



1 Timothy

RBS
1 Timothy 5:1–25

Lesson 5: Church Family, Widows, Elders, and Personal Instructions

“I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:14b–15a).

Doctrinal Focus: The local church is a covenant family, and so we must treat each other as family members—protecting and providing for one another.

Read 1 Timothy 5:1–25.

In the final two chapters of 1 Timothy, we encounter a mixture of instructions related to church life and conduct, in addition to personal instructions and exhortations from Paul to his younger disciple, Timothy. In chapter 5, the church is characterized as a covenant family. Since the church is a family system, its members must learn to relate to one another, especially given the potential diversity in it. There will be Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, slave and free. The power of the gospel cuts across the barriers of race, gender, age, and status. As such, the potential diversity of membership in the church family receives special attention in this fifth chapter of 1 Timothy.

Verses 1–2

How should an elder or overseer like Timothy relate to the various members of the church? He should relate to them like he would to his own family. He must treat the older men and women like fathers and mothers, and the younger men and women like brothers and sisters, “*in all purity*”!

The Christian life and life in the church is covenantal life (cf. Matthew 26:28; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 7:22; 8:7–8, 13; 9:1, 15; 10:16; 12:24), and covenantal life is family life. Here, and throughout the New Testament, we encounter kinship terms as believers relate one

to another (cf. Acts 9:17; 21:20; Romans 14:10–21; 16:1; 1 Corinthians 7:15; Colossians 1:1; 4:7, 9; James 2:15, et al). Given the difficulty of Timothy’s work in the Ephesian church, and the danger of the false teachers in it, Paul reminds Timothy to conduct himself in a gentle manner, treating each person as he would one of his own family members. Because Timothy is to set an example for all believers in faith and conduct (cf. 1 Timothy 4:12), it becomes important for us all to conduct ourselves in this manner as we relate to one another in the local church.

Verses 3–16

In these next verses, Paul turns his attention to widows in the church. In the ancient world, and even now, widows were especially susceptible to economic ruin and poverty after the death of a husband, the primary or even sole income provider in that cultural context. The care for widows appears to have become a major concern in the local church. Recall from Acts 6 that this very issue necessitated the appointment of deacons, “*Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution*” (Acts 6:1). But concern for the widow is not something new in the New Testament. The Old Testament is filled with laws and exhortations to care for

The Rafiki Bible Study Lessons in all forms is the property of the Rafiki Foundation, Inc. No portion may be reproduced or translated without the written permission of the Rafiki Foundation Home Office, U.S.A. ©, copyright© 2019 by Rafiki Foundation, Inc.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright© 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

widows, orphans, sojourners, and anyone else who might be vulnerable, mistreated, or oppressed (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 16:11; 24:19-21; Psalms 68:5; 146:9; Proverbs 15:25; Isaiah 1:7; Jeremiah 22:3; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5). It is rooted in the very character of God, *"He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing"* (Deuteronomy 10:18). Remember, church life is family life, and so the church must look after its members who are truly in need.

Paul's treatment of widows begins and ends with the exhortation to care for those who are *"truly widows"* (verses 3, 16). That is, there will be some widows for whom the church should not care, and Paul will describe for us these realities. First, however, we must consider what Paul intends by the command to *"honor"* a widow in verse 3. In Greek, this particular word has two basic meanings: (1) to set a price, value; and (2) to show regard for, revere. In this context, the clear intention is that the church would provide financially for the true widow, which is, secondarily, the honorable thing to do. This point is reinforced by the care for widows shown in Acts 6 (cf. 1 Timothy 5:8, 16). In fact, it appears that care for widows had become an official part of church life, and so Paul can speak of an official enrollment or registration of widows in the church (1 Timothy 5:9). For this reason, Paul must also describe what constitutes a true widow for whom the church must care, and so also the widow for whom the church is not primarily responsible in terms of financial care.

Let's begin with Paul's description of widows for whom the church is not primarily responsible. First, if a widow has a biological family able to care for her, children or grandchildren, then she should not be enrolled (verse 4). This is especially true if the children and grandchildren are believers, for *"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world"* (James 1:27). In fact, Paul strongly states that those who do not provide for family members in need are worse than unbelievers (cf. verses 8 and 16). Additionally, if the widow is self-indulgent, living beyond the bounds of propriety (verse 6), an idle gossip or meddling busybody

(verse 13), under sixty years of age (verses 9, 11), or desires to remarry (verse 14), then she should not be enrolled under the care of the church. In fact, Paul explicitly instructs younger widows to *"marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander"* (verse 14).

Now we will consider the type of widow that should be enrolled under the care of the local church. First, she must be alone and without family to care for her (verse 5). She must also be a godly woman, a woman of constant prayer (cf. Luke 2:37) with a reputation for good works, hospitality, mercy, and compassion for others in need (verse 10). In terms of age, she must be at least sixty, that is, beyond the normal age for remarriage and having children. And finally, she must have been faithful to her deceased husband, literally, a *"one man woman."* We encountered this same requirement for elders and deacons back in 1 Timothy 3. It is undergirded by the reality that faithfulness in biological family life is consistent with faithfulness in the life of the local church.

Perhaps it seems odd that Paul would devote so much time and attention to the care of widows in this first letter to Timothy. However, if you consider the grand story of the Bible, the reason becomes apparent. Since the very beginning, God has been looking out for those in need – Abraham and Sarah, the barren couple, Israel, the least of all the nations on earth, Rahab the prostitute and Ruth the widow, barren Hannah, David, the youngest brother in the family, or Solomon, the son of adultery and murder. Over and over again, God demonstrates both his great strength and his endless compassion by caring for the weak, abandoned, oppressed, unqualified, and unwanted. It is important, therefore, that the church exhibit this same concern as a reflection of God's mercy and compassion to us, sinners saved by grace and made heirs of all eternity.

Verses 17-20

Following the command to care for widows, Paul turns his attention to the elder (overseer) and how the church should care for him. Paul's first point is that the elder should be compensated financially for his work. The text states that the elder who rules well by preaching and teaching is worthy

of “double honor” (verse 17). The term “honor,” as with widows before (cf. verse 1 Timothy 5:3), denotes financial compensation, or honoraria, for the work of the elder. By “double” it is not intended that elders be paid twice as much as those in other kinds of work, but rather that, in addition to financial compensation, the elder is also worthy of respect and esteem for his labors in preaching and teaching. Thus, the full meaning of “honor” is intended in this statement, both respect and remuneration. Paul grounds his command to honor elders by quoting an Old Testament text, and the words of Jesus. First, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, “*You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.*” He comments on this same teaching in 1 Corinthians 9:7–12:

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?

Next, Paul quotes the very words of Jesus, a portion from Luke 10:7, “*the laborer deserves*

his wages,” reinforcing the same basic point. The elder who labors in preaching and teaching should be provided for by those he serves. In other words, the church family is responsible to support the gospel ministry (preachers and teachers), and those in material need (widows).

Paul concludes this brief section by commenting on how to confront an elder suspected of persistent sin. First, charges may not come from any single individual, protecting the elder from disgruntled or cantankerous church members. Rather, there must be evidence from at least two witnesses (cf. Deuteronomy 17:6). Secondly, if the elder is guilty of such sin, and unrepentant, then he must be publically confronted in order to engender appropriate concern. In other words, the elder is a part of the church family, and he is not above reproach, but must submit to the protocols of church life—community, accountability, faith, and repentance are necessary.

Verses 21–25

These last few verses of chapter 5 are very personal in nature, addressed specifically to Timothy from Paul. Paul charges Timothy to carry out his instructions without partiality or favoritism, to do nothing in haste, and to avoid participation in the sins of others, that is, to keep himself pure. In other words, Timothy must remain faithful and patient in the work of his calling to the Ephesian church. In this way, the rotten fruit of the false teachers will become evident (verse 24), while the good fruit of the “*good servant*” (1 Timothy 4:6) will likewise be evident to all (cf. Matthew 7:17–19; 12:23; John 15:2–8; Colossians 1:10).

Recommended Commentary

1 Timothy by Philip Ryken (Reformed Expository Commentaries)



1 Timothy Lesson 5

Questions for Discussion

Read 1 Timothy 5:1-25.

1. Why does the apostle Paul use family or kinship terms when describing how we should conduct ourselves with one another in the context of the local church?
2. In what way is the local church a family? What makes us “related” to each other as family members?
3. Many people simply do not have biological families. The good news is that our LORD has provided Christians with a second family, the local church. In what way has the local church become a family to you? Do you relate to the church and church members as you would your own family?
4. Why is Paul so concerned with how the church cares for widows within the church? What does it mean to “*honor*” a widow?
5. What does the Old Testament teach us about God’s care for widows? In addition to widows, what other types of people does God look after with special concern in the Old Testament?
6. According to Paul, not all widows require care from the church. For which widows should the church care? For which widows should the church not care? Why is this so?
7. In addition to widows, what other types of people in your own community may require assistance from the local church? Do you know any people in your local church who are alone, unable to support themselves, and in great need—single mothers, students, foreigners, orphans?
8. In what ways can your local church help people in need? If your church lacks significant economic resources, are there other ways to care for people in need?

9. Paul uses strong words for those who do not care for their own biological family members. Why is this so? Do you have biological family members who are in need of your help? Are you in need of help from your family or the local church?

10. In addition to widows, the local church must also "*honor*" the elder who rules well by preaching and teaching. What does it mean that such elders are worthy of "*double honor*"?

11. How does Paul support his argument that those who labor in preaching and teaching are worthy of this "*double honor*"?

12. How do we hold erring elders accountable to the local church? When does it become necessary to confront such elders in public?

13. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul instructs Timothy in the conduct of the local church. Church life is family life, and family life is covenantal life. In what ways do our own local churches function like families? How can we improve what we are already doing? Is there anything that we are failing to do in this regard? Who are the people in greatest need?

14. When it comes to the distribution of funds from the local church, we learn that it must support the gospel ministry (elders who rule by preaching and teaching) and those in financial need (widows). Do these two areas dominate our church budgets? Are we actively supporting the ministry of the gospel and the financially destitute?