

In a healthy family each member has a special place.

It’s your unique way of fitting into the family.

It’s how you know you belong.

The late Rodney Dangerfield wisecracked that when his little brother was lost his parents sent him to look for him, and take his place.

- Only the President and a few other notables can be special everywhere. But each of us needs to be special somewhere.

Someone once asked John Wesley’s mother Susanna, *‘Which of your 19 children do you love most?’* [Yes she and Samuel had 19—no octuplets. John was #15; Charles #18] *Which one is most special to you?*

Her answer was as wise as the question was foolish: *‘I love the one who is sick until he’s well, and the one who’s away until he comes home.’* (Susanna Wesley)

Just as a large family has children with many different temperaments and abilities and challenges, so a church family has a wide array of gifts, and strengths, and weaknesses, and perhaps issues.

In a healthy church each person should feel safe and loved.

- The Scripture text for our study today is 1 Timothy 5:1-16.

From this point to the end of his letter, the Apostle Paul instructs Timothy how to deal with various groups of people in the church—the old, the young, men, women, widows, elders, masters, servants, the wealthy, the poor.

Timothy must make sure no person or group in the church is neglected or dishonored.

- Let me remind you that the Apostle Paul has just told Timothy to devote himself to preaching and teaching (4:15,16). As a pastor his entire work revolves around the Word of God. The Bible is central.

There was a strong precedent for protecting this priority.

In the early church in Jerusalem the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians claimed that the Aramaic-speaking Jewish widows were being favored, while their needy widows suffered neglect.

That was true, but it wasn’t deliberate.

The apostles recognized the importance of this matter, but it would not be right for them to neglect the teaching and preaching of God’s Word to deal with it.

So they asked the church to select a task force of 7 godly men to manage that ministry. (Acts 6:1-6) This group was probably the precursors of church deacons.

- This is an indisputable biblical principle. Nothing must take precedence over preaching, teaching and prayer in a church.

Other needs and issues are important, but these are absolutely essential.

- Now in this part of his letter to Timothy, Paul gets into some practical matters about the church family.

Timothy must make sure that he deals with all the people of the church in an honorable way, just as the needs of the Jerusalem widows were addressed more than 30 years earlier.

See how emphatic Paul was about this: *‘I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.’* (5:21)

- Maybe some of you have a deep longing in your soul to know that you are not alone; that this church is there for you

Maybe you want to be sure that you are making a difference and that you are serving as the Holy Spirit has gifted you. You just want to fit in.

You don’t want to be *top banana*. You’d just like to be *Joe Banana or Joanna Banana—one of the bunch*.

This is what we sometimes call *body life*—the life of the body of Christ, the church. We can also call it *family business*.

Let’s read how Paul addresses it here:

1. *Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers,*
2. *older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.*
3. *Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.*
4. *But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.*
5. *The widow who is really in need and left alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.*

6. *But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.*
7. *Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame.*
8. *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*
9. *No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,*
10. *and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.*
11. *As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry.*
12. *Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge.*
13. *Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.*
14. *So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander.*
15. *Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.*
16. *If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.*

Here in 1 Timothy 5:1-16 the Apostle Paul provides some **principles** to guide us in taking care of church family business.

## I. RESPECT FOR EVERYONE

God created all people in his image. He wants all people to put their trust in Jesus Christ as Savior (John 6:29); 1 John 3:23). God doesn't show partiality or favoritism (Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9). That's the good news we call the gospel. It's for all people.

Paul told Timothy to show honor to all the people of the church, old and young, men and women.

- Crossroads Church is a family.

The New Testament often uses this metaphor to describe the church. We are brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers in the family of God.

1. *Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers,*
2. *older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.*

The word for *older man* here is the same word for *elder* in the New Testament—*presbuteros*.

3. *Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.*

At that time many widows had needs that could not be met anywhere outside the church family.

There was no government assistance. It was the church family's responsibility to care for them.

Maybe their biological family had rejected them for becoming Christians, and so the church had become their only family.

- God Himself was a protector of widows:

*'A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.'* (Psalm 68:5)

*'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.'* (James 1:27)

- But it's quite different today, isn't it?

Among the wealthiest people in America today the largest group is widows.

Actuarial charts tell us that women tend to live longer than men, so family estates frequently end up in the hands of widows. Nevertheless, there are also many other widows who struggle to get by on what they have.

- So, is there any group in society today that would be the equivalent of widows of the biblical era—people who deserve special consideration because of their difficult circumstances?

I have a group in mind: single parents—especially single mothers.

Every day many of them face incredible hardships. And many people seem oblivious to their needs.

Paul's instructions about widows must certainly apply to those who are most in need of our help today.

- A church has a responsibility for those in the family of God who have no one else to care for them.

They need to know that they are safe, that they have their place and that they belong.

God's word calls this *honor*. Verse 3 says, literally we are to *honor* widows who are alone.

- Respecting those in need means paying attention to their special situation.

## II. RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERYONE

Caring for those in the church who have needs is a shared responsibility.

For various reasons there are always some people in a church for whom the church has become their only family. Many families are so busy with work and sports, and classes and programs that some family members get squeezed out because there is no time left for them.

A school girl asked mother, *'Why does Daddy work so late every night and not get home to be with us?'* Mother said, *'He can't get all his work done during the day.'* The girl suggested, *'So, why don't they just put him in a slower group?'*

That's a good idea. Slow down, and put people ahead of plans and projects—especially the people for whom you are responsible.

- Godliness begins at home, and it's surprisingly practical.

4. *But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.*

If someone in your family has needs, and God has blessed you and enabled you to help, then you must do so.

Caring for aged parents was a matter of God's law to Israel.

- Paul says caring for needy members of our families is actually a mark of genuine faith.

8. *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

To neglect the needs of those for whom they are responsible is tantamount to Christians nullifying their faith.

- Jesus our Lord abominated the practice of weaseling out of the responsibility to care for parents.

This is what he said to the Pharisees and teachers of the law: *'For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother," . . . But you say that if a man says to his father and mother: "Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. . . .'* (Mark 7:10-13)

16. *If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.*

It is not a church's responsibility to do what others should do.

There is no other agency or entity on earth that has the ability or the responsibility to bring spiritually destitute people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

That is the "main thing". Christ's church has been entrusted with the gospel of Christ, which is the hope of the world.

The church of our Lord Jesus Christ has a distinctive niche, shared with no other entity on earth. We are stewards of the good news of forgiveness of sins and eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

But the church must never ignore those in the church family who have special needs.

- Those who receive help also have a responsibility.

5. *The widow who is really in need and left alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.*

Her only hope is in God. There is nothing on earth she can rely on.

You've heard the cruel expression, *You've made your bed, now lie in it.* It's a common response to people who complain about problems they have brought on themselves.

That attitude has no place in the family of believers.

Even if they did bring hardship on themselves, haven't we all brought problems on ourselves, and God showed kindness to us?

- But Christ's church was not and is not a social welfare agency.

11. *As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry.*

14. *So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander.*

- The culture in the first century was, of course, quite different from ours today.

Paul cautioned Timothy that younger widows would break their pledge.

The Greek term he uses suggests the picture of young oxen yoked for work trying to escape from the yoke.

Paul was concerned that any careless conduct of younger widows might bring serious reproach on the church.

*No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty. . . and is well known for her good deeds, . . .* (9, 10a)

'Sixty' was the Jewish number for the beginning of old age.

That's when they got their AARP cards and could order from the Seniors' menu at Perkins in Ephesus.

- Paul's remarks here tell us that in the first century church there was some sort of ministry circle of older widows.

This underscores the principle that those who receive benevolence helps are to be involved in the spiritual life of the church. They have a responsibility to help others also.

### III. REPROACH BY NO ONE

Everyone in the church must guard against bringing reproach on the church family.

7. *Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame.*

Being *above reproach* is crucial to the spread of the gospel.

To protect the church from reproach you count on the good reputation of the members.

9. *No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,*

10. *and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.*

A reputation for compassion is better than a reputation for being smart or gifted.

Someone said this about a man who lacked compassion: *'If I ever need a heart transplant I want his because it's hardly ever been used!'*

- In the churches I have served as pastor, older widows were most often truly committed servants of the Lord. Paul uses the expression in verse 10, *washed the feet of the saints* as an idiom for someone willing to be a humble servant.

I have a dear friend in the last church I served as pastor. She is a widow in her late-80's now. Occasionally she needs help from the church, but she insists on paying it back if she can. I know that she tithes her meager social security check. She always wears gold colors because she belongs to the King. She can be quite the scalawag at times, but she volunteers to help in any need in the church. That's Mildred. Years ago a pastor at another church in the town told her that she really didn't fit in with them and that she ought to find another church. I adopted her as my mother after my own mother passed away. Mildred belongs, and Mildred serves.

- The Apostle Paul was not a "soft touch." He would not tolerate anything that might harm the church. Timothy had to make sure the church's ministries of compassion didn't encourage idleness and sinfulness.

6. *But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.*

This means a widow who lives fast and furiously.

11. *As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry.*

12. *Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge.*

13. *Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.*

**5:15** *Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.*

Paul wanted to be sure that the church took care of those who are absolutely without support. They were expected to do their part in a ministry of caring in the church family.

Apparently they made a pledge to remain unmarried and to care for others in the church.

But if they were young, some would break that pledge and might even marry unbelievers. That's possibly what he means when he said some had turned away to follow Satan.

Others remained in the church and stirred up trouble with their mouths.

- People who serve too little and talk too much say things they ought not to say.

*A tongue three inches long can kill a man six feet tall.* (Japanese Proverb)

Paul warns that when the devil gets hold of someone's tongue, he easily leads them astray into many sins.

Vicious accusations, false teachings, and gossip can destroy lives and wreck a church's reputation.

People who serve Christ and his church from the heart will use their tongues to encourage and not to hurt.

If pastors and elders in a church preach and teach God's Word as the "main thing," the church will be well equipped to honor and care for every person in the church.

Those who receive also give. Those who are cared for, also care for others.