

1 Timothy 5:: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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2 Timothy chapter 5 2 Timothy chapter 5 2 Timothy chapter 5 2 Timothy chapter 5 2 Timothy chapter 6 As in the case of dealing with the older men, when he deals with the older women.

Timothy needs to show them a proper honour, in this case treating them as he would a mother. Timothy needs to treat the women of his age and younger as sisters, and here it is particularly emphasised that he must act with purity towards them.

Given the household character of the church, Paul is concerned that Timothy perceive and operate within the structures of honour, authority and association that naturally exist in a society that's ordered by gender and age.

Using the relations of the extended family as guides, Paul can give him a template within which to think about the way that he relates to different groups. The church does not float free of the generational and gendered character of communal life more generally.

[5 : 56] This was one of the concerns of Paul in chapter 2 when dealing with men and women in the congregations. In the related passage in Titus chapter 1, we should note, The gendered and generational character of the church is expressed in the orders of its teaching.

The discipleship of the younger women is largely undertaken by older women, not by Titus himself. Titus, however, plays that role relative to the younger man. There seem to have been problems in the Ephesian congregations around the issue of widows, and it is to this matter that Paul now turns in verses 3-16.

Throughout the scripture, the Lord expresses an especial concern for the widow, the fatherless and the stranger. Isaiah chapter 1 verse 17 As a sort of extended family, the church would take responsibility for providing for needy persons in their midst.

We see this in Acts chapter 6, where there were structures of community provision for the widows in the congregation. The church is not merely a place of teaching. It's a household, and there needs to be provision of material assistance to its members.

In Acts chapter 9, we also see another instance where widows are mentioned as a group, as those who had been helped by Dorcas. The problem in Ephesus, however, is that the church's provision for widows seems to have been abused.

[7 : 27] Some young widows of marriageable age were depending upon the church's resources when they did not need to be. Some families seem to have been neglecting their duty of support and handing it over to the church, expecting the church to pick up their slack.

Other widows enjoying the support of the church were engaging in community-disrupting behaviours. Paul addresses this situation by providing criteria by which true widows could be supported, and unworthy recipients of the church's support would be removed from the rosters.

The widows who were enrolled for support by the church needed to be without family to support them. If a widow had such family, it was not the duty of the church to look after her, but the duty of the family.

And if the family was not prepared to do its duty, then any of the widow's family members shirking their responsibility should not be regarded as members of the community of faith. This was a rejection of the faith, and the sort of Christian behaviour that ought to accompany it.

Paul restricts the church's support to widows over the age of 60 who had a reputation and a long-standing record of godliness. The widows to be supported by the church were expected to have been wives of one husband, faithful mothers, persons who had practised hospitality, especially to the members of the church, and marked out by commitment to charity and the works of mercy.

[8 : 44] These were women who had given much of their lives and their resources to the service of the household of faith, and the household of faith had a corresponding duty to show them great honour. The statement with which Paul begins this section, honour widows who are truly widows, singles out this group for special respect, and also the material provision and support that is a necessary component of such honour.

The faithful widows are contrasted with another group, a group of younger widows, perhaps examples of the new Roman women that some have seen in the background of the book of 1 Timothy and its situation in Ephesus.

A number of these women, presumably more wealthy, were given to practices that were causing trouble in the community. Rather than devoting themselves to the works of mercy and charity, they went from house to house, engaging in gossip, slander, and the spread of false teaching.

Their commitment to the faith also seems to have been slight. A number of them, itching to remarry, seem to have sought new husbands from outside of the household of faith, abandoning Christ for a pagan spouse.

This would greatly have unsettled the church, and compromised its witness to the surrounding society. Paul is concerned that women susceptible to such falling away are not enrolled in the company of widows that the church provides for.

[9 : 57] They can provide for themselves, many of them will have families that will be able to support them, and no small number of them will be able to remarry. While there are situations, as we see in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, where Paul can advise against remarriage, here he presents it as a prudent response to the young widow's condition.

The ideal was that such young women remarried and gave themselves to the activities of a wife and mother. We should also bear in mind the concept of managing their households would have been a very expansive activity within the first century context, far wider than what we often think about in terms of homemaking.

The woman who managed her household was overseeing the children, but also the wider activity of the household as a site of production. In many respects, the household could be compared to a small business today, and much of the activity of production within a society occurred within its context.

Many have wondered whether the widows described in this chapter were a particular class of appointed women within the church, with special ministry roles. This, it seems to me, is unlikely. While the women in question were being honoured for their past service, they were selected not according to their aptitude for future ministry, but according to their need.

Besides, as a group limited to women over 60, many of the widows would not be able to perform any sort of active ministry. Given the degree to which the modern church has been abstracted from the context of the household, we are more likely to think of the church as an organisation that is perhaps similar to a business, with importance in the community being defined by official roles, titles, and by positions on the payroll.

[11 : 29] This was not the case in the early church, and I think we are misguided if we are looking for the prominence of women in the community by looking for official positions and titles. The widows that are honoured here, for instance, are women who had been serving the community for some time already prior to their being enrolled in the company of the widows.

As the church functioned as a household, the church was not primarily defined by official titles and positions, rather it was the life of a community, and the ministries and works of service in the community mostly did not occur under the auspices of official titles and roles.

Women like those described here who were faithful in their service of the community were supposed to be treated with a special honour, for which material support and provision was essential. Elsewhere in Paul's letters, in places like Romans 16, we see the great number of women who were active within particular communities.

Churches in this context seem to have numerous prominent women, even while the positions of official oversight of the communities were exclusive to men. In modern Christian contexts, where most of the ministry of churches occurs through churches as official organisations and structures, it may be difficult to recover the prominence that women enjoyed within a structure of the church as an organic household, and an active community, most of whose life was carried out in informal contexts.

However, it seems to me that pursuing such a challenge is absolutely essential if the church is to be what it ought to be. The less that the church functions like an extended family and household, the more that there will be a breach between word and life within its existence.

[13 : 03] From the widows, Paul turns to another group that need to be accorded special honour, the elders. Alastair Campbell, in his book on the elders, argues that the group referred to here are the elders of the town churches, rather than just the households.

The elders of the house churches would not presumably have been paid for their labour in preaching and teaching. It was only the overseers, the leaders of the town churches, that would need to give themselves completely to these tasks.

As the fatherly guardians and instructors of the Christians within a given town, it was important that the office of these elders be shown a proper respect. This would involve paying them for their efforts.

To support his assertion here, Paul cites two statements, the first from Deuteronomy chapter 25 verse 4, concerning the oxen threshing the grain, and then the second from Luke chapter 10 verse 7, words of our Lord, and remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the labourer deserves his wages.

Elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 7 to 14, Paul also references the case law concerning the oxen threshing out the grain. Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?

[14 : 11] Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of its milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.

Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the ploughman should plough in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop.

If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much that we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

There appear to have been issues with some of the elders in Ephesus. Certain elders seem to have been accused of sin, and some seem to have been clearly guilty. Part of Timothy's task in this situation is to exercise justice as Paul's representative.

[15 : 22] To equip him in this task, Paul references a number of Old Testament principles of justice. The first concerns proper evidence. Deuteronomy chapter 19 verse 15. A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offence that he has committed.

Only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be established. Where repentance was not forthcoming, elders would have to be rebuked in the presence of everyone.

When private and respectful appeal to them as fathers had failed, the company of the elders and Timothy would have to gather together and collectively enact justice in the situation. A communally witnessed rebuke would also be a deterrent for any others.

Deuteronomy chapter 19 verse 20 is another principle in the background here. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. The impenitent sinning elder is rebuked in the presence of the whole company of the church, and Paul charges Timothy in the presence of the entire heavenly council.

Of God, of Christ Jesus, and of the elect angels. Like Old Testament judges, he is charged to exercise these rules without prejudice and without partiality.

[16 : 33] He needs to be very careful about appointing people to the office of an elder. He must not take part in the sins of others, whether allowing people's abuses to continue without rebuke, or by appointing people who are not worthy of the positions that they are entering.

As an aside at this juncture, Paul speaks to Timothy's health, and his need to drink wine. Perhaps Timothy was experiencing health issues, drinking unclean water, while he was abstaining from alcohol.

Drinking wine in moderation would not be giving himself to drunkenness, but it would spare him from the health issues that he might experience otherwise. Paul has given Timothy a most solemn charge.

However, Timothy, like any human being, is not up to the task of discerning other people's hearts. People's hearts cannot be fully discerned, and Paul recognises this at the end of the chapter.

Certain people's sins are conspicuous, or can be recognised by the observant person. Other sins, however, are secret sins, and only appear later over time, perhaps through sudden scandalous exposure, or perhaps in the character that they produce in a person over many years.

[17 : 35] Others may only be revealed on the day of judgement. On the other hand, there are people whose good works are obvious and plain to everyone around them, and others whose good deeds are not seen by others, but are largely hidden.

However, even those good deeds that are not immediately obvious will be made apparent over time. By their fruit you will know them, and people's habitual behaviours will be steadily revealed in their characters.

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