

1 Timothy 5: The Christian Leader and Relationships

A Bible Study on 1 Timothy 5

Study Bible Studies Not stated

1 Timothy 5 (quoted)

1 Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; 2 The elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity. 3 Honour widows that are widows indeed. 4 But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God. 5 Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day. 6 But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth. 7 And these things give in charge, that they may be blameless. 8 But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel. 9 Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, 10 Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work. 11 But the younger widows refuse: for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry; 12 Having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith. 13 And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not. 14 I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. 15 For some are already turned aside after Satan. 16 If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed. 17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. 18 For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward. 19 Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. 20 Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. 21 I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality. 22 Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure. 23 Drink

no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities. 24 Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after. 25 Likewise also the good works of some are manifest beforehand; and they that are otherwise cannot be hid.

— 1 Timothy 5:1-25, King James Version

The Christian Leader and Relationships

As is the case with the clothes we wear, the church has its seams, created naturally by age differences, gender differences, economic differences and so on. When various groups try to exist and function together, these seams often show visible signs of stress. It becomes the responsibility of the Christian leader to cross all these lines from time to time in order to minister effectively. But crossing these lines requires sensitive handling with due care. In this chapter, Paul addresses precisely these issues and offers pragmatic approaches. Surprisingly, most of what he said here has immense applicability to our present-day situations also.

About Chapter 5

This chapter is loosely connected with the preceding chapter. Timothy, the minister, is still in view, but the topic changes here to ministry in a more general sense. It becomes clear that the minister must carry out the task of ministry at every level in the church. Timothy is cautioned against the harsh rebuke that may be termed "tongue-lashing", often indulged in any organisation where lines of authority are in place. This method of correction relies on fear and authority, and is often applied when feelings of anger and insecurity are running high. Exhortation, as suggested by Paul in this and other writings, is, on the other hand, a far more effective method of ministry. It includes correcting, cautioning, encouraging and comforting. This kind of ministry values the relationship between believers far above any need to assert or prove lines of authority. It seeks to promote unity at (almost) all costs. A caring style of ministry is required to cross, with sensitivity, the social lines indicated in these verses. Paul also indicates that, as models, Christian leaders, far from being above the social norms in existence, were all the more bound by them.

First, in the course of ministry to older men — even if it be correction, as the situation in Ephesus must have warranted — Paul urges the ministers to treat older people with the respect generally due to fathers (verse 1). Exhortation will therefore be gentle and respectful.

Ministry to younger men — or, in Timothy's case, to peers — must similarly not lean on authority, but stress the common bond in Christ.

Paul stresses equally that the norms governing communication and interaction across gender lines must be observed. Ministry here calls for sensitivity and caution. Older women are to be treated with the respect due a mother (verse 2). In ministering to younger women, the male leader has the added need to make every effort to avoid giving the impression of unseemly behaviour: Paul says to treat younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

Instructions Concerning Widows

A recently widowed woman may find it difficult to relate to others around her, and her immediate relatives and friends may also find it difficult to relate to her. Her grown children have their own lives to get on with. Gradually, she eases towards the periphery of the church.

One may argue that this is not always the case, and it is certainly not a problem limited to the church. But when it happens in the church, the heads of even unbelievers shake in amazement and scorn. Some then wonder: where is Christian compassion? Where is Christian love for one another?

From the time of Israel's inception, God has been known as the defender of widows. "Justice" among God's people was measured in part by the treatment of widows (Isaiah 1:17). God's compassion for the widow became the covenant community's responsibility, which the early church naturally took up (Acts 6:1).

The present passage is the Bible's most extensive treatment of the subject. Through instructions to Timothy, Paul addresses the issue of community support for widows. At the same time, the widow is encouraged to make positive contributions to the church's ministry.

The passage reflects a fairly advanced system of care — preparation of a "roster" of widows eligible for support (verse 9). But this system was being abused; families of widows were not shouldering their responsibility, thus placing financial and time strain on the church. Then certain younger widows, who may have managed to get on the list, were threatening the church's reputation by involvement with false teaching and scandalous behaviour. Paul addresses three related topics here:

- identification of the honourable widow;
- family responsibility for widows; and
- young widows.

The opening instruction (verse 3) controls the thought of the whole passage. The church must properly recognise its needy widows (literally, "real widows"). But good stewardship of the church's limited resources, and protection of its reputation, required the leadership to

decide who the "real" widows in the church were, and whether alternative means of support were available to them.

The Older Widows

If a widow was to qualify for care from the church, her practical circumstances and Christian witness were to be examined. On practical grounds she must be all alone (verse 5), having no family and consequently no one to take up the support earlier provided by a husband. Furthermore, she must be at least sixty years of age (verse 9). This age was the culturally recognised age of retirement. But more importantly, at this age the possibility of remarriage would be slim. Presumably, at this age the temptations faced by the younger widow (verses 11 to 15) would have ceased to be a serious concern. Paul also emphasises that to qualify for support the widow had to lead a life that testified to a genuine relationship with God. Hope and prayer, therefore, characterise the godly widow's personal relationship with God, the vertical dimension of her true faith.

The Qualifications for Support from the Church

The mention of the widow who lives for pleasure in verse 6, an allusion to the younger widows of verses 11 to 15, provides a graphic contrast. This description calls to mind the fantasy of "living life to its fullest" that the media constantly parade before us. "Life" is defined as a wild (and always fashionable) ride from one new experience to the next. But Paul calls this "living death", for the ride takes one away from the true source of meaningful and eternal life; this "life" is only a crude imitation, a mask on the face of death.

It is interesting to note that the guidelines given in this chapter are very similar in tone, content and purpose to those that appear in chapter 3, verses 2 to 7, in reference to the overseer; that godly life begins within the home and moves outward (verses 9 to 10). Therefore, Paul argues that for the one who is or has been married, the results of faith must first be evident in the marriage relationship. The Greek phrase in verse 9, literally "one-man woman", is the counterpart to the "one-woman man" which describes the overseer and deacon (chapter 3, verses 2 and 12; Titus 1:6).

Next (verse 10), since typically the widow's sphere of activity would have been the home, Paul inquires about her skills as a parent. Raising children diligently was one of the marks of the ideal woman in the Graeco-Roman and Jewish world. Yet in that day, as sadly in ours, child neglect and even abuse were common. The proof of the life-changing power of the Gospel in the home was to be seen in exemplary marriages and responsible child care. Beyond meeting basic physical and emotional needs, Christian parenting means also training children in

the faith (Ephesians 6:4).

A third item related to the home is the practice of hospitality, a highly regarded practice in the ancient world. Hospitality's warmth and sharing made it essential to the Christian mission and to church unity. Given the notorious condition of inns in that day, it is easy to see how strategic an open home might have been for the spread of the gospel as well. Such sharing has proved effective over and over again in modern times.

The list mentions two final specific activities that the widow is to be known for: "foot washing" among the saints, and providing "help" to those in trouble. "Foot washing" on the literal level was a service to visitors, an act of kindness that was central to hospitality. But Paul's meaning goes beyond the literal level. Figuratively, the term includes the sense of performing all manner of humble tasks for the benefit of others. The language used here makes certain contact with the pattern of life that our Lord laid down for his disciples.

Among Paul's readers were believers who were children or grandchildren of a widow. For them, making provision for the widow was an essential expression of genuine faith. What is actually at stake here is obedience to the fifth commandment: "Honour your father and your mother". Not only is care for the widowed mother or grandmother a logical recompense for her faithful service to children and grandchildren, but in the obedience to God's will that it reflects, this care is pleasing to God.

The Young Widow

To the modern ear, Paul comes off sounding very unfair here. Certainly it is not true that "as a rule" young widows would yield to sensual desires. Paul is generalising here. But he does so because of a very serious pattern of behaviour that had developed among some young widows, and also because he wants to avoid damage to the church's reputation.

He talks of sensual desires that overcome their dedication to Christ, and result in a desire to marry. Younger widows would be more subject to physical desires. Similar advice, directed to men and women, appears in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9. The fact of the matter is that physical desires are a current factor for younger people, and the strength of these desires often makes (re)marriage a wise course.

The desire to remarry is connected with isolation from Christ — not because remarriage is prohibited, but probably either because it was considered a hasty alternative to genuine repentance for immoral behaviour, or because they were seeking to marry unbelievers.

Paul goes on in verse 12 to say that in this case remarriage leads to

judgment, because they have broken their first pledge, that is, their faith. Given the Pauline background on teaching regarding remarriage, and the positive teaching about it in verse 14, it is more likely that unsanctioned remarriage to unbelievers, or precipitate remarriage in general, is what is being discussed here.

A second reason not to include young widows on the list may seem like another unfair generalisation: the tendency to become idle, to flit from house to house and, worse yet, to become gossip mongers and busybodies, saying things that are inappropriate (verse 13). It may mean that young widows, their financial burden lifted but lacking the spiritual maturity to apply themselves to prayer and other tasks of ministry, became lazy and even counterproductive.

What Then for Young Widows

What Paul has just laid down as reasons for excluding young widows from church support now leads to the logical conclusion. He does not leave them without hope or protection from the church. He asserts that such young widows should marry. A comparison with the approved credentials of the older widow (verses 9 to 10) shows that he calls young widows to pursue that same domestic lifestyle. The three phrases — to marry, to bring up children properly, to manage their homes well — describe the responsible and socially normative role of the homemaker.

The wanton behaviour of verse 11 and the foolish talk of verse 13 occur where the church meets the world, which makes the outside critic a concern. It is doubly of concern if this disrespectful behaviour is seen as financially subsidised by the church.

Application

This passage, which addresses a very specific situation, springs from a truth about God that compels us to ask some very penetrating questions regarding the focus of our compassion today: God is committed to helping those who cannot help themselves. As already pointed out, the Old Testament announces clearly God's special concern for widows, alongside those who are often named the fatherless or orphans. The direction of Jesus' ministry developed the theme of God's compassion with even greater clarity to encompass the poor, the sick, the outcasts of society. It was to these that Jesus reached out. The need for the church to minister to widows, and the accompanying concern for the church's testimony in the world evident in chapter 5, verses 1 to 16, are an application of God's care for those unable to care for themselves.

This extension of support to other categories is of great concern to the church today. What about our poor — the homeless, the jobless? What about our single mothers, the elderly, the convicts and ex-convicts, the

divorced? What about the drug addicts? While the questions come easier than the answers, I think we will all agree that the church is to be God's channel of compassion as he seeks to include the excluded. Paul's treatment suggests that there is far more involved than simply handing out money.

Instructions Concerning Elders

Here Paul is addressing matters related to the leaders, as opposed to older men, whom we looked at in the beginning. Leaders can make or break a church. What makes leadership so solemn a responsibility? One part of the answer is implicit in this passage: the importance of the church community's trust in its leadership. A member's mistakes may affect only the member, but a leader's mistakes affect the whole church. But if a church is to continue to exist and to carry out its God-given task, it must support and trust its leaders.

The church that Paul addresses had been torn apart by false teachers, and much of this letter is aimed at putting the pieces back together. The faithful elders needed to be distinguished from the unfaithful. The unfaithful needed to be disciplined, but in fairness. And some of the leadership had to be replaced. This task must have been first on Timothy's list of things to do, for the unity and mission of the church depended upon it.

Proper Regard for Faithful Elders

Paul's esteem for those called to leadership is evident from the way he begins his instructions with those who had remained faithful. The church was to honour them doubly. On the one hand, believers were to give them all the honour and respect due them as leaders appointed by God. In practice this means submitting to their authority and following their leadership. Not only had God chosen them, but they had proved themselves to be devoted to the work. On the other hand, as verse 18 indicates, those called elders were to be supported by the church for their service — financially, or perhaps "materially", since we do not know exactly what form this support took.

What characterises the faithful elder? First, this leader must have an established record of skilful management. This management (chapter 3, verses 4 to 5) included the whole range of pastoral activities, from preaching and teaching to administration and the overseeing of the church's entire ministry and life. In the house churches in Ephesus, management also meant upholding the Word of God in the face of false teaching, turning back the verbal attacks of the false teachers, and making every effort to hold the people together. The full-time minister's right to remuneration was not an innovation but a well-established tradition in the early church.

Discipline of Elders

When a leader errs, the rest of the leadership must discipline the offender. Given the situation that existed in Ephesus, it is easy to imagine that tempers would have run high. A "purge" mentality may have set in among those who had resisted the false teachers, leading them to make every effort to root out any elders even remotely associated with the opposition.

In order to protect a person from false accusation, the law of Moses stipulated that the testimony of two or three witnesses was necessary to establish the matter (Deuteronomy 19:15). This became part of the early church's procedure of discipline (Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1). Paul's readers are probably already embroiled in controversy surrounding accused elders, and when he invokes the well-known regulation, it is to protect the accused and instil some order into the process. It falls to the church leadership to ensure that, as far as possible, injustice is avoided.

Discipline must be meted out to those elders whose sin is properly confirmed. But what constitutes sin? First, Paul uses the present tense, which implies that some elders are presently sinning, perhaps refusing to acknowledge their sin and repent.

Of course, these rules would apply in any case in which an elder wilfully transgressed the revealed will of God in matters of faith and practice. But the standard for determining sin must be Scripture.

Finally, the matter must be judged and (if warranted) discipline must be administered with absolute impartiality. This is meant to ensure both a just evaluation and the consistent application of discipline in actual cases of sin.

The gravity of the situation addressed here certainly calls for immediate action. But Timothy is not to allow the pressures of the moment to force him to conclude that expediency alone is the objective. The instructions envision a process designed to aid the church's leadership in making responsible decisions about discipline.

Careful Selection of Elders

The defection of some elders in the church certainly underlined the need for care in selecting replacements. The apostle urges thoroughness so that the risks might be minimised. Prior to the laying on of hands — the ceremony in which the elders signalled before the congregation God's choice of a new elder — the leadership of the church must thoroughly examine the candidate. To judge from the bishop/elder code in chapter 3, which Paul gave for this purpose, evidence of Christian lifestyle, not just correct doctrine, was critical.

The issue in verse 22 is sin, or tendencies that lead to sin, and a sloppy assessment will implicate the examiner or examining committee in the leader's sin. Consequently, if the well-being of the church is not enough to ensure careful attention to the process of selecting an elder, the thought of personally sharing in the sin of another is added. This concept of sharing in the sin of another, whether by tacit approval or by apathetic failure to take a stand, rests on an important theological premise.

About Drinking Wine

At my first reading, verse 23 — "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" — gave me the impression that this was fatherly advice from Paul to Timothy. I thought a better alternative could have been isabgol (a traditional digestive remedy) or its equivalent to keep the stomach in order. That could have been one reason. Paul obviously did not want a sick pastor in the midst of all the trouble in Ephesus. But more importantly, it could be Paul's concern for Timothy, who was right in the midst of false teaching that included asceticism, such as abstinence from certain foods (chapter 4, verse 3). Whatever benefits abstinence might have for the believer, the heretics had taken it to a sinful extreme. Not only is Timothy to distance himself from these false views, but he is, for the sake of his health, to demonstrate Christian freedom and drink wine instead of exclusively water (chapter 5, verse 23).

Conclusion

Paul's conclusion to this passage on the selection of elders has a proverbial ring, appealing to common sense. This popular wisdom emphasises two advantages of a thorough examination of leader candidates. First, some who are unfit to lead the church disqualify themselves from the start with obvious sins. But the disqualifying sins of others, who are equally unfit, come to light only after extensive scrutiny (verse 24) — thus Paul's instructions.

Second, the marks of genuine faith that point towards eligibility may be immediately evident in some people. But in the case of other qualified people, perhaps of quieter temperament, careful searching will be needed to recognise their potential (verse 25) — yet another reason for heeding Paul's advice.

Amen.

