

Caring for the Lord's Family

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[0 : 01] Amen. Well, let's turn together to the first letter of Paul to Timothy. And you'll find this in our big hardback Bibles on page 992, 992. This is the last in our little series of sermons for these Wednesday lunchtimes on 1 Timothy. I'm not quite sure what's on the agenda for next week, but God willing, we shall be here next week as well. So 1 Timothy chapter 5, and I'll read the whole chapter. Do not rebuke an older man, but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters in all purity. Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than 60 years of age, having been the wife of one husband 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. But refuse to enroll younger widows. For when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. 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. So I would have the younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. For some have already strayed after Satan. 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 really widows. Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the scripture says, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain, and the laborer deserves his wages. Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.

Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure. No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.

The sins of some men are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

[3 : 54] Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers.

Rather, they must serve all the better, since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

Well, now, if the Apostle Paul happened to be sitting here today in the front row, and if I were to ask him to step up onto the stage and submit himself to being asked a few questions about 1 Timothy, I think what I would ask him would be this.

Tell us, dear Apostle, what would you say are the main concerns that you were grappling with in your first letter to Timothy? And I think Paul would probably reply along these lines.

There are two main things that I was wanting to get across to Timothy and to have him understand clearly. First, something about the truth. That the truth of the gospel, the truth of the word of God, has to be taught clearly and guarded carefully against being twisted and changed.

[5 : 10] So that's the first thing. But secondly, I wanted to get across to Timothy that the Lord's family needs to be properly cared for. Now, it's the second concern, the care needed by the Lord's family, which Paul is particularly addressing here in chapter 5.

Now, we know from our experience of church belonging to a particular congregation that, and Paul would know this, of course, from 30 years of Christian leadership and experience, we know that the local church is a body, genuinely a body of people, who share their identity because they belong to Christ.

And rightly, they share not only their identity as Christians, but they share a good deal of their actual life together. They come to know one another, often quite deeply.

They come to understand each other's joys and sorrows, each other's opportunities and frustrations, each other's strengths and frailties. The Lord's people come truly to love one another in the churches.

Of course we do. Jesus himself said, By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for each other. So I think we might say this, thinking of Paul's reply about the truth and about caring for the family, we might say this, the church is in one aspect a school, and in another aspect, it's a family.

[6 : 37] So it's a school where we learn the truth of the Bible and the gospel, and where we learn to distinguish the truth from falsehood. But equally, it's a family whose members differ enormously from each other in all sorts of ways, but we learn to love each other, to support each other, and to care for one another.

So the responsibility of Timothy and the elders of the churches, both back in the first century and today, is to teach the church the truth, but also to look after a varied family.

And it's the family aspect of the work that Paul is dealing with in his fifth chapter of this letter. You'll see that he uses family language in the first two verses there, where he tells Timothy to regard the older men as fathers, the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters.

So the implication is, we're family. The ties that bind us together are those of the closest family relationships. And then Paul writes of three categories of people in the family, the Lord's family.

First of all, the widows. Secondly, the elders of the church. And thirdly, church members who were slaves. And of course, slavery was a very widespread institution in the first century.

[7 : 57] So we'll look at these three sections and these three categories of people. First of all, the widows. Now, Paul's theme, Paul's instruction about the widows is basically this.

Look after them, but be discerning. Paul is encouraging the church to look after Christian widows who are really destitute. But he's also saying, don't be naive, because systems of support can easily be abused.

We get the flavor of what he's saying in both the opening and closing verses of the section. So in verse three, he writes, honor widows who are truly widows.

And then in verse 16, he writes that the church should care for those who are really widows. And what he means by truly widows and really widows is widows who have no family or close relatives to support them.

Now, we need to bear in mind that in first century society in the Roman Empire, things were not quite the same as in our society in Britain today. We are used to government-supported welfare and benefit systems, which, of course, were not known in the ancient world.

[9 : 10] And while our modern benefit systems are open to abuse and are sometimes abused, we're very thankful, and I think rightly thankful, that they exist. Many of us receive financial help from the government.

I know we pay stuff into the government, sometimes quite a lot, but we receive quite a lot back as well. And if we should live long enough and become sufficiently ancient, we'll perhaps receive quite a lot of support from the government in our declining years.

Carers coming to visit us at home, old people's homes where the fees are partly paid for by the government, and so on. But what our society and first century society have in common is the family.

Many people, as they grow older, have grown-up children and even grown-up grandchildren. And those children and grandchildren are able to support them, both emotionally and sometimes financially.

And this is what Paul is saying here in verse 4. If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.

[10 : 19] So that verse gives grown-up children and grown-up grandchildren two reasons for supporting elderly widows. First of all, it helps them to make some return to their parents or their grandparents.

We know, especially if we've been parents ourselves, we know that bringing up a family involves spending a lot of energy and a lot of money and a lot of time. And then in later years, Paul is saying the younger generations can pay the older generation back, at least to some extent.

And the second reason given in verse 4 is that this kind of behavior is pleasing in the sight of God. So the widow described in verse 4 is provided for by her close family.

And Paul says that's the right thing to do. And therefore, in the words of verse 16, a widow of that kind should not be a financial burden on the church. She's not what Paul calls a true widow or a real widow.

So who is the true widow? Well, there she is in verse 5. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.

[11 : 31] So there's the key phrase there, that she is left all alone. She's too old and frail to earn her living by working. She has no young relatives to support her or help her or provide her with a home and food.

And Paul says in verse 3 that she should be honored, which means not only respected and valued, but in this context, financially supported as well.

So the widow who needs the church's support is the true widow, not the widow with a family around her. But Paul has more to say about just what kind of widow should be supported by the church in verse 9 and the following verses.

So he says in verse 9, she needs to be at least 60 and it should be clear that she has lived a godly life, sexually chaste, hardworking, hospitable, and the kind of person who has when she was younger and fitter, cared for others who were weak and in trouble.

So you can see how Paul here is being very loving, but he's not naive. He knows that any organized system of care, such as he's commending here, can be abused.

[12 : 44] And Paul has certainly met younger women, younger widows, who fit into the category described in verses 11 to 13. He knows some of these people, doesn't he? He describes them as idlers and gossips and busybodies.

And he says in verse 14, they should take responsibility for themselves. In other words, settle down, marry again if they can, raise a family, they look after their households. You see, Paul has no wish that the church should be brought into disrepute.

He doesn't want the adversary, as he puts it in verse 14, that may be the devil or it may be people who are representing a contrary opinion.

He doesn't want the adversary to be able to say that the church is a soft-touch institution which promotes idleness and discourages able-bodied people from taking proper responsibility.

So Paul's message to Timothy here is, Timothy, take care of the widows who are true widows, over 60 and living a godly life. Enroll them on an official list and lovingly support them.

[13 : 51] But make sure that people are not added to that list if they don't properly qualify. Now it's clear that in the ancient world, widowhood was dreaded for financial reasons as well as for the more obvious reasons of bereavement and loneliness.

In our world, the Western world of today, the financial aspect of widowhood is, on the whole, less fearful, partly because there is state support.

But surely there's a principle being taught here, which is the principle of loving financial support for those Christians who are destitute. And that's a principle that we need to value and follow.

In most of our churches, we are very well accustomed to the practice of offering emotional support and friendship to those who are struggling. But a passage like this makes us think about financial support as well.

And in our society today, surely this principle can go more widely. It's not just widows or even primarily widows who may need this kind of financial help. It could be needed by single women, by divorced women, by older men, and, especially in a city like ours, Christians from abroad who are in financial distress.

[15 : 10] That word enrolled, which is used in verse 9, and Paul uses it again in verse 11, suggests an actual list to be put on the roll, a list compiled by responsible people in the fellowship.

And I guess quite a number of churches have a list of that kind. It's the sort of list that doesn't need to be published or publicly known. In fact, surely it's much better to keep it for only a few pairs of eyes.

But it expresses real and much-needed care for members of the congregation who are genuinely destitute. The church is a family as well as a school. So Paul is saying to Timothy, don't be naive, don't put the wrong names on that list, but do care for those who really need it, those who, in our modern society, can't survive in any other way.

So it's right that our churches should give some support to folk like that financially. Well, now, secondly, Paul turns from the care of widows to the question of elders.

This is still family talk, if you like, family kitchen table talk. It's still teaching about how the Lord's family is to be well-run and properly looked after. And Paul brings three points to Timothy's attention about the elders.

[16 : 26] First of all, about their pay or remuneration. Secondly, about their discipline if they step out of line. And thirdly, about their recruitment. So first of all, their pay in verses 17 and 18.

Now, when Paul says in verse 17 that the elders who rule well should be doubly honoured, the context suggests that money is Paul's primary concern here.

I say that because in verse 3 the honouring of widows is primarily expressed in the church financially supporting them. But even more so when Paul gets to verse 18, which is unpacking the implications of verse 17, it's obvious that he's talking about money.

For he says, the scriptures say, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain and the labourer deserves his wages. And there Paul is quoting from both Deuteronomy in the law of Moses and also from the teaching of Jesus in Matthew chapter 10.

Now, we may feel a little bit puzzled by this when we remember that Paul, as much as possible, waived his right to receive money from the churches that he founded and worked in.

[17 : 42] Later in his life, he certainly received a measure of financial support from the church at Philippi. But in general, Paul tried to support himself by plying his trade of tent making and leather working.

He had, if you like, a day job and a night job. He would work night and day. Well, daytime and evening, I guess we would think of it. So he'd spend part of his day teaching and preaching and part of his day making tents and shoes.

And he did this because he was so keen to avoid the accusation, and his opponents did level this against him sometimes, the accusation of being in the work of the gospel for the money.

But Paul was in a very different position from these local church elders at Ephesus. Paul was a traveling apostle. He was a high-profile Christian, one of the best-known and most controversial Christian figures in the world.

So he was a target for the enemy. But the people that he's writing about here are much more low-profile. They're settled, local church leaders. And for them, he says, there must be proper remuneration.

[18 : 47] And the two quotations that he brings in there in verse 18 are making exactly that point. So we need to ensure, I just think of, you come from different congregations, but think of your own leaders, your minister, elders, or whatever.

We need to ensure that our leaders who work hard at their preaching and teaching are receiving enough income to free them from financial worry. The pastor's life is going to have plenty of pressures and stresses laid on it without the additional stress of having so little money that the man can hardly heat his home in the winter or buy decent food for the family's tea.

This does happen even in modern Britain. Now, Paul has no wish to make the pastor a rich man, but he knows that the churches are going to suffer if their leaders have too little.

So here's a suggestion. Next time you visit the home of your pastor or church leader, have a look around and just ask a few questions about the home.

Look at the sofa. Is it threadbare? Look at his car, if he has a car. Is it held together by string and fresh air? Have a look at his wife.

[19 : 58] Does she look like a woman who is being ground down by lack of money? I've met pastor's wives like that. You can just see it and you feel for them. So there's the first thing.

Pay. Secondly, Paul deals with the disciplining of erring elders in verses 19 to 21. Now, verse 19, do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

That is a protection for an elder or minister against a false accusation. And false accusations will be made even against the most godly ministers by people who oppose the truth of the gospel.

It's not surprising. Jesus himself was falsely accused of blasphemy and other things. Paul was often accused of malpractice. But if it is clear in a church that a church leader is behaving wrongly in a persistent way, Paul tells Timothy in verses 20 and 21 that the man must be disciplined.

Now, how should the discipline be administered? Well, look at verse 20 and there we have the answer. Publicly. Publicly. Let me read that verse. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all so that the rest may stand in fear.

[21 : 17] Now, we might feel, oh dear, dear, dear, does it have to be as open and public as that? Couldn't it be done rather quietly and behind closed doors? Couldn't there just be a small footnote printed at the bottom of the church newsletter which says that Mr. So-and-so has retired to larks following some personal difficulties or something like that?

Now, Paul's answer is no. He says it must be done in the presence of all. In other words, with all the congregation present so that the rest may stand in fear.

In other words, so that all the congregation, especially the other leaders and elders, should realize just how serious it is for a church leader to misbehave and be unrepentant about it.

One of the great weaknesses in the Church of England, which I grew up in, and I think in the Church of Scotland in the last century or so, is that this nettle of disciplining erring church leaders has often not been grasped.

So leaders have persisted either in sinful moral behavior or in holding false doctrine and they've been allowed to get away with it. The scandal of pedophile priests in the Roman Catholic Church has arisen simply because verses 20 and 21 here have not been taken seriously.

[22 : 34] And that problem is not confined to the Roman Catholic Church. So the healthy church learns to fear the Lord and the healthy congregation learns to be unafraid to discipline erring elders.

Part of the answer to the problem of erring elders comes in Paul's third point about elders, and that is that only the right ones should be recruited and appointed in the first place.

And this is what verses 22 to 25 are about. He says there in verse 22, do not be hasty in the laying on of hands. Laying on of hands is what happens generally at an ordination or commissioning service for elders and ministers.

The person being ordained perhaps kneel down or sit and others gather around and lay hands on their head. Now Paul is saying don't rush to put somebody into position as a church leader.

Part of his reason for saying this comes out in chapter 3, verse 6, if you just look back there, 3, 6. The overseer or elder must not be a recent convert or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

[23 : 47] Somebody who's only been a Christian for a year or two is not ready for senior leadership. However intelligent he may be, however steady in character, he's not ready because there's so much to be learned about the way churches work and also the young man has so much to learn about the frailties of his own temperament.

Go back to chapter 5, verse 24. The sins of some men are conspicuous, obvious, written all over their face if you like, all over their life, going before them to judgment.

But the sins of others appear later. In other words, a man may look just like the real thing initially. He may appear to be smart and eager and godly and vigorous.

But Paul is saying at the end of verse 24 that sinful things can appear after time passes. I can remember a man like this in one of the churches that I was vicar of down in England.

He was a young man of about 30. He was well-liked and well-known in the church. We got him preaching up in the pulpit on several occasions and he did quite well with his sermons. He was an able young man, he had good professional qualifications, and he had a delightful Christian wife.

[25 : 03] And many people in our church, including me, thought that we should put him forward for ordination. So we sent him off to one of the Church of England's selection conferences. And we were all taken aback and perplexed when the selectors turned him down.

We said, but how could they? He's such an obvious candidate for the Christian ministry. Anyway, time passed. He and his wife already had one baby and two more quickly followed.

But when the youngest baby was only a few months old, the man left his wife and his three young children, he went to live far away at the other end of the country. He deserted the Lord's people and he deserted the Lord and the faith.

And I realized that we had been too hasty in assuming that this man was fitted for Christian leadership. The passage of time revealed that he wasn't fit for it.

And it was a striking demonstration of the truth of Paul's words here in 1 Timothy 5. So Paul's message to Timothy is, teach the churches to pay their elders properly, to discipline them properly when that's necessary, and to recruit the right ones.

[26 : 14] And then, third and last, Paul speaks to Timothy about slaves, slaves who were Christian members of the churches in Ephesus. Now, slavery, as you know, was a gigantic institution in the Roman Empire.

There were thought to be about 50 million slaves in the Roman Empire at this time. I don't know how many people lived in the Roman Empire, but 50 million must have been a very large proportion of them.

And in Paul's day, approximately one-third of the population of the city of Rome were slaves. And the slaves were used not only for the most menial tasks, but for more responsible things.

Some of them were teachers or clerks, craftsmen, business managers, and so on. But a slave was still a slave, even if he had a responsible position. Now, Paul's instructions to slaves here in chapter 6 are all to do with the reputation of God and of the gospel and of the church.

So he says in verse 1, let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and the teaching, the gospel, may not be reviled.

[27 : 29] If slaves who were known to be Christians were often speaking disrespectfully and rudely about their non-Christian masters, people would take a dim view of Christianity and a dim view of the God of the Christians.

But if Christian slaves were consistently seen to honor their masters, to be obedient and respectful and to speak well of them in their absence, people would sit up and take notice of the fact that the gospel had a refining, sweetening effect on those who believed it.

So the message of verse 1 is, Christian slaves, honor your master if he is not a Christian. And then verse 2, honor your master if he is a Christian.

You might be tempted to take advantage of the fact that he's your brother in Christ and you come to church with him every week, but don't take advantage. Serve him all the better because he is your beloved brother.

Well friends, time is up and I must stop. But let's treasure these words of Paul about the family of the church and the care for it. There's one idea, there's one word in this passage which I think ties together the three sections that we've been looking at and it's the word honor.

[28 : 43] Honor. Verse 3, honor widows who are truly widows. Verse 17, doubly honor the elders who rule well. And then chapter 6, verse 1, let slaves regard their masters as worthy of all honor.

Now the world, non-Christian society, characteristically rides roughshod over people exploiting and manipulating and mistreating. But one of the great characteristics of the Lord's people is that we learn whatever our human differences may be in background or experience or ability, we learn to honor one another.

It's part of the hallmark of the family who cares for its members. And that sense of honoring one another needs to be right at the heart of the shared life that we enjoy in our congregations.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you so much for the care that you have for the varied members of the churches and which Paul expresses here to Timothy for Timothy to pass on and teach to others.

And we do pray that you will help each one of us to play the kind of part in our congregations that builds up our shared life. Teach us to love one another deeply, dear Father, to care for each other at every level where care is needed.

[30 : 14] Emotional support, financial support, the development of love and friendship and real knowledge of one another. And we do pray that this note of honoring others in our congregations, whoever we are and whatever our position in life, should be something which we come to understand and practice more and more deeply.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.