

Family Business Part 3: *Widows – A Blessing (not burden) to the Church* 1 Timothy 5:9-16

Introduction: Every once in a while we will pose a type of question to our staff: *if money were no object, what we do next as a church? Where are we falling short or what investment in people, program, or property would help become more effective in our mission?* This kind of discussion allows us to think proactively, to prioritize what is most important, evaluate our current situations, and plan for future necessities. When we get in a reactive mode of operation, things catch us by surprise and we miss opportunities that we had not planned for.

Life as a follower of Christ in His church is similar. We should be proactive, thoughtful, and engaged in planning to be most effective. When our eyes are opened to our sin and we are given faith to believe, asking for forgiveness and repenting of our sin, everything changes. Christ is all. He is supreme and satisfying. Serving Him is NOT just on the list of things to obey, it is the list. He is our main priority, delight, passion, and goal. We begin to ask questions like, *"What pleases Him the most", or "How do I make much of Him?"*. We evaluate not on the basis of **minimal requirements** but on what secures full devotion to him. This was the basis of Paul's interaction with the Corinthian church when he spoke of marriage, singleness, divorce, and widows: ***"I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure you undivided devotion to Christ."*** (1 Cor. 7:35)

Based on that, the question I'd pose to all of us this morning: *If money were no object (you would not have to work a job for maintaining a budget) and thus time were no object, what would you engage yourself in? What ministry would you involve yourself in? What people would you pursue? How would your life and time reflect an **undivided devotion to Christ?***

The discussion and answer to these questions are revealing. Life in Christ is intended to move with purpose, knowing that our life and time are not our own. Stages of life such as **retirement, empty nesting, and even losing a spouse** should not cause us to change the direction of our life, even though it will change the particulars. This is the point to be made in this section on **widows**. You'll remember last week that we talked about a family's responsibility to take care of a woman who is left without a husband, through abandonment, divorce, or death, and when the family cannot or will not, the church will step in with financial and spiritual care. In this follow up section, Timothy is directed to remind and teach the widows of the church ***how they should function within the church, to be a blessing, and to emulate the maturity that should be present.*** It was clear that the challenges in Ephesus were the fact that some families had not taken care of the responsibility in their home, and that some of the widows in the church were NOT functioning with self-control or godly character, and they needed to be corrected. What we are dealing with in this section is **NOT** about qualifications about supporting a widow financially, but rather about a **widows service IN the church**. Apparently there was a list that widows would be put on, not elders or deacons but a special category of service that would be performed by those **older widows** who would not remarry but would give themselves wholly to the care, support, and service of the church. This is much like **Anna, a prophetess** in Luke 2:36-37, who after her husband died after 7 years of marriage, dedicated herself to worship and prayer in the Temple.

So what we find here is the **qualification** to be added to this list, which would be a pledge to serve. The first group **SHOULD** be enrolled, the second **SHOULD NOT BE**. In looking at this, we should also ask the question: *what type of people should we be, knowing that we do not know the future of our status.*

OLDER WIDOWS: *The High Call & Commitment of Service* (5:9-10)

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not **less than sixty years of age**, having been the **wife of one husband**,¹⁰ and having a **reputation for good works**: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

Though the enrolling of a widow on a list of service was distinct to Ephesus, it does not mean that we cannot glean principles for how all women (and men for that matter) should live their lives in Christ. Again what we notice is the fact that not just anybody would be on this list, but those with proven character and faithfulness. That should be the aim of all of us. Here, Paul gives Timothy **3 qualifications for widows to be put on the list of influential service in the church**, which by nature would have made these women leaders among women.

1. **Maturity** – It is both instructive and fascinating that Paul set an age limit for widows. Part of this is the culture at the time saw ages as necessary marks of maturity, with 40 and 60 being significant. At the age of 60, some would be ready to retire and have a life of contemplation, and also seen as wise with something to offer. It is also clear that apparently in the culture a woman would be far less likely to remarry at this point. Does this mean a widow in OUR culture should not remarry? By no means. We have seen marriage at all ages as a blessing, regardless if one is beyond child-bearing (v. 14). But it IS clear that Paul wanted mature women to be on this list, and a type of maturity that could only be achieved by years of faithful living.
 2. **Fidelity** – “having been the wife of one husband” – this is the flip of a qualification of an elder, who was the husband of one wife. This does not mean a woman could not have been married more than one time, but that while she was married she was chaste, committed to him. Setting an example of sexual morality is imperative to any leader in the church, and one who could exercise self-control was one who could be a model (1 Cor. 7:9). It seems clear that there were some ladies in the church that did NOT have control in this area of life (2 Tim. 3:6), so leading by example was that much more important. This is true today, and just as important. We need older women in the church who will demonstrate a faithfulness to Christ that produces faithfulness in marriage.
 3. **Quality** – The widow on the list should be a model, or have a **reputation** of good works. Two things stand out before getting into the **5 categories of good works she was involved in**: 1) Our good works should be seen. Our character is often forged behind the scenes, as we discipline ourselves for godliness, doing the hard work no one sees. But that same character should burst forth in good works, tangibly showing itself in love, service, and care of others 2) **Reputation matters!** There are certainly parts of our reputation that are outside of our control (a person with a gripe or grudge spreading gossip or slander, for instance), but how we are perceived matters to a leader. We do not live and act so that people would see us a certain way, but we are definitely aware that people see us and perceive us a certain way, and that either shuts down or opens up opportunities. We are not **captive to our reputation**, but we know that leaders reputations are forged by public interaction.
- **Brought up children** – Again, here is a general principle of the joy and responsibilities of women to not only give birth to children but to *bring them up in the fear and nurture of the Lord*. This

does not mean that a barren woman could not serve in this capacity, but as we have seen before, the **home is the proving ground for the church**. *A woman who has raised children faithfully understands discipleship, how to teach, model, and discipline.*

- **Hospitality to strangers** – In the time of writing, Ephesus would have been like much of the first century, where strangers passing through would need places to stay, particularly believers from other areas. A widow would view her dwelling as a place of entertain, care for, and host. It has been said that a home is a castle, but sometimes we can view that through the lens of trying to keep things pristine and untouchable. Hospitality is sharing the thing we hold dear, which is our house or home. A widow who would be a leader would see her **home as a place of ministry**, where people would know they were loved. I was talking with my friend Lavar this week and he told of how Sunday nights at his mom's house was a time friends could come and be, to talk, and especially to eat! People did not come over because the house was awesome or they had activities, but because the people opened up their lives to feed and care for those they sought to love.
- **Washes the disciples feet** – This could mean that she participates in a formal service of the gathering of the church, but more likely this means that she exercises humble service toward those that would enter her home. Foot washing was customary for those that would enter a home and a way of showing honor. Since she would wash the feet of disciples, she is demonstrating **humble service**, as Peter said "clothing herself" with humility (literally putting on the apron of a slave - 1 Peter 5:5). **Pride is the enemy of God, leadership, and relationships**. Though one can fake external acts with no real inner change, a widow would have demonstrated true humility by willingly and lovingly embracing these menial tasks.
- **Assisted those in distress** – She would visit and care for those under pressure or in distress. She would be known for caring those who experienced loss and grief, since she was well acquainted with such heartbreak. She would care for the orphan, visit the sick, and even those who were in prison. Assisting those in distress means that she would be on the lookout and on the ready to care for those who needed help and encouragement. Because those in distress would have been a **fluid state, her job was never done**. Remember this, when we have an attitude of caring for those in distress, there will never be a long lull in between active ministry.
- **Devoted to every good work** – Finally, she was **distinctive in her devotion**. Good works were not a cursory or secondary part of her life, they were the center set, the core of who she was. Not only was this to the whole of the church, but she was particularly a blessing to OTHER WIDOWS (v. 16), especially those in her own family.

What a distinctive blessing this would be to the church: a mature, pure, and sure servant who not only received blessing from the church, but returned it exponentially. This reminds us all of a few things: 1) Legacy and impact in the future starts NOW - we must set a pattern now to be effective in the future, 2) We are never done in ministry, never is there a time where we can 'retire' from serving others, and never a time where our efforts are not valuable. 3) Women and their engagement, of all stages and marital status, are imperative to the success and health of the church.

YOUNGER WIDOWS: *The Caution of Considering the Cost of Service (5:11-16)*

But refuse to enroll **younger widows**, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry¹² and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith.¹³ Besides that, they

learn to be **idlers**, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also **gossips** and **busybodies**, saying what they should not. ¹⁴ **So I would have younger widows** marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. ¹⁵ For some have already strayed after Satan. ¹⁶ If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.

Now, Timothy was to turn his attention to the "younger widows" (this should make anyone in their '40's or 50's feel really good!). The pledge to service had the feel of a **vow**, one that was voluntary but not easily broken. It was a formal commitment of a widow to the church, and to go back on it would be breaking a vow, which was breaking a promise before man and God (Ecc. 5:4), which put one at odds with both. So a younger widow would want to be wise, to continue a process of maturity, but not be flippant in formally being put on the list.

CALL (11 - 12, 14) - Paul's advice to younger widows: get married, have more kids, and become the managers and keepers of the home. Now obviously this is easier said than done as we have several women without husbands who would love to be married again. Verses 11-12 talk about **passions, drawing away from Christ, and abandoning the faith**, which could very well mean that there were some marrying **unbelievers** or were involved in **sexual immorality**, there is another point being made. Paul had said earlier to the Corinthian church: *"I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the **unmarried and the widows**, I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion."* (1 Cor. 7:7-9)

The issue was more about understanding the nature of a commitment to Christ and making promises one could not keep. Paul is clear that **singleness has advantage, marriage is good, but marriage creates anxiety and an earthbound mindset** (1 Cor. 7:32-35). The passion for younger widows is to marry, in going against a vow they would be going against Christ and abandoning their former faith, which in classical Greek *pistis* can mean "pledge".

CAUTION (13) – The problem with youthful widows is the plague on any youth: directionless and purposeless living leads to wandering and sin. Marriage brings responsibility and focus because one realizes they are not living for themselves but the care of another. For younger widows who were not committed to service and were not married would be tempted to become **idle, gossips, and busybodies**. None of these is a compliment or a desired outcome. The idea is that widows were being cared for but were involved in everyone else's business, involved in the spread of information they had no business having, and were involved in everything without helping anyone. This is the epitome of selfishness. These traits are the **opposite of one committed to supplications and prayers night and day** (5:5). No humility, only involving themselves in what THEY wanted, and a **burden rather than blessing**. Being both "idle" and a "busybody" is a hard trick to pull off, but purposeless living will get you there.

CONSEQUENCE (15) - Breaking vows and purposeless living would be detrimental to anyone, but here a widow in that mix would be in danger or 'straying after Satan'. They would choose a life of self-fulfillment and exchange the eternal promises of God for temporal satisfaction.

Key principles to keep in mind. 1) At every wedding I've ever performed we talk about vows to the Lord. Vows are freely entered into and God takes them seriously. If you're married today, when was the last time you reviewed your vows? When was the last time you've delighted in the commitment and promise you made to your spouse before man and God? 2) If you are in a position of being single or no

longer married, are you using your time to devote yourself to Christ and good works? Are you redeeming the time even though your desires may not be met right now?

When I first came to this church almost 17 years ago, there was a woman who stood out. She was the widow of a pastor/school teacher, and there was a clear sense that the "younger" women knew her, respected her, and were known by her. She was a classic prayer warrior, one that when she talked to and listened to you and offered prayer, you knew she would follow through and commit to it. One of the most indelible experiences I've had in life and ministry is attending Mary Barshaw's funeral. When the call went up to who had been impacted individually by the ministry of Mary in our church to stand up, the room palpably shifted by the number who stood up. She was humble. She was a servant. She made an impact late in her life, as a widow, through prayer, and made a lasting impression on so many. This is a widow indeed. The church needs more Mary Barshaw's.

Questions to Answer:

- If time and money were not an issue, what would you desire to do in ministry and the service of Christ?
- How are you maximizing your stage of life and status of marriage to their maximum fullness?
- How do we better secure undivided devotion to Christ? What needs to change for that to be a reality?
- Is there any purposeless activity in your life that leads to wandering and sin?

Ways to Pray:

- Pray for our families in the church that homes would be a place of care and learning to show godliness.
- Pray for those who are single and formerly married in our church, that they would know they are an integral part of this family, that God would be gracious for those waiting, and that they'd be active in growing, maturing, and serving.
- Pray for our community as we seek to **pray - plan - risk** to make Christ known, to show love to all, and to stay focused on our mission.
- Pray for the wisdom of Christian leaders and churches in navigating the potentially divisive days that we live in, that we would be beacons of Biblical truth, speaking in love, moved toward empathy, bathed in humility, enveloped with boldness, willing to evaluate, quick to repent, and stoked with the fire of hope.