that can include the specific request but is broader and involves the worship and praise of God for His faithfulness.*
2. The phrase **“day and night”** is a Jewish idiom for “constantly” or “at all times” – cp. **1 Thessalonians 5:17**.

3. This is the humble attitude taught by Christ in the “Disciples’ Prayer” – “Give us this day our daily bread ....”
4. The practice of the presence of God is a significant component in a lonely person’s encouragement – one cannot look to others alone but foremostly encourage one’s heart in the Lord.

#### D. She Is Above Reproach – vv. 6-7

1. Additionally, she cannot be a woman *“who gives herself to wanton pleasure”* [σπαταλάω] – *“to indulge oneself beyond the bounds of propriety, live luxuriously/voluptuously.”*<sup>2</sup>
2. Although the term carries a notion of moral laxity, the context suggests that it also describes careless or frivolous indulgence in luxuries.
3. A woman to be cared for by the church cannot be a person who squanders the support she is provided on luxuries, frivolous purchases, and self-indulgent or sinful pursuits – cp. *James 5:5*.
4. Like the family members who fail to care for her are “worse than unbelievers,” a woman who squanders the care she does receive is *“dead even while she lives.”*
5. This reference to being *“dead”* ([Θνήσκω] – separated) refers to separating oneself from spiritual priorities and living inconsistently with what is expected of those who know Christ.
6. This seems to be one of the significant areas where Timothy is to protect the church’s doctrine and rebuke false doctrine – *“Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach.”*
7. He is to *“prescribe these things”* to three groups within the church which picks up the instruction from 1 Timothy 4:11 ...
  - a) *The widows are to behave circumspectly.*
  - b) *The families are to take ownership of caring for parents/grandparents.*
  - c) *The Church is to care for “widows indeed.”*

#### E. She Has Acknowledged Godliness – v. 9-10

1. **The Sustained Godliness – v. 9a**
  - a) *At this point, Paul transitions from talking about the church’s responsibility to care for the widows to the responsibility the church has to engage widows in serving Christ with an official duty.*

<sup>2</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 936.

- b) *He refers to “a widow is to be put on the list ...” – a reference to membership in an order of servants who have made a covenant to serve the Lord with a singular and devoted ministry role.*
- c) *The widows who engage in this level of devotion are women who are mature enough to be beyond the normal passions and urges of youthful lusts – “... if she is not less than sixty years old ...”*
  - (1) Such a woman has typically gone through “the change” of menopause and has diminished estrogen levels with all the attendant circumstances, including being past “child-bearing” years.
  - (2) She is given to other forms of intimacy, including a spiritual focus with sorted priorities that elevate eternal values.
  - (3) Hence, she is not tossed about by passions that lure her back into relationships dominated by her flesh.
  - (4) Such godly women have the time, maturity, character, interest, and compassion to serve the Body of Christ without distractions.
- d) *Additionally, such mature women have the benefit of having lived a godly life for sufficient years to gain the trust of other believers and have a sustained testimony of godliness.*

## 2. The Substantiated Godliness – vv. 9b-10

- a) *Her reputation substantiates the characteristics of godliness.*
- b) *We are given the qualifying features of a woman’s testimony enabling her to be given the opportunity to be placed on the list of widows indeed:*
  - (1) A testimony of marital commitment – “... *having been the wife of one man*” – that is, a “one man woman” – cp. [1 Timothy 3:2](#).
  - (2) A testimony of participation in good works – “... *having a reputation [μαρτυρέω] of good [καλός] works ...*” -- having been observed engaging in good works; counted on as available when needed.
  - (3) A testimony of maternal commitment – “... *and if she has brought up children, ...*” – this does not eliminate women who did not bear children – only that a widow needs to have been seen in a nurturing context with children.
  - (4) A testimony of hospitality – “... *if she has shown hospitality to strangers ...*”
  - (5) A testimony of humility in service – “... *if she has washed the saints’ feet ...*”
  - (6) A testimony of compassion for the needy – “... *if she has assisted those in distress ...*” – “*assisted*” [ἐπαρκέω] – carries the idea of providing for those in need and implies



financial sacrifice.

- (7) A testimony of zeal for good works – “... *and if she has devoted [ἐπακολουθέω] herself to every good [ἀγαθός] work.*” – that is, engaged in them without being recruited.

*c) If these qualities do not characterize a woman, she should not be given the opportunity to serve as one of the recognized, devoted widows the church is obligated to “honor.”*

*d) This is an important distinction since there are risks of younger widows becoming alloyed in their affections, devotion, and commitments.*

#### IV. THE ALLURE FOR WIDOWS – 5:11-15

##### A. The Struggle with Sensuality – vv. 11-12

1. The devotion a woman who is put on the list is a serious thing – amounting to a vow that such a woman makes to serve the Lord with singleness of heart.
2. Hence Paul states that Timothy must not yield to the pressure to include younger widows in this elite group of devoted widows – “*But refuse to put younger widows on the list ...*”
3. Eager women bereft of a spouse will yearn for a place to belong, find fellowship, and occupy themselves and might be eager to volunteer for the ministry of “widows indeed.”
4. However, there are pressures and allures that will commonly compromise her devotion – “... *for when they feel sensual desires ... they want to get married.*”
5. When such “*desires*” come, they will choose their fulfillment and abandon their previous commitment to serve Christ wholly – “... *in disregard of Christ.*”
6. This does not mean that a woman is doing something wrong by remarrying – *1 Corinthians 7:39.*
7. Marriage is the appropriate resolution for a woman who has been married and continues to yearn for marital pleasures – cp. *1 Corinthians 7:8-9.*
8. However, when she has sworn a vow to a celibate commitment to serving the Lord alone, she must keep her word given when she is put on the list.

##### B. The Straying from Sobriety – v. 13

1. When a younger widow's heart is lured away from the simplicity of devotion to Christ through a yearning for something "more," she can begin to display a variety of aberrant behaviors – some of which Paul lists as illustrations:
2. ***"At the same time they also learn to be idle"***
  - (1) ***"they also learn"*** [μανθάνω] – means to
  - (2) ***"to be idle"*** [ἀργός] – a reference to being unwilling to do the work; unproductive or worthless to the glory of Christ.
  - b) ***"... as they go around from house to house"*** – literally: ***"making the circuit"*** and refers to the assigned homes where they were to seek to minister to members of the congregation.
  - c) ***However, instead of ministering the grace of Christ, they would spread information they got at the previous house – "... and not merely idle, but also gossips ..."***
  - d) ***"... and busybodies"*** [περίεργος] – ***digging up more information they will be able to share with others.***
  - e) ***"... talking about things not proper to mention."*** – ***instead of sharing truth, they were sharing things that were personal, salacious, and slanderous.***
3. Opportunities designed to provide a widow with the opportunity to truly fellowship with other saints to the glory of Christ, were being used by the woman to promote herself because of a heart that had grown cold toward Christ.

### C. **The Susceptibility to Satan – vv. 14-15**

1. Paul speaks as led by God's Spirit and therefore declares with authority: ***"Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach."***
2. This is the normal course for a woman – to apply herself domestically on behalf of a family.
3. Instead of traveling around to everyone else's houses as a busybody, ***"younger widows"*** ought to occupy themselves domestically as a wife and mother.
4. This is not a slight toward single women or women who do not have children, as God has a special purpose and ministry for such women not in view in this verse.
5. However, when a woman departs from her devotion to serving Christ and allows a distancing to occur between her and the Lord because she is dissatisfied with her lot in life, she becomes vulnerable to Satanic

deceptions, temptations, and entrapments – “... *and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan.*”

6. Apparently, they not only abandoned their vow to Christ, but they also abandoned faithfulness altogether – participating in false teaching, or even getting involved with unsaved men – *2 Timothy 3:6*.

## V. THE ATTENTIVENESS TO WIDOWS – 5:16

### A. The Family’s Attentiveness

1. Paul returns to the issue of the principal provider of a widow being her own family.
2. He states clearly “*If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened ...*”
3. First, a widow’s sons and grandsons ought to be relied upon. However, they may not be available or refuse to do anything.
4. When such is the case, it falls to her daughters and granddaughters to care for her.
5. They must not simply assume the church will do it – and it is not feasible for the church to care for any widows except those who are “widows indeed” – avoiding overloading the church – “*burdened*” [βαρέω].
6. “*assist*” [ἐπαρκέω] means to “come to the aid of someone” – to remain attentive and ready to bear their burden.

### B. The Fellowship’s Attentiveness

1. The reason is that the church has the responsibility to make sure “*widows indeed*” are cared for.
2. Paul declares these families must care for their own “*so that it [the church] may assist those who are widows indeed.*”
3. Only widows with no other means of support should be assisted by the church.
4. In a section where Timothy is charged to confront errant theology, this section on caring for widows is indicative of how the heart of God must be reflected in the actions of His people as a practical application of truth.

## So What?

1. How can you avoid “incidentalism” in ministering to a widow by being a sustained reflection of God’s heart for her?

2. **Ministering to widows is not an end, it is a means to an end. What is the end toward which such a ministry strives?**
3. **Women, have you sought to live a life that would bring glory to Jesus Christ and ultimately qualify you for the church's assistance should it ever be needed?**
4. **Sons, what are you doing to replace the absence of male leadership in the life of your widowed mother?**

***The godly take a special interest in caring for those in need.***