



Though “The Servant Song” was written in the late 70s, I first heard it in the early 90s when I became a youth pastor at a church in Virginia. That song had long been a favorite of the teens and leaders, and that remained the case during my time there. We always felt a special closeness as we sang it together – and rightly so! – because that song beautifully expresses the essence of Christian community, the kind of community that God wants his people to cultivate.

In the middle of Paul’s letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” The church upholds the truth not only by teaching God’s word faithfully but also by treating one another properly. That’s what 1 Timothy chapter 5 is about. [\[show text and title\]](#)

**TREAT YOUR FAITH FAMILY WELL**  
**Part One**

**1 Timothy 5:1-16**  
**(p. 933, pew Bible)**

Amid all the instructions throughout chapter 5, the main thing to remember is:

***Churches flourish when their members  
treat one another like family.***

In verses 1-2, Paul tells us to *love one another like family*. Then in verses 3-16, he says to *look after those who have no family*. This is how God wants his household to function. So, let’s pay attention to what the Holy Spirit says through the words of Paul.

**1. Love one another like family (vv. 1-2).**

Paul begins chapter 5 by saying, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.”

Notice, first, that Paul categorizes the congregation in four groups: older men, younger men, older women, younger women. Even though all believers are one in Christ and there is to be no division in the body, that doesn’t mean that we’re all exactly the same and are to be treated exactly the same. There is to be a nuanced application in the way we display our love for one another.

The main way we do that is by *encouraging* one another. This command is to be applied across all four age/gender categories. By implication the command could be repeated

four times: Encourage older men as fathers, encourage younger men as brothers, encourage older women as mothers, encourage younger women as sisters. *Encourage everyone*, Timothy, regardless of their age or gender! That's the second thing to note.

The first thing to note: *four categories*. The second thing to note: *encourage everyone* (across all four categories). The third thing to note: *two qualifiers*. One of them appears at the beginning of the verse in reference to older men, and the second one appears at the end of the verse in reference to younger women.

Paul says, "*Do not rebuke an older man* but encourage him as you would a father" (v. 1). "Do not rebuke" is the qualifier. The word "rebuke" is an intensified form of Greek word for "hit." Figuratively, it means "to strike someone with sharp, insensitive (brutal) words."<sup>1</sup>

Why does Paul add this qualifier? Because sometimes Timothy will have to confront a Christian brother who is sinning but is also significantly older than Timothy. When that happens, Timothy must watch his words and his tone to make sure that he is treating this an older Christian with proper respect. Such behavior has its roots in the Old Testament. In Leviticus 19, the LORD commanded, "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD" (v. 32). To respect the elderly is to revere God. To disrespect the elderly is to dishonor the Lord.

Twenty years ago, an older man in the church I pastored had been stirring up division, so I rebuked him sharply. One might say I "let him have it." Later that evening, the Lord brought 1 Timothy 5:1 – to mind: "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but encourage<sup>2</sup> him as a father" (EHV). In that moment I thought, "I would never talk to my dad the way that I talked to Mr. So-and-So today." Though I was right in what I said, I was wrong in how I said it. So, I called him and asked him to forgive me for my lack of respect.

Young men are more likely to chew out older men than older ladies. That's probably why Paul didn't add any qualifiers regarding them. But young men can struggle in how they relate to young ladies in the church. Their tendency isn't to lash out at them but to lust after them. So, Paul says, "encourage ... younger women as sisters, in all purity" (v. 1). As you come alongside to encourage them, don't compromise your moral standards.

I have a confession to make. Almost every Sunday, I end up holding hands with a woman who is not my wife. It's my older sister in Christ, Lidia, who sits behind us. On any given Sunday, Lidia will come up to me right after the service, take my hand and hold it as she offers words of encouragement. Nobody has a problem with that. Nobody gives it a second thought. But if I went up to a younger woman each week after church and held her hand as I "encouraged" her in the Lord, there would probably be some raised eyebrows.

Paul gave two qualifiers to Timothy regarding older men and younger women because of his particular age/gender category. Had Paul been addressing an older believer, he might have said, "Don't belittle or look down on younger Christians." The point is that we must consider a person's age and gender if we're to encourage him or her the way that God wants us to and *love one another like family*.

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<sup>1</sup> "1969. Epipléssó." HELPS Word-studies [online]. Retrieved on 01 February 2024 from <https://biblehub.com/greek/1969.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word is *parakaleó* which also means "to exhort, admonish, entreat, beseech," etc.

## 2. Look after those who have no family (vv. 3-16).

No biological family, that is. In verses 3-16, Paul talks about caring for widows – those needing support (vv. 3-8), and those offering service (9-16). And of course, there would be a lot of overlap between the two groups.

### a. widows needing support (vv. 3-8)

Verse 3 says, “Honor widows who are truly widows.” By this Paul doesn’t mean merely mean “show them respect.” He means “support them financially.” Provide for them (v. 8).

The church is to do this for “widows who are *truly* widows” (v. 3). Does Paul mean only those widows whose husbands have *really* died? No, all widows are widows in *that* sense. Paul is talking about widows who have no family to support them. Verse 4 says, “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.”

In the previous chapter, Paul said, “train yourself for godliness” (4:7). Now he says, “Show it first at home.” That’s where charity begins, right? Paul gives two reasons why children and grand-children should provide for their aging parents and grandparents:

***It’s payback.*** It’s an opportunity to repay parents and grandparents for all the good they have shown us. Economists estimate that the market-value of a mom’s labor at home is anywhere from \$125K to \$185K per year – not that you can put a number on the kind of care that a mom provides.<sup>3</sup> And what about the support that grandparents provide? In a few days my wife will be driving to Virginia where she’ll spend the next two weeks taking care of our three grandchildren as our daughter recovers from giving birth to our fourth grandchild. Think of all the support that grandparents provide emotionally, prayerfully, physically, financially – in addition to all that they poured into raising our own parents!

A popular expression nowadays is “pay it forward.” That’s when a recipient of an act of kindness does something kind for someone else instead of simply accepting or repaying the original good deed. Paying it forward is a good thing to do. But *paying back* parents and grandparents for all the good they’ve shown us is what God wants us to do.

***It pleases God.*** That’s what Paul says in verse 4: “This is pleasing in the sight of God.” Scripture says, “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.” That verse can be either convicting or encouraging, depending on what you’re doing! When you provide for a widowed parent or grandparent that needs support, that is a good thing, and God is pleased when he sees you doing that. And of course this makes sense, for Scripture says,

God in his holy dwelling is a father of the fatherless and a champion of widows.  
- Psalm 68:5 CSB

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<sup>3</sup> Cameron Huddleston, “Here’s How Much Economists Say Stay-at-Home Moms Should Get Paid.” Yahoo! Finance [online]. Retrieved on 03 February 2024 from <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/much-economists-stay-home-moms-130001098.html>.

God expects his people to follow suit. That's why the care of orphans and widows was incorporated into the Law of Moses. In Exodus 22, the Lord said, "You must not exploit a widow or an orphan. If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will blaze against you..." (vv. 22-24 NLT).

Jesus warned against religious charlatans who exploited widows while pretending to be pious in public. Unlike them, Jesus showed great compassion toward widows. On one occasion as Jesus approached a village, he observed a funeral procession. "The young man who had died was a widow's only son.... When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion" (Luke 7:12b-13). Jesus stopped the procession, restored the widow's son to life, "and gave him back to his mother" (v. 15). Even as he hung on the cross, Jesus entrusted his widowed mother to John's care (John 19:26-27).

The early church took its cue from the Old Testament and the example of Jesus and continued to show the same concern and care for widows. They appointed seven gifted leaders to supervise the daily distribution of food to the widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:3).

In 1 Timothy 5, Paul tells Timothy to make sure that the church continues to care for "widows who are truly widows" – those devoid of family and dependent on God. Verse 5 says, "She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day." The widow Anna in Luke 2 exemplified such devotion. "She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer" (v. 37 NLT). "But," Paul says in verse 6, "she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives." A true disciple is marked by self-*denial*, not self-indulgence (Matt. 16:24). Someone who lives for herself is physically alive but spiritually dead.

So, Paul says in verse 7, "Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach." In the previous chapter, Paul told Timothy, "Command and teach these things" (4:11). In that context he was telling Timothy to preach the truth of Christ and to refute false teachings. Now Paul says, "command and teach these things as well." Make sure that believers care properly for widows and by so doing maintain a good reputation.

Paul then reinforces the family's responsibility in verse 8, saying, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Because the law of God is written on their hearts (Rom. 2:14-15), even unbelievers know that children should look after their elderly parents. Under Greek law, children were legally bound to do so. Anyone who refused that duty lost his civil rights.<sup>4</sup> The Romans enacted similar laws.<sup>5</sup> Today in the U.S., thirty states have filial responsibility laws requiring children to take care of their parents' basic needs and medical care. If unbelievers provide for their widowed parents, how can believers in Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us, do any less?

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<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. The Daily Study Bible series, revised edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Doscher Byrd, *Relative Responsibility Extended: Requirement of Adult Children to Pay for Their Indigent Parent's Medical Needs*, 22 FAM. L.Q. 87, 88 (1988). Cited in Andrea Rickles-Jordan, "Fillial [sic] Responsibility: A Survey Across Time and Oceans." *Marquette Elder's Advisor*, volume 9, issue 1 (Fall), article 8 [online]. Retrieved on 03 February 2024 from <https://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1050&context=elders>.

### b. widows offering service (vv. 9-16)

<sup>9</sup> Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. <sup>15</sup> For some have already strayed after Satan.

- 1 Timothy 5:1-15

In this paragraph Paul slightly shifts his focus from widows needing support to widows offering service. John Stott asserts, "There is some evidence that such an identifiable group existed in the early church."<sup>6</sup> He then points to the death of Dorcas in Acts 9. The believers laid her body in the upper room of the house and sent for the apostle Peter. Luke writes, "When he arrived, he was taken to the room upstairs, where all the widows crowded around him, crying and showing him all the shirts and coats that Dorcas had made while she was alive" (Acts 9:39 GNT). Stott says, "Luke refers to 'all the widows' in Joppa as if they were a known and even registered group. It is possible that Dorcas was one of them; she was certainly 'full of good works and acts of charity.'"<sup>7</sup> Though there are hints in the New Testament that there was an order of widows in the early church,

it is not until the end of the second century ... that Tertullian gives us unequivocal evidence that an order of widows existed. In his time and in the third century the registered widows gave themselves to prayer, nursed the sick, cared for the orphans, visited Christians in prison, evangelized pagan women, and taught female converts in preparation for their baptism.<sup>8</sup>

Although there may not have been an official "order of widows" in Paul's time, there was certainly a "register" of widows who served on behalf of the church. For a widow to be registered, three requirements had to be met: (1) She had to be at least sixty years old; (2) she had to have been devoted to her husband, literally a "one-man woman"; (3) she must have a reputation of good deeds, such as:

- bringing up children (i.e., caring for them physically and spiritually, whether her own children or orphans)
- showing hospitality

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<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*. The Bible Speaks Today, NT series editor John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 9:36, 39, 41. Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See "Widows" in Everett Ferguson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (St James Press, 1990), and "Assistance and Charity" in A. D. Berardino (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (James Clarke, 1992). Cited in Stott, 132-133.

- washing the feet of the saints (a menial task usually reserved for slaves but beautified by the example of Jesus)
- helping those in trouble (referring to any kind of affliction, distress, persecution)<sup>9</sup>

Paul tells Timothy not to enroll younger widows, because, as one paraphrase puts it,

No sooner will they get on [the list] than they'll want to get off, obsessed with wanting to get a husband rather than serving Christ in this way. By breaking their word, they're liable to go from bad to worse, frittering away their days on empty talk, gossip, and trivialities. No, I'd rather the young widows go ahead and get married in the first place, have children, manage their homes, and not give critics any foothold for finding fault. Some of them have already left and gone after Satan.

- 1 Timothy 5:11-15 MSG

I find that last statement interesting given that there were false teachers in Ephesus who were forbidding people to marry (1 Tim. 4:3). This seems to have set up young widows for a fall. They would pledge to remain single and serve Christ, but since they did not have the gift of celibacy, their passions would soon get the better of them. There's even a term for this. It's called the "widow's fire," which describes the all-consuming desire for sex following bereavement.<sup>10</sup> "For some people, it's not so much a craving for sex as a craving for intimacy."<sup>11</sup> Notice that Paul didn't say that these young widows got married but that they *desired* marriage." Most likely, some of these young widows were giving in to their passions and committing sexual sin while remaining single. Or perhaps some of them wound up marrying unbelievers outside the church and leaving the Christian faith altogether. Whatever the case, some of these young widows had "already strayed after Satan" (5:15). By reaffirming God's truth, the church would reverse this trend. So, Paul took great care in giving biblical instructions and godly counsel.

Paul concludes this whole section on widows by insisting for the third time (vv. 3-4, 8), that only the destitute are to be supported by the church, not those who have family to look after them. In verse 16 Paul says, "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." The Puritan commentator Matthew Henry wrote,

Charity misplaced is a great hindrance to true charity. There should be prudence in the choice of the objects of charity, that it may not be thrown away upon those who are not properly so, that there may be the more for those who are real objects of charity.

John Calvin stated the matter more succinctly, saying, "Before the church has to carry the burden, let the children do their duty."<sup>12</sup> Paul wants to make sure that the widows

<sup>9</sup> Stott, 133.

<sup>10</sup> "Seven Deadly Sins of Widowhood (aka Widow's Fire." *The Widow's Handbook* [online]. Retrieved on 03 February 2024 from <https://www.thewidowshandbook.com/home/widows-fire>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smal, Calvin's Commentaries (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd,

get the care they need. For that to happen, the church must help those who are truly destitute, and Christians must provide for their relatives. Many of you have done just that. Your provision for your loved ones “is pleasing in the sight of God” (1 Tim. 5:4).

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I want to pass on to you two principles that John Stott articulated in his commentary on this passage – principles that I thought were tremendously practical:

#### **1. The principle of discrimination**

Stott writes,

There was to be no general handout to all widows, irrespective of their circumstances. Widowhood was not in itself a qualification of support by the church. No, the church’s ... provisions are to be limited to those in genuine need. If there are any alternative means of support, they should be used. In particular, the first call is on the widow’s family. All of us must accept responsibility for our own relatives. The church’s sense of social responsibility is not to encourage irresponsibility in others.<sup>13</sup>

#### **2. The principle of dignity**

I really appreciated this one. Stott writes,

It is very interesting to note the two categories of widow Paul mentions, the one needing support and the other offering service. Although we have considered them separately, they must have overlapped. Indeed ideally, health and strength permitting, the supported and the serving widows should be the same people. Widows (together with others in similar circumstances like single mothers, abused and divorced women) should have the opportunity both to receive according to their need and to give according to their ability, that is, both to be served and to serve. ... Christian relief should never demean its beneficiaries, but rather increase their sense of dignity.<sup>14</sup>

***Churches flourish when their members  
treat one another like family.***

Isn’t that how God treats us? “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).

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1964), 251. Cited in Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*. Reformed Expository Commentary, NT edited by Daniel M. Doriani, series edited by Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007), 219-220.

<sup>13</sup> Stott, 135.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.