

The Pillar: Chapter 5 (Part 2 of 3)

Thinking Correctly About Compassion

1 Timothy 5:3-16

Mark Vroegop

³Honor widows who are truly widows. ⁴But 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. ⁵She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, ⁶but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. ⁷Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. ⁸But 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.

⁹Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, ¹⁰and 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. ¹¹But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry ¹²and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. ¹³Besides 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. ¹⁴So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. ¹⁵For some have already strayed after Satan. ¹⁶If 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.

You've probably heard it said before that "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." That statement links two very important ideas we've talked about before: grace and truth. Jesus himself was full of both (John 1:14), and since the heart of Christianity and what it means to be a church is to be like Jesus, then we should strive to be full of grace and truth. While the church's primary mission is to preach the gospel, the gospel is not often received when those who proclaim it fail to live out the compassion implicit in the gospel. In other words, the gospel is our message but gracious living supports the message. We have to build bridges of grace that can bear the weight of truth.

Jesus said it this way: "*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:35). And, as we saw last week, 1 John 3:17-18 says, "*But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*"

So how we care for people, especially people within the church, is really important. It validates the message of the gospel. But here's the thing: while that is a great idea, it is often far more complicated than what you might realize. Caring for hurting and needy people is the right thing to do, but it is not simple.

Last week we looked at the first two verses of chapter five, and we heard Paul use the metaphor of family to describe Timothy's relationship with various groups of people in the church. He was to treat each group in a unique way:

- Older men as fathers – honoring their life experiences with respect and cautious correction
- Older women as mothers – listening, loving, and caring for them
- Younger men as brothers – treating them as part of a band of brothers
- Younger women as sisters – shepherding them as sisters and with all purity

This week we are going to continue our study of chapter five, and we will see Paul address some practical matters regarding how to care for people, especially widows. We will see some very specific instructions that Paul gives as he tries to help this church balance the call to be compassionate with the danger of some who might take advantage of the church's generosity.

We are going to see the balance of grace, truth, and wisdom. So it is not just that we need to build bridges of grace. We need to wisely build bridges of grace. We need to think biblically about the way that we help people.

Five Principles for Compassion

Paul is, no doubt, addressing some kind of real issue that developed in the church. He gives Timothy some specific instructions on how to wisely care for some hurting people in his church while also setting some important boundaries. This list is not meant to be all-encompassing, but it does give us a snap-shot of how we should think about these things.

I've tried to summarize what is in this passage with five principles.¹ These are designed to help us understand the beauty and the boundaries of compassion.

1. Be helpful but don't replace family (vv 3-4)

It is rather interesting to me that right after Paul identifies that the people in the church should be treated like family, he establishes a qualification as to what that means. When considering the care of people in need, the church has a role, but the church's role does not eclipse the role of family.

In verse three we see that Paul starts with a broad statement: "Honor widows who are truly widows." The Greek word for widow literally meant a woman without a husband. Typically we assume that this meant that the husband has died. But the word can refer to a woman abandoned by her husband. R. Kent Hughes, in his commentary on this passage, says that given our present American culture, we should apply this definition to a broader scope of people than what we may think: "... modern American culture has produced a category of women virtually unknown in the

¹ My five principles are summaries of William Mounce's analysis of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 – see William Mounce, Pastoral Epistles – The Word Biblical Commentary, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 274.

first century – Christian women and children who have been abandoned by their spouses and left without family support. Godly single mothers are a new class of ‘widow’.² So we could expand the definition here beyond simply a woman whose husband has died.

But notice that Paul says to “honor widows who are **truly widows**.” What does that mean? Paul seems to take this broad category of women and identify that there are special widows within the broad definition of widowhood. In other words, there are some women who have unusual circumstances. They are “true widows.” Not that the other widows are false or fake ones, but this special group is one that the church needs to address because of their needs.

In the Ancient Near East, widowhood was exceptionally difficult. Given the dynamics and economics of the culture, it was quite difficult for widows to take care of themselves and their children if the primary income earner of the family died. Whether it was intentional or not, those abandoned by their husbands or those whose husbands had died were treated poorly. The scales were tipped against them. That is why the Bible takes up the cause of the widow and orphan in particular. Since they have lost their protector and provider, God wants them to know that he cares for them. Listen to Psalm 68:

*Sing to God, sing praises to his name;
lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts;
his name is the LORD;
exult before him!
Father of the fatherless and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation.
God settles the solitary in a home (Psalm 68:4-6)*

Don’t you just love this about God? I sure do. What’s more, I’ve seen him do it – to provide in surprising ways for those who are abandoned and oppressed. That also means that if you’ve been abandoned by someone in your past, that God sees, knows, and cares. God and his people are to honor those who are truly widows.

However, the problem in Ephesus was that some were taking this too far. If you read the entire section, you’ll find that there were some younger women whom the church had committed to care for, but it was creating a problem. Due to their age, idleness, and bad theology, there were some women who, while being supported by the church, were leaving the faith and bringing reproach against Christ and the church.³

Therefore, Paul has to give Timothy some guidance as to what to do about this problem. How should Timothy fulfill the biblical call to care for widows while also being wise? It was possible for the church’s help to be unhelpful. That is always the challenge when it comes to compassion – how to be really helpful.

² R. Kent Hughes, *1 and 2 Timothy: To Guard the Deposit*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2000), 126.

³ William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – The Word Biblical Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 275.

We find the first of many qualifications in verse four: *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 (1 Tim. 5:4)*. Paul points Timothy back to the family first, essentially saying that if the widow has the means of being cared for through family, then that is where compassion should start.

It is interesting to note here that the church's compassion program was never supposed to negate the family's responsibility. Paul's rationale is twofold. First, caring for one's family is the godly thing to do. It is part of what it means to keep the fifth commandment, to honor father and mother, and it is a practical way to demonstrate godliness and please God. In other words, and from a spiritual standpoint, it is just the right thing to do. Second, there is a fairness issue. After all the years of care, protection, and love that a mother has offered to her children, it is only right that they should "make some return to their parents." Children and grandchildren should care for their family members in the same way that they were cared for. The church certainly could be involved at some level, but family is not allowed to shirk their responsibility.

The church is to be helpful, but it is not to replace family.

2. Need does not eclipse godliness (vv 5-6)

The second principle relates to the issue of who is qualified to receive church assistance. Paul apparently wanted to help Timothy think through a grid for how to truly help people. Remember that Timothy was dealing with the difficult task of determining who should be helped as a widow and who should not. Certainly this was not an easy task.

Once again Paul uses the terminology of "truly a widow" to describe the kind of woman who should be supported and helped by the church. We see a second time that this woman is not only abandoned by her husband through sin or circumstances, but she is also "left all alone." This echoes what we heard in verse four, with the burden being on the family. The church should be significantly involved when she is all alone and truly a widow. But that's not all.

Verse five also says that she has "set her hope in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day." So it is not just that she has been left all alone; she is also clearly a godly woman. She is a woman who is fully relying on God and demonstrates her reliance through her godly prayer life. This is reminiscent of Anna in Luke 2 who "did not depart from temple worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day" (Luke 2:37). Anna and the "true widows" demonstrate their godliness through their vibrant and persevering prayer lives.

Don't miss the significance of this, especially if you are a woman, or if you are caring for a woman in this situation. There can be real sense of loss of identity and purpose when a woman is "all alone." Because of the maternal nature of women and their role in family, it just seems so sad when a woman is "all alone" and even worse when the sinful actions of others create this scenario. A woman in that position who feels abandoned, unprotected, and lonely can, no doubt, wonder "What role or value do I have?" But Paul gives us a great vision for a widowed woman who uses the circumstances of life that force her to depend upon God as a platform for intercession, prayer,

and worship. So if you are an older or an abandoned woman, let me encourage you. It may be that you can't do all of the things that you used to do which were so fulfilling, but there is one very meaningful and significant thing that you can do: you can pray. Use the circumstances that have created God-centered desperation to drive you to a life of prayer with impact.

Not all women, even widowed women, live this way. Look at verse six: ". . . but she who is self-indulgent is dead while she lives." What does Paul mean that there were some widows who were self-indulgent? It means to live for pleasure, and often it was tied to luxurious, materialistic living. But that doesn't seem to be the case here since all of the women were in need. It needs to be seen in contrast to the phrase in verse five regarding setting one's hope on God. Therefore, the idea is that these self-indulgent widows were taking church financial support while living self-centered, selfish lives.

Timothy was to be discerning here, and he had to be sure that he was seeing the need of these women through a spiritual lens. He still had a responsibility to shepherd these women, and these women still had need to be godly. Just because a person is in need doesn't mean that she gets a pass when it comes to godliness. Just because a person is in a hard circumstance, it doesn't mean that she has the right to act in a self-centered, selfish way.

One of my seminary professors once said, "It is hard to do good theology in front of a crying woman." He meant that the emotional issues in people's lives sometimes make it very challenging to shepherd them well. Yet, their need doesn't eclipse the importance of godliness.

3. Help everyone understand the importance of compassion (vv 7-8)

The third command or instruction relates to how Timothy is to train his entire congregation to think about this issue of compassion. Timothy's pastoral role is not just to meet the needs of the congregation. That is certainly part of his role, but he must also help the entire congregation to see what their role is, especially as it relates to family.

Timothy is to "command these things." This is a word we've seen before (1:3, 4:11) to refer to Timothy's pastoral charge and responsibility. In this case, part of his role is to help this congregation think through how and when and whom to help. It is not entirely clear specifically to whom Timothy is to make this command. More than likely Paul is referring to all three groups of widows, families, and the congregation. If any of them fail in their God-given responsibilities, they will be guilty or reproachable.

They were to take this issue seriously. And to make that point even more apparent, Paul adds a blunt statement that is meant to be a bit shocking:

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 (1 Tim. 5:8).

Did you hear that? Denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Wow! To neglect one's family is to deny the essence of what Christianity is all about, creating legitimate questions about

whether or not you really possess genuine faith. It is to act in a way that doesn't even measure up to the basic standards of decency and fairness. Even worldly people, who have never tasted the sweetness of God's grace, know that you should take care of your family!

It would seem that such a strong statement would be due to the fact that some people in the Ephesian church were failing miserably in this area. It may have been like what Jesus confronted in Mark 7:11 when people used spiritual sounding categories (i.e., "I can't help my parents because I'm giving so much to God") to justify their lack of love.

Caring for the hurting and those left alone just fits with what Christianity is all about. To neglect this is a serious mistake. Philip Ryken, in his commentary on 1 Timothy, relates a story from the mission field that illustrates the beauty of what this should look like. He recounts the story of Joanne Shetler who served the Balangao tribe in the Philippines for twenty years. Through her ministry she saw the tribe come to Christ and their culture transformed. In the course of time, the tribe came to study and learn 1 Timothy 5. Here's what she wrote:

We got to the end of the book where it talks about widows in need and the church's responsibility to take over for widows who have no other source of livelihood. About the same time, Forsan, one of those old women the spirits had earlier tried to kill, lost her husband. And she was a widow indeed. All of her children had long been dead. She had no relatives in Balangao. In fact, she was not even a Balangao. And in Balangao culture there is no mercy if there is no blood connection. She would have been left alone in her house without food until she died. One of the men who had helped me in the translation . . . went over and took Forsan by the hand with her one little pot, brought her over and said, "You will be like my mother and you will live with us in our home." And that old woman is there today, even though she is old and sickly.⁴

It just makes sense that gospel-loving, grace-experiencing people would care for those who are in need. To fail in this task, especially if it is your own family, is inexcusable and spiritually devastating.

4. Be careful how and to whom you give support (vv 9-13)

The fourth principle is yet another contrast between the kind of women who are qualified for church support and those who are not. In verses 9-13, Paul gets very specific about particular qualifications or disqualifications that need to be considered. Further, it appears that the church at Ephesus had made the care of widows into something that resembled a formal program. They are described as being "enrolled," and this could have meant 1) a list of women who needed help or 2) a group of widowed women who received assistance and who had specific areas of service. By the third century, there was an official order of widows in the church. These women "gave themselves to prayer, nursed the sick, cared for orphans, visited Christians in prison, evangelized pagan

⁴ Philip Ryken, *1 Timothy – Reformed Expository Commentary*, (Phillipsburg: New Jersey, 2007), 206 citing Joanne Shetler, "Faithful in Obedience."

women, and taught female converts in preparation for baptism.”⁵ So these widows were useful to the church, and Paul needed to help Timothy think through who should be supported financially.

He begins in verses 9-10 by listing some characteristics of the kind of woman that should be supported:

- **Not less than 60 years old** – this was the traditional age of maturity, and it was also an age where remarriage was unlikely
- **The wife of one husband** – the woman was to have been faithful in her marriage
- **A good reputation** – she was to be known for her good works which Paul lists: 1) brought up children, 2) shown hospitality, 3) washed the feet of the saints, 4) cared for the afflicted, and 5) devoted herself to every good work

Obviously, she was to be a godly woman, and it was unfortunate that not all the women fit this description. In fact, Paul lists some very specific issues which Timothy needed to be aware of. There were some young women who were not only unqualified; they were dangerous. Paul lists some characteristics:

- **Self-centered** – their passions were getting the best of some of them.
- **Unfaithful** – they were bringing the name of Christ down by their lack of fidelity to Christ and his church through a lack of commitment to what was right.⁶
- **Lazy** – he describes the problem as “idleness.” They could be doing something, but they weren’t.
- **Sinful words** – as is often the case, their idleness led them into other sins like gossip.

As you read verse 13, especially when Paul says “going from house to house,” you get a clear sense that these young women were quite busy, but they were busy doing the wrong things! And because of that, Paul wanted Timothy to choose the right women for church support and ministry.

5. Summary: the church should care for those truly in need (vv 14-16)

The fifth and final statement is Paul’s conclusion and a summary of what he has said in the previous verses. He wants to make himself very clear, and therefore he restates what he has already said. Again, the contrast is between younger women who are not qualified for church support and older truly alone women who absolutely need it.

In verses 14-15 he summarizes what he wants young women to do: 1) get married, 2) bear children, and 3) manage their households. A failure to do this would have negative results: “*and give the adversary no occasion for slander. ¹⁵For some have already strayed after Satan (1 Tim. 5:14b-15).*”

⁵ Ryken, 209 – Quoting John Stott in *Guard the Truth*

⁶ Paul is not necessarily suggesting that they shouldn’t be married. The problem was either 1) they were violating a commitment they made to be unmarried or 2) they were marrying non-believers due to their sinful desires.

In verse 16 he returns to the theme of family obligations. ¹⁶*If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them (1 Tim. 5:16).* Family is to meet their God-given and natural responsibility.

Finally, he talks about all of this so that the church can be free to meet the needs of particular women who truly need it: *“Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows” (1 Tim. 5:116b).*

So the endgame of compassion here is to be able to really care for the people who really need it. Family should do their part and those who have other options should do their part in finding other legitimate paths. Caring for people is what the church is supposed to do, but it can be quite complicated.

Pastoral Conclusions

This text has been really interesting to work through. It is so practical and realistic. It reflects the complexity of the challenges of really caring for people, and it has prompted a number of concluding thoughts:

1. The church can be helpful, but it is not ultimate. Family obligations and even personal responsibility are also an important part of the care equation. It is not enough to be sure that your family is well cared for; you must also be sure you are doing your part.
2. Caring for people is messy work, so we shouldn't be discouraged when it is hard, complicated, nebulous, and frustrating.
3. Honoring of one's parents and grandparents in simple and significant ways needs to be a higher value in our Christian circles
4. Finally, a word to widows: If in God's providence you find yourself "abandoned," remember 1) God has not forgotten you, 2) you can still have great opportunities for ministry, 3) when your family tries to help you, as hard as it is, let them while being grateful for God's help through them.

The church of Jesus Christ is called to care; our understanding of gospel demands it. But we have to care about **how** we care. We need to build bridges of grace that can bear the weight of truth, but we must build those bridges wisely, thoughtfully, and personally.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com

Scriptural Citations: Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.