

When the Church Must Support Widows

Each of us was born into this world because it was God's will for us to be born. God gave us to our mother and father. Then Job 14:5 says that God determined the length of our days. At the end of those days, we will die or be raptured. Ecclesiastes 3:1 gives us the same news. It says,

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven — A time to give birth and a time to die. Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NASB)

Most of the time one spouse dies and leaves the other spouse all alone. According to the United States' Administration for Community Living, in 2021 there were more than 2.6 million widowers and 8.8 million widows in the United States.¹ It is reported that 700,000 women become widows each year in the United States. Widows live only about fourteen years after they lose their husbands and are poorer than widowers.

Now these are statistics for widows in the USA. These facts help us to understand that the world often does not financially provide for widowhood as they should. The situation for widows are even worse in many countries around the world.

It was even more tragic in the Old and New Testament times. In the Old Testament times, a widow had to depend

upon her family for financial support, especially upon her oldest son to care for her. His birthright carried that responsibility. If a woman's relatives and her oldest son did not want to help her, she was in serious trouble. The Mosaic Law allowed widows to receive some minor financial support from the welfare tithe collected every three years (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12). She could go into the fields and glean from the crops (Deuteronomy 24:19-21). The widow, Ruth the Moabitess, went into Boaz's field and gleaned from his crops (Ruth 2:1-22). A widow could also participate in the religious feasts (Deuteronomy 12:17; 14: 22-27; 16:11, 14).²

Ralph Gower states that in the New Testament times,

A woman who survived her husband was in a very difficult position. She could not inherit from her

husband. She could remain in her husband's family if the next of kin would take her in marriage. More often the widow was without any financial support. . . . In the early church, money was

set aside to care for widows (Acts 6:1), because in the society of the day, prostitution was about the only way for women to obtain money to live.³



1. 2020 Profile Of Older Americans. The Administration for Community Living, May 2021. PDF.

2. Unger and Harrison. Widows. The New Unger's Bible Dictionary. Moody Publishers. 2005. p. 1364.

3. Ralph Gower. Bereavement. The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times. Moody Publishers. 2005. pp. 69-70.

God's Attitude Regarding Care for Widows.

We should not be surprised that God defended widows. Remember in Isaiah 1:17 God said this to Israel,

Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow.
Isaiah 1:17 (NASB)

In Isaiah 1:23, God reveals that the wicked do not care for widows,

Your rulers are rebels
And companions of thieves;
Everyone loves a bribe
And chases after rewards.
They do not defend the orphan,
Nor does the widow's plea come before them.
Isaiah 1:23 (NASB)

The message is that God, Himself, defends widows and the orphans. In the next four passages, God commands us to care for widows.

You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, 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 (ESV)

He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. Deuteronomy 10:18 (NASB)

You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge. Deuteronomy 24:17 (NASB)

The LORD watches over the sojourners;
He upholds the widow and the fatherless,
But the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
Psalm 146:9 (ESV)

Our Study — 1 Timothy 5:3-16. All of these verses reveal how much God cares for widows. The strongest passage about the care for widows in the New Testament is 1 Timothy 5:3-16. That is our study. This passage answers the question, when must the church support widows? In this passage, the Holy Spirit gives us five principles that help us answer this question.

Church Must Financially Support Real Widows (v. 3). The first principle is given to us in 1 Timothy 5:3.

Honor widows who are widows indeed. 1 Timothy 5:3 (NASB)

Here we are told that the church must financially support real widows. In order to understand this verse, I want to define three words. First, the Greek word for honor is *timao*. It can mean to "show respect" and "to give financial support." The later meaning is the correct understanding in this passage, as we will soon discover. Second, the Greek word for "widows" is *chera*. It refers to a woman whose husband is dead. The third word is "indeed." The Greek word for "indeed" can be translated as "truly" or "real." Now if we put all of these words together, we discover that the church is to provide financial support for women whose husbands are dead - if they really need financial support. This is the first principle. The church must financially support real widows.

Church Must Determine Who is a Real Widow (v. 4-8). But must the church support every widow who claims to have a financial need? The answer is found in the second principle which is given to us in verses 4-8. Paul says in verse 4,

But if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for

this is acceptable in the sight of God. 1 Timothy 5:4 (NASB)

It is not enough that a widow claims she needs help. My wife and I knew a widow who lied to the government about her financial needs. She received medical support because she lied. She said that she had very little money, but the truth was she had hidden some of her assets. She willingly lied to save her own money.

That is, if a widow has children or grandchildren, they must provide some financial support. When we are told “they” Paul is referring to all of the relatives. Paul says they must “make some return.”

The Greek word is *apodidomi*. It means “to pay back,” or “to repay.” That is, children are to repay their parents for having raised them and not just take from them. This pleases the Lord.

In Matthew 15:2-6 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees who did not want to financially help their parents. We will start with verse 2. The Pharisees asked Jesus this question,

“Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,’ and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would

help you has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition.” Matthew 15:2-6 (NASB)

There are two important insights to learn from this passage. First, the phrase “to honor your father and mother” includes financial support. The Greek word honor is *timao*. In 1 Timothy 5:17-18, this word includes financial support. The second insight is that Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for not wanting to help their parents. This means that children must honor their parents by showing kindness and providing financial

help when it is needed.

Verses 5-7 are a brief explanation about the meaning of a “widow indeed.” Paul gives us a definition of a “widow indeed.” He says,

Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been



Women Gleaning

left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. 1 Timothy 5:5-7 (NASB)

First, she must be single. The Greek word translated as “alone” means that she is in a permanent state of being “single.” Second, she must be a believer. She is trusting God the Father to meet her needs. She has been making requests of God for her needs and constantly praying to God for others and worshiping Him. Third, she must be not indulging herself in luxuries and soft comfort while ignoring what is right

and wrong. That is, she must be not given to high living. Why should the church support a widow who pursues a high standard of living? Then Paul commands Timothy to teach these things.

Verse 8 adds,

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. 1 Timothy 5:8 (NASB)

The Greek word for “provide for” means “to foresee” or “to plan ahead.” That is, a believing child or believing grandchild who do not plan ahead to care for their widows have denied the faith and are worse than an unbeliever. This could include providing for any widow among your relatives, especially your widowed mother-in-law and your own widowed mother.

So, the second principle is that the church must determine if she is a godly widow who is in real financial need.

Church Must Determine if Widows Qualify for Support (v. 9-10). The third principle is that the church must determine if widows qualify for financial support. Verses 9-10 give us some additional qualifications that must be satisfied before financial support is given.

A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work. 1 Timothy 5:9-10 (NASB)

First, Paul says that widows the church supports must be at least sixty years old. This is lower than the age required by Social Security in the United States. That is, the church is obligated to support widows who are sixty years or older if they are in financial need.

Second, she must have been a one-man-woman. That is the literal Greek. It is like an adjective. That means she must have been completely devoted to her husband. In verses 11-15 Paul

commands younger women to remarry. This helps us understand that it is not a sin to remarry.

Third, she must be known for doing good works. This reveals she was not a self-centered woman. The church should only support widows who have been concerned for and have cared for others in the church. Fourth, she must have raised children. This assumes she was able to have children. Fifth, she must have shown a love for strangers. That includes opening her home for hospitality. Sixth, she must have washed the saints’ feet. This refers to the custom of washing the dirty feet of guests. This reveals that she humbly served others. Seventh, she helped those who needed help. The eighth and last qualification is that she was completely devoted to good works.

So, the third principle is that the church must determine if widows who need financial support also meet the spiritual qualifications.

Church Must Encourage Younger Widows to Remarry (v. 11-15). The fourth principle is that the church must encourage younger widows to remarry. Verses 11-12 refer to widows who are still able to have children. These verses say,

But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. 1 Timothy 5:11-12 (NASB)

Paul says refuse younger widows. The Greek word for “refuse” has the sense of “to avoid.” That is, do not let this happen. Do not support younger widows. Why? It appears that when a widow was supported by the church she had to make a commitment to serve the church in some way. This helps us understand Paul’s concern. He was concerned these young widows would make a pledge to serve the body of Christ to gain financial support, and then break their commitment or pledge because they wanted to marry again. Their “yes” would not be “yes.” They would abandon their pledge due to overpowering sexual passions.

Paul also had another concern with younger widows. He

added,

At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. 1 Timothy 5:13-15 (NASB)

Paul was also concerned that young widows would become idle “as they go from house to house.” This helps us understand the ministry that widows would provide to the church in exchange for financial support. It appears they would function as a deaconess, ministering to other women. Paul was concerned the younger women would turn these visits more into social times than ministry. They might gossip and be busybodies. Notice Paul says they might begin to talk about things they should not be talking about. This happens too often. But why is this an issue for younger women? It appears that younger women have a lot of energy but may lack the maturity that comes with time.

Having given his reasons for not adding them to the list for financial support, Paul now tells younger widows what they are to do. They are to get married, have children, and keep house. Notice that Paul did not tell them to get a job. He says keep house.

Titus 2:3-5 is an important passage. That may help us understand what the widows the church supported were to do. They were to encourage younger women to,

. . . love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. Titus 2:4-5 (NASB)

Both passages reveal that younger women do not honor God when they refuse to follow these principles. Titus 2:4-5 tells us how they bring dishonor to the Word of God. 1 Timothy tells us that Satan brings the dishonor or reproach.

So, the fourth principle is that the church must encourage younger widows to remarry.

Church Must Encourage Children to Support Their Widows (v. 16). The fifth principle is that the church must encourage children to support their widowed mothers and grandmothers. Verse 16 says,

If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed. 1 Timothy 5:16 (NASB)

Now Paul repeats the message that he gave in verses 4 and 8. He is emphasizing that believing, female children are to help support the widows in their own family. Why? So that the church does not need to help the widow.

Conclusion. The Holy Spirit has given us five principles that help us know when the church must support believing widows. First, the church must financially support “real” widows. Second, the church must determine who is a “real” widow. Third, the church must determine if widows qualify for financial support. Fourth, the church must encourage younger widows to remarry. Fifth, the church must encourage children to support the widows in their own family. The point is that family members must obey God and give honor to their own widows. The church must help, only when certain conditions exist.

James 1:27 tells us that,

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. James 1:27 (NASB)

That is exactly what the early church did. Acts 6:1 reveals that the early church fed their widows. They were a great example to us and to every church. We must remember that orphans and widows have a special place in God’s heart. 1 Timothy 5:4 tells us that it is pleasing in the sight of God for us to help widows who are widows indeed.