

Subject: *Caring for Widows in the Church, Part 2*

Scripture: *1 Timothy 5:9-16*

The local church has a responsibility to care for needy widows. As we deal with this portion of Scripture, we need to ask the questions: What does this Scripture mean? And how does it apply to us today? We must first deal with the correct interpretation and then make a proper application.

When Paul wrote this letter to Timothy there was no Social Security, there were no retirement plans, no nursing homes or assisted living facilities, so obviously the church had a huge role in caring for widows. I want to remind you that the term “widow” does not refer only to a woman whose husband died, but it has a broader meaning. The Greek word includes that meaning, but is not limited to it. It was used of a woman who has no husband and is left alone. She may be alone because her husband died, divorced her, deserted her, or was imprisoned. The duty of caring for widows extends to all women who are alone and have no family to care for them and who cannot care for themselves.

It is important to see the two main teachings from this passage (beginning in 5:1). The first is that the local church must meet the needs of those who are truly needy, and the second is that real Christianity works not only in the church, but also in the family. If our Christian faith doesn't work at home, it doesn't work at all. We must care for our own families and not expect the church to care for every needy person.

In verses 1-8, Paul addresses three things:

- The duty of caring for widows
- The description of widows to be cared for (they have no family members to care for them; they are genuine Christians; and they are godly women of prayer and devotion)
- The disgrace of not caring for widows

Now in verses 9-16, Paul deals with other matters related to the care of widows.

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR CHURCH CAREGIVERS

In verse 9, Paul refers to “the number.” This was a specific list or designated group within the church. Who is Paul referring to? There are basically two interpretations: the first is that Paul is talking about the widows who are to be cared for, and these are the qualifications to be on that care list. The other interpretation is that Paul is talking about a group of widows who care for other widows on behalf of the church. The second interpretation seems to be the right one. Paul has already stated the qualifications for widows who are to be cared for by the church (“widows indeed” in vs. 3, 5, and vs. 16). The only qualification is that they have no family members to care for them and they are not able to care for themselves. There was a group of widows who cared for other needy widows and that Paul referred to in verses 9-10. This will become even clearer when we get to verses 11-15 where Paul talks about the reasons why younger widows are not to be in this group. What are the requirements for those who care for other widows? There are eight requirements in all:

- 1) The age requirement – She must be at least 60 or older. In New Testament times 60 was considered retirement age.

- 2) The faithful wife requirement – She must have been faithfully committed to her husband. This is the similar description used of a pastor (3:2) and deacon (3:12), “the husband of one wife,” which means a one-woman man. Here it means a one-man woman. Faithfulness in marriage may not be important to the world, but it is important to God and the church.
- 3) The good works requirement – She doesn’t do things for show, but her good works are not hidden. **Matthew 5:16** *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*
- 4) The good mother requirement – “Brought up children” means to nourish them. She raises her children to know and serve the Lord. This is her greatest privilege and duty. **Titus 2:3-5** ³ *The aged women likewise, that they be in behavior as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things;* ⁴ *That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children,* ⁵ *To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.*
- 5) The hospitality requirement – Providing lodging for strangers was an important ministry in that day since there were no motels or hotels, and the inns were usually dirty and dangerous. At the close of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he commends Phoebe as a “helper of many, and of myself also” (Rom. 16:2).
- 6) The humility requirement – Washing feet was the duty of household slaves. Roads were dusty and guests needed to have their feet washed. This was a common custom. This speaks of a humble, servant heart.
- 7) The compassionate service requirement – She devotes her life to helping people who are afflicted (literally, under pressure). It may be physical, mental, emotional, or financial pressure. She looks for a way to help.
- 8) The godly life requirement – This means she is deeply devoted to doing good things. She is like Dorcas, **Acts 9:36-41** ³⁶ *Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and alms deeds which she did.* ³⁷ *And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in an upper chamber.* ³⁸ *And forasmuch as Lydda was nigh to Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent unto him two men, desiring him that he would not delay to come to them.* ³⁹ *Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and showing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them.* ⁴⁰ *But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.* ⁴¹ *And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive.*

All these requirements prove how seriously the church must regard its assignment to care for truly needy widows. In verses 11-15, Paul describes the widows who are not allowed to serve in the widow’s ministry. They are younger widows, that is, under sixty years old.

“Refuse” is a strong word, used in 4:7, to speak of rejecting false teachers. Paul gives three reasons why younger widows must not be in the group:

- Vs. 11-12, younger widows may not be single minded in their devotion
Paul’s concern is that a young widow may make a pledge to service that she cannot keep. The “first faith” (vs. 12) refers to her vow to serve the Lord in the ministry to widows. She may feel the desire to be married again and she would have to break her promise to serve in this capacity.
- Vs. 13, younger widows may be immature and potentially disruptive (vs. 13)
She may cause trouble because her heart is not in the ministry. Visits once carried out for ministry might become opportunities for idleness, or even worse, being a gossip or a busybody. Instead of meals on wheels or faith in action, she is trouble in motion.
- Vs. 14-15, younger widows have a higher calling in the home (vs. 14-15)
Paul states, “I will,” which carries the force of a command rather than a wish. God’s design for a younger widow is most likely to remarry and possibly raise children. Everything must be done so that the enemy (any enemy of God’s people and God’s Word) has no occasion (launching point of an attack) to bring reproach on the cause of Christ. Something precious is at stake here.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FAMILY CAREGIVERS

Paul has already mentioned this in verses 4 and 8. He concludes his teaching with another reminder in verse 16. Even pagan, unchristian people care for their own needy widows (vs. 8). How can a Christian do any less? Our belief in the Lord should lead to our relief for the needy widow.

Caring for needy widows is a duty and a privilege. Christian people are known for loving what God loves and hating what God hates. We hate sin and evil people who take advantage of the needy. We share God’s sense of justice and we stand for what’s right and against what’s wrong. On the other hand, we share God’s sense of mercy and compassion as we care for people in need. Christ gives us the privilege and responsibility to be His hands, His feet, and His heart to needy people both inside and outside the church. We are the body of Christ and we need to act like it. That is the message of First Timothy 5.