

The Church's Care Of Widows

Instructions To The Church

Here in this passage found in Paul's letter to Timothy attention is given primarily concerning widows - who they are and how they are to be cared for. It is my hope this morning you will also see that it has implications beyond widows and encompasses the entire church. These principals outlined here still directly apply to us as Christ's Church today. The Church is a family of families whose patriarch is Christ. The Church is to place a high priority on caring for those within the church family that are in need. Even though this passage primarily focuses on widows, it will become apparent as this message unfolds that the guidelines are to be applied beyond widows.

Beginning in the Old Testament God has demonstrated that He designed women to be cared for. Men are to care for women sacrificially. This has nothing to do with the role of women or whether women are not to work outside the home or obtain college degrees. Neither Paul nor I are dealing with those subjects in this passage. Throughout the scriptures God illustrates that His proper order is for men to protect, provide for and spiritually guide women. Men often fall short in fulfilling their God given roles well, but in spite of this it is what God calls men to. This provision of protection begins with a girl's father, then a woman's husband and finally by her children. The order is accepted as the normal progression because the majority of men die before their wives. In Psalm 68 we read God is the **"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows."** (Psalm 68:5) Christ came to earth to show the world God in the flesh and He was both **"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows."** Christ is the Head of the Church and it is the His Church that is to show the world who Christ is and what God does in the lives of believes. Since Jesus' resurrection

and return to heaven, it is the Christ's Church who is to be "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows." This theme goes back in time to when God called His people to be set apart as holy and continues to this day.

God instructed Israel concerning their responsibility and treatment of a variety of people in Exodus chapter 22. In the midst of these instructions comes this stern warning, "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. ²³ If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, ²⁴ and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless." (Exodus 22:22–24) God has a passion for the care of widows and children. This warning was for Israel, but is current with the needs within our society today. The nation Israel was God's chosen people and they were to demonstrate to the world who He is and that all people have a desperate need for God in their lives. Today, it is the Church of Christ, the body of believers, that is to live in holiness demonstrating to the world that they are lost and desperately need a Savior who can make them into a new creation. An important part of this life style is love and care for each other and for those in need and especially widows. The prophet Isaiah instructed that those who follow God are to "...learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." (Isaiah 1:17) God calls Christians to fulfill this by living a life of service, as He has called all who are His, from the beginning of creation, to live this pattern of lovingly serving and providing for others.

God's pattern established in the Old Testament is the foundation of Paul's writing in the New Testament. The Old Testament teaches that widows should remarry. If marriage was not possible or time was needed then the widow was to remain in her father's house. In Genesis 38 Judah told his daughter-in-law, Tamar whose husband Er had died to remain in his house until his son, Shelah was old enough to marry her. When Ruth's husband died she remained in her mother-in-law Naomi's house.

Both Judah and Naomi were considered to be a father and mother, not just in-laws. One's spouse's family was truly their family also. It has always been and continues to be God's desire that widows are cared for. Old Testament law gave widows' provision that an unmarried brother-in-law, as was the case with Tamar, was to marry her and if this was not possible then the responsibility went to next of kin as with Ruth and Boaz. This was meant to provide for and to protect widows.

Widows, at the time of Paul's writing to Timothy, were commonly poor. Women in general were not permitted to work outside of the home and this limited their ability to provide. They were dependent upon their family. Jesus told the parable story in Luke 18 of the Judge who did not fear God or man, but because of the entreaties of the widow, he finally gave her justice. For this he is commended. It would have taken less time if she had had men to defend her, but she was without family, a true widow. Jesus spoke in chapter 20 of Luke concerning those who were false and hurt or took advantage of widows, **"Beware of the scribes...who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."** (Luke 20:46–47) Here Jesus places the sins of those who take advantage of widows as deserving great condemnation because it is an affront to God. This is a precept the church needs to understand and be careful of to this very day.

There is the story in Luke chapter 7 of the widow in the city Nain whose only son had died. Jesus felt compassion for her, as she was now alone. Jesus stopped the funeral procession as He approached the city of Nain and came up to the coffin and spoke for the young man to rise and the man rose and the people glorified God for the miracle. Jesus knew without the son this woman would become destitute. Jesus had a deep love for widows all through His ministry and even to the very end of His life.

Considering the history of God's instructions for the care of widows in the Old Testament and Jesus' teachings about and actions towards widows it should be of no surprise that the first ministry to be developed in the new church was that of caring for widows. To help Timothy to understand the godly principals of caring for widows Paul put his instructions into writing for both Timothy's sake and so the church would understand its responsibility. These instructions found in 1st Timothy 5, verses 3 to 16 continue to be valid. In verses 3 to 8 Paul gives instructions to the church in Ephesus about how to care for widows. Then in verses 9 to 16 Paul writes of older women as assets to the church body because of their wisdom and experience that is to be used to instruct and to be shared with younger women. These older women are also in position to have time to serve the church and its families. I would ask that you to spend time reading and meditating on 1 Timothy 5, verses 9 to 16 because it is clear what Paul is saying and we will have already explored the relation between the church and true widows and also those who are not true widows. So from this message we will move on in chapter 5 to verse 17.

As I concentrated on verses 3 to 8 it appears to me these instructions and principals are just as true for the church today as when Paul wrote to Timothy. The church today needs to take God's instruction to heart and work to fulfill them.

The Church and True Widows

Paul begins simply and clearly, "[Honor widows who are truly widows.](#)" In our English language the word "widow" is given to a woman whose husband has died. In the Greek language the meaning of the word "widow" is more open-ended with no definition of the cause for becoming a widow, meaning it can define women who have lost their husbands through death, desertion, divorce or imprisonment. The responsibility of the church, and of Timothy, and of you and me, is towards **all** women who have lost their husbands and are true believers. With our society's

wholesale divorce, men fathering babies and not providing support, the challenge before Christ's church is greater than at any other time in history and gives great importance to what Paul is instructing here. When the world watches the Church, how the Church responds with love to those in need is a witness of how Christ-like we are or are not. The early church worked hard to care for orphans and widows. The welfare system of the Western nations is a direct result of the church's influence in their early history. The problem is that the church allowed the governments to take over meeting the needs that were the responsibility of the church. Now the governments, which no longer hold to Christian values, have made it a mess and welfare is a massive burden to our society.

I realize our small church has limited resources and this it is a true limitation. However, it should not be used as an excuse. We should do everything within our means to help those in need within our community. We should be working at meeting the needs of the needy in financial, physical and spiritual ways. Look at our sister Floy, who I have come to deeply love, I love the fact she is feisty and to a large extent she is independent. However, this does not excuse us from honoring her and caring for her where we can, for she is a true widow. Even if a widow does not require material support from us we still must provide for their spiritual support. By the way the word "widow" can also include men who have lost their wives, are alone and in need. We should be serving them as well. There is no word "widower" in the Bible.

What a sad observation about American that the number of women living in poverty is growing at a rapid pace and the current generations of children, in general, do not care for their elderly parents. God has commanded that children honor their parents. It is sinful when children view their elderly parents as burdens who must be cared for out of obligation.

Joyce and I worked hard to support our parents toward the end of their lives. We owned them so much, and frankly, we owned them more than we could ever return. It was an honor to care for them and because we saw it as an honor and privilege it was easy to care for them with love. Honoring parents honors God. When Joyce and I came back from serving in ministry overseas we sat down with our 3 daughters and explained that I could go back into business or stay in ministry. However, if we continued to serve the Lord they could very well have to provide for our financial and physical needs when we were old. They all encouraged us to continue serving the Lord and said they would be there for us until the end of our lives. What a comfort to have the freedom to serve God and His people, knowing our children are committed to care for us. I pray this will be what is said of our families that make up Canyon Bible Church; that we richly love, care and honor those in need, especially our elderly and especially elderly women.

The other problem that the Church has to contend with is that the more welfare the government supplies to it's citizens the more dependent the citizens become on the government and this causes the government to work to supply even more welfare benefits. It is a cycle that moves the government, our society and people into a socialist state where everyone wants to be served, given what they have not earned and this develops an attitude of not desiring to serve others. As the government takes care of more and more people and fewer and fewer are giving, it will fail as we have seen time and time again throughout history. The parallels between the rise and fall of the Roman Empire and America are astonishing. Governments come and go. The only hope a society has for a secure future is found in the foundational principles of Christ's teachings and His Church.

When Peter made his confession that Jesus was the Son of God, Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this

rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

(Matthew 16:17–19) The Church of Christ will remain throughout human history until Jesus returns and “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Christ’s Church will outlast all governments and all of the evil one’s false religions. The true Church of Jesus Christ is the only thing that will be a constant throughout history. Christ’s church is called to serve, serve with love, serve beginning with widows.

Paul uses verses 4 to 8 to define “who are truly widows” that are to be honored as commanded in verse 3. Paul gives criteria for determining who are the widows the church should give honor and support to. We find the first criteria in verse 4, which reads, “But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first 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.” A widow’s children and/or grandchildren should consider it an honor to lovingly care for her. As Paul wrote to care for our parents makes a return for what they have done for us and is pleasing in the sight of God. This general principal applies to both elderly men and women, but women especially, for God has set the principal for especially men of the church to protect, provide for and spiritually guide women. A son of a widow may become her spiritual head covering, but he is to do so with the greatest honor and respect towards his mother.

Caring for ones parents was not just seen as a responsibility for those who believed in the one true God; the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament. Most pagan cultures and nations believed caring for parents was important. Aristotle wrote, “It would be though in the matter of food we should help our parents before all others.” (Nichomachean Ethics) Plato said, “Comes the

honour of loving parents, to whom, as is met, we have to pay the first and greatest and oldest of debts, considering that all which a man has belongs to those who gave him birth and brought him up, and that he must do all that he can to minister to them; first, in his property; secondly, in his person; and thirdly, in his soul; paying the debts of old days of his infancy, and which he is now able to pay them back, when they are old and in the extremity of their need.” (The Laws) We can never pay back Christ for His gift of our salvation and we cannot pay our parents back for the physical life they gave us and their loving care of us as we grew up.

The second criteria is found in verse 5, “She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.” The widow must be “left all alone” meaning no family to support her and she must be a believer for the church to come to her aid. It makes no difference if a widow is a believer or not for her family to care for her. Just as Aristotle was not a believer and yet knew he needed to care for his parents. But, for the church to provide care and support, the widow must be without family support, be a believer and her life is to be evidence of her true faith.

Praying “night and day” is a Jewish expression for doing something on a continual basis or praying on a regular basis, all the time. This is to be part of every believer’s life, constantly seeking God. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always,¹⁷ pray without ceasing,¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18) The example that comes to mind of a widow who prayed “day and night” or “without ceasing” was the prophetess Anna. Reading about Anna from Luke chapter 2, “There was a prophetess, Anna ... She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin,³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four.” *Anna would have been uncommon with the average life expectancy at this time being 45 to 55 for men and 50 to 60 for women. For example, we do not*

know how Jesus' earthly father, Joseph died or when he died, but with men, on average, living only into their 40s and into their early 50s it simply may have been Joseph died from old age. Since Anna was over 60 she qualified on age as a true widow as stated in verse 9 and she certainly was a true woman of faith. Continuing in verse 37, "She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day." (Luke 2:34–37) Anna was devoted to the service of the Lord and never remarried and she was faithful. God gave to this faithful widow the privilege of seeing the Messiah as an infant.

The Church and Unfaithful Widows

Anna was the opposite of the widows referred to in verse 6, "*she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.*" The Greek word structure is describing a person who leads a life of pleasure and, at times, at the expense of others. A life lived without concern for what God says is right and wrong. Although she is physically alive she is spiritually dead. It appears "*she*" was involved in the church while her husband lived but now is living the life of an unregenerate. This person cannot be helped until she repents and comes back to both the community of Christ and a life lived holy before God. I did not say she would need to be sinless, but rather striving to live holy by the power of the Holy Spirit that God has given her. This is what is meant by verse 7, "*Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach.*"

A pastor I knew for many years worked diligently for the Lord; he spent years as a missionary and then years as a church planter and pastor here in Albuquerque. When he died his wife who had appeared for all those years to be a virtuous woman began living a most unchristian life and found her way to Canyon Bible. It was with a broken heart I had to ask her and her gigolo male companion to leave because they would not repent before God and it was not Canyon Bible's responsibility to care for

them since they were unrepentant and without true faith. It proves that things have not changed from the time of Paul's writing to this day. We have different people but the same sin problems.

Verse 8 states in a negative truth what Paul express as a positive truth in verse 4. Children and family are to care lovingly for their parents. Those who fail to care for their parents, especially widows are worse than unbelievers. Verse 8, **“But 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.”** Wow, you cannot get much clearer than this. Children who do not provide for their needy parents and a husband that does not provide for his wife and children has sinned against God in at least two ways. First, **“he has denied the faith.”** Paul is not referring to the loss of their salvation, but rather, they have turned from the life of faith and have lost their love for the Lord. Secondly, they are **“worse than an unbeliever”** because they know better and have chosen to disobey God's commands their sin is grievous before God. As we saw a few minutes ago even the pagan nations knew it was their duty to care for their parents.

Christ Demonstrates Care

As I bring our time in God's Word to close, I think of our Lord Jesus nailed to a cross. He came to live, die and rise again to pay the debt for all sins. Jesus on the cross near death so loved his widowed mother, Mary that He gave His remaining energy to care for her. The apostle John recorded, **“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”** (John 19:26–27) It appears at the time of Jesus' death his half brothers and sisters were unbelievers. Mary could be cared

for physically by her children, but not spiritually. Jesus was concerned with Mary's spiritual health above her physical comfort.

Jesus spoke from the cross to two people in need. The thief on the cross who looked at Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus responded with great effort to the criminal on the cross saying, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:42–43) Nothing more clearly reveals the heart of God than His own Son's care of His widowed mother and His care of a lost man while He suffered on the cross. While He bore the sins of the world, Jesus' mind was concerned for the salvation of one sinner and the care of one widow.

The care of widows and those in need began with God and continued with the obedience of His Son and now continues with the obedience and loving submission of each believer to live as a servant of God. The Church and more specifically, Canyon Bible Church cannot do collectively what each believing member of Canyon Bible will not do individually. Serving parents, widows and those in need may be inconvenient and take time away from other pursuits and it surely takes energy, but this is what God calls Christians to do and to do so with a loving and kind heart.

A chain is only as strong as it's weakest link. Look at yourself in the mirror when you get home and ask yourself, "Am I a link in God's chain, called His church, that strengthens or weakens my community? Will we, my brothers and sisters, "Honor widows who are truly widows?" If the answer is yes, we need to show the world our love and honor of Jesus Christ by lovingly caring for widows and those in need.

The Hebrew word (אָמֵן) "amen" means "let it be true." Do I hear an "Amen" from all here for what God has spoken into our hearts and minds this morning about serving and honoring others? If so, say with me, Amen and Amen!