

Caring for the Family - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **1 Timothy 5:3-16** (#537)

Introduction: We live in a world – at least, here in the United States – that values function first and foremost. Performance. The ability to make money and have an economic impact. This is true not just for people in business, but for writers (how many books will sell?), musicians (what will the concert revenues be?), education (how much will the new job pay?), even healthcare professionals (what value does this treatment or that process bring to the bottom line of our hospital system?). In short, we are subtly yet surely trained to value everything economically.

But that comes to be a real problem when we interact with people. Children are most definitely an economic drain, but more importantly the Bible tells us that they are a blessing. The elderly and the disabled contribute little to our nation's GDP, yet Jesus gave much of His precious time to caring for and about them. Women were often overlooked in the Roman world – after all, they weren't thought fit to fight or lead. Yet Christianity showed that women not only have a real place and value in the world, but are created no more or less in God's image than men.

Thus, the scriptures call us to look at life differently from the wider world. It's not that economics don't matter, but instead that they aren't what matters *most*. This morning, we'll be reading Paul's words to Timothy about widows. The vast majority of women in the Roman world who lost their husband had little choice but to hope for remarriage. And if that wasn't possible, they would normally have been consigned to a life that was meagre at best, horrifyingly poor at worst. Even in our supposedly enlightened times today, widows often struggle to make ends meet – not only financially, but even to find a place of worth and value in our society. How hopeful, then, that the Ephesian church where Timothy was pastoring was

given a plan for the widows connected to it. And how encouraging for you and I – and for those of you who are widows and whom we are blessed to worship Christ alongside. Let’s look at Paul’s thoughts together as we turn to **1 Timothy 5:3**...

5:3-6 Paul begins with the phrase “honor widows who are truly widows.” He doesn’t mean that any of these ladies are somehow faking the fact of their husbands’ death. Instead, as we see in **verse 5** and as we’ll read in **verse 10**, what Paul is writing about here is a widow who is directly connected to the church and who is – on the one hand – in financial need and yet, on the other hand, devotedly doing all she can to serve the church in faithfulness. Said another way, Paul has a specific kind of widow in mind here, one who is in a specific situation.

So, before we venture onward, let me say a word about widowhood during New Testament times. While I’ve already mentioned the often degrading hardship in terms of Roman society, what were the norms and expectations within Jewish lands? We read of at least a few widows – ladies such as Anna in **Luke 2** – who gave herself to worshipping the Lord at the temple each day after the death of her husband. She provides an example of what some widows, apparently those without an extended family, did with their time. In Anna’s case, we don’t know all of the details, but she certainly fulfilled part of what Paul writes about here.

Still, not every widow was an Anna. And the early Christian churches rarely had the sort of wealth or resources that the Jerusalem temple would have had. This, then, is the background for why Paul writes to Timothy as he does. Let’s pull a few of the details apart to see what Paul is teaching here...

First, in **verse 3**, Paul sets up something that he will come back to: there are some widows who fulfill the definition of the word. Calvin notes that Paul “alludes to the Greek word for ‘widow’ that is derived from a word meaning ‘deprived’ or ‘destitute’.” We’ll talk about that situation in a few moments.

Second, Paul states the obvious: not every widow embodies the word in this way. Some can – and should – be taken care of by surviving family members. This is what we read of in **verse 4**. Others, as we’ll see in a few minutes, ought to aim for remarriage. Christian churches at that time had very little in the way of financial resources, they had no way of financially supporting lots of people. In that sense, we aren’t terribly different as a church, are we? We have some resources – for which we should all thank the Lord. But unlike some of the established mainline denominations and their endowments, we have quite a few limitations when it comes to the very significant amounts of money it takes to live these days.

What was the church in Ephesus to do? What are we to do? Paul’s first response is that those widows who have family should be provided for by their family. Friends: is there a dear lady in your family, a mother or grandmother, who is a widow? You honor Christ well if you look out for her needs. It’s not a distraction from climbing the corporate ladder, it’s not something to find some way to get out of doing. Christians should be known for caring and providing for their own families. This isn’t to downplay very real situations like the need for skilled nursing care or mental health situations, but it is to say that a family should care for their own before asking the church to step in.

Third, as I’ve already alluded to, Paul makes a distinction between different situations. Those who are widows with living family should be provided for by

them. Those who can remarry, should. But there is a third path: widows of such an age and station in life that they would best serve – and be served – by making a commitment to serve the church for the rest of their life. More on that in a moment. Note that, according to **verse 6**, those who won't take one of these faithful paths shouldn't expect to be supported by the church. Elsewhere, we see that this is consistent with what Paul teaches when he says that “if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” in **2 Thessalonians 3**. Paul has no category for a Christian who won't find some way to serve or live that follows our Lord.

Paul's expectation is that all who love the Lord should labor in serving one another and extending the Gospel to those who have yet to respond. Idleness, laziness, a life of ease: these are not things that Paul ever commends, and certainly not the example he himself gives.

Now, all of this has been a bit theoretical. Let's turn to one of Paul's own applications...

5:7-8 If you have a family member who is a widow, your faithful response is to find some way to care for her. Widows are what Paul has in view here, but I think the principle applies to the family overall. Difficult relationships, heart-breaking situations – none of those are foreign to the world of the New Testament. Still, Paul's command is to care, it's to love. We are to love because Christ first loved us. When we do this poorly, we act in ways that aren't only less than many irreligious people in the world, but we also show our own disobedience to the mission that Christ has called us to. Instead, our love is to be motivated by the Gospel, and that is to be tangible, in the same pattern as Christ who gave not only

of His wisdom, but of His very body for us. Do this well, and you'll honor your Savior – and that's good Gospel-focused work.

But, as I mentioned earlier, Paul also sees two other paths that widows in certain situations might tread...

5:9-10 What Paul envisions here is not at all like the nuns of a convent, but instead it is meant to be a way for widows without family and of such a life stage that they can't remarry to be provided for. These ladies are giving a commitment that, rather than seeking remarriage, they will instead spend their time and efforts to serve the various needs of the church. It makes sense then, similarly to what we've read about other servants of the church – overseers, deacons, deaconesses – that these ladies would also be expected to have a certain character. The specifics are given here in a modified form that is appropriate to widows.

Paul's point is not necessarily that this should be an "office" in the church. Indeed, if every widow is already provided for either through loving family or through remarriage, then there would be no need to maintain a list of "enrolled widows." But his point is that there might be need for such a role. And if so, this is the best and most faithful way to go about it. (credit to George Knight for this summary)

What about us here at First E-Free? I'm not aware of any who are widows and facing poverty and destitution. But if so, I'd say that – as Paul teaches here – we as a church ought to at least consider what it could look like to care for any widow who is committed to giving their life to serve here in the church. That hasn't been the case in the past, but it should be something that we'd be willing to explore as an expression of caring for our own and because of the ways in which such a dear

widow might be a blessing to the congregation. Though Paul doesn't specify, likely the sorts of work he envisions are along the same lines as the qualifications given here: caring for children, hospitality, and all that could go under the heading of "every good work."

Yet there is also another situation – likely the more common one – which Paul addresses last...

5:11-16 I suspect that these words seem overly harsh to many of us, yet – when you keep Paul's entire argument in mind – hopefully you'll see that his point isn't to belittle, but instead to customize his teaching depending upon the situation. That's why he speaks here of younger widows, who would be much more likely to be able to remarry and who would face very real temptations should they refuse to or be told that they shouldn't.

The situation seems to be that a widow might desire to serve the church formally as Paul just wrote about, yet – in the course of time – decide that she wishes to marry again instead of continuing in this service. Paul's point isn't that marriage is a bad desire, but rather that he sees the role of the church as to support only those widows who cannot be supported any other way. All of which leads us to his conclusion and point: Paul wants the church to constantly ask: "how can we best go about our disciple-making mission? Do we have any widows who might have a formal and permanent role in that if we could provide for them financially?" So let me close by asking the broad questions: if you are a widow, are you serving Christ in one of these three ways? For the church overall: are you caring for your individual family in this kind of Jesus-centered way? This is part of what it means to be the family of God – let's be found to faithfully example it to the world.