

A duty of care

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[0 : 00] There are lots of different ways, aren't there, of dividing the population into two groups. Plenty of sayings that start with the phrase, there are two kinds of people in the world, so on and so on.

This evening, there are two kinds of people in the world. There are, if you like, the dreamers and there are the doers. The dreamers, those people who have that grand vision of how things could be.

The dreamer is the one who can picture that stunning skyscraper in his mind's eye. Or the one who can think through the outlines of some grand project.

The person who can get you enthused about the idea of rockets taking people to Mars in 20 years' time. There are the dreamers. And then there are the doers, who are those awkward people, who come along and ask, yes, but where are we going to put the toilets?

And how are you going to carry enough fuel on your rockets? And most of you can probably imagine yourselves into one of those two camps, I suspect. Now, I think normally we think of Paul in that first category.

[1 : 09] We think of Paul who writes these letters that form a big chunk of the New Testament. And we think of these grand expositions of Christian doctrine.

We think of these big, meaty statements. These far-flung descriptions of the grace of God and the glories of the gospel. We think of Paul in these terms.

And then he explains who ought to get their pension provided out of the church coffers and who shouldn't. And he gives Timothy advice about how to settle his stomach.

Paul must be that rare combination of someone who is both a dreamer and a doer. Because Paul, I think, Paul recognizes that however grand your ideas, they can very easily get derailed by those small details.

Maybe some of you remember back in 1999, NASA lost a spacecraft. They lost a Mars orbiter that had cost them \$125 million.

[2 : 17] It drove itself closer into the planet than planned. It overheated and it lost contact with NASA. I wonder if any of you remember why that happened.

Well, NASA were using inches for their calculations. But one of their contractors designed a subsystem that provided the details in millimeters.

And nobody spotted that there was a problem with how those two came together. Small details can have really big consequences sometimes, can't they? And the same is true in the church.

Do you remember back in Acts chapter 6, the early church in Jerusalem recognized that it was getting sidetracked. It recognized that it was in danger of falling out with one another because they're of widows, because of perceived inequality.

And so too in Ephesus. Paul knows that these seemingly perhaps minor details are ultimately anything but. Does a church need to have its doctrine right?

[3 : 20] Well, yes, of course it does. But it is also true that a church needs to live out that doctrine in practice. As Paul says in verse 8 here, to fail to care for those in need is to deny the faith.

And so Paul here in these verses, he's continuing with the concern that started in verses 1 and 2 that we looked at last week, that concern for what the church should look like as a family.

And it shouldn't be a surprise to us as we consider family life that widows are singled out for particular attention. Why? Because the consistent witness of Scripture is that widows are dear to God and must be a concern of his people.

There's provisions in the law given to Moses that landowners will set aside a tenth of their income to provide for the Levites, for the widows, and for the orphans. And besides that, we'll leave the edges

of the field available for them to glean from and so on.

There's that statement of God's concern that we sang about in Psalm 146 a few moments ago. And we find it again in James' letter, James 1.27.

[4 : 34] 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.

With plenty of other steps along the way, plenty of other verses that we could pull out, care for widows is a thread that runs through the Bible.

And God presents himself here as the one who is the protector of widows, the one who is their provider, and he expects his people to embrace that role alongside him.

And that is no less true of the church in Paul's day, no less true of the church in our day, than it was of Israel before them.

But before we dive into this passage, I know some of you are going to be sitting with the ESV open in front of you. And I want to take just a moment to explain what's going on if you're looking at verse 3 in the ESV.

[5 : 37] You'll find there, honor widows who are truly widows. Now that's a good translation, that is what Paul said, but it's a bit weird, isn't it?

What does it mean to say not all widows are truly widows? Are we saying that the pain of some women who've lost their husbands doesn't really count? That they're not really widows?

Well the NIV has this. Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. And I think that helpfully clarifies what Paul is trying to get at here.

Because from the verses that follow on, we can see that his concern is primarily with financial provision for these widows. So Paul isn't saying that there are some widows who don't really count as widows in an emotional sense.

He isn't saying that it's not painful to lose your husband just because you have children to look after you. But at this point it isn't the emotional needs of these women that he's focusing on.

[6 : 38] So when Paul uses the word true widows, what he means is those who are financially destitute on top of the emotional situation that they're in.

So, verses 1 and 2, Paul is thinking about the church as a family. Paul is thinking about an obligation to care for one another and working through the details of what that might look like in practice.

And they have this grand sense of concern for one another. This big desire to look after each other. And maybe what would ideally have been the case, wouldn't it be nice maybe we would think, if all of those in any kind of need could be supported generously from church funds.

We might think that in theory, but it doesn't match up with reality, does it? Because quite often, both then and now, the church doesn't have the financial resources to do that and has to make hard decisions about where to draw those kind of lines about who to support.

And so, these verses here in Timothy chapter 5, these verses serve primarily to limit who the church should financially support. If that seems unloving, let's be clear on the basis of verse 16 that the reason for these limits is precisely to enable the church to best support those who most need it.

[8 : 10] Because Paul is deeply concerned for these people and that means he wants to help those who are in genuine need. He doesn't want them to waste their funds on some kind of misguided theoretical notion of equality in an idealistic sense.

And so, the first big message of these verses is don't support those who don't need it. The first category of those who are not to be supported by the church comes through in verse 4.

The church supports only those who are really in need, which means those who have other means of support should expect to receive it there. In other words, the biological family ought to step up first before they expect the spiritual family to do so.

Now, it is absolutely true, it is a vital idea that the church is a spiritual family. It is true, as we were saying last week, that we have those obligations to one another, that we are committed to each other.

But we don't let that idea of church as spiritual family dominate the very real importance that the Bible places on family in a more traditional sense.

[9 : 21] Because let's not forget, family is God's idea in the first place. Right back in Genesis, he gave Adam and Eve to one another to form that first family. And throughout the Bible, God has related to people in families.

The Bible is punctuated by genealogies because family matters to God. And the Bible has plenty of commands telling families how to relate to one another.

And this is one of those commands. The family are to honor their elderly relatives. The family must not leave their weaker members uncared for. The family must make appropriate provision for any and all widows associated with them.

Who do we mean by associated with them? Well, verse 4 begins by saying that children and grandchildren ought to care for their widowed mothers and grandmothers. But verse 8 seems to expand that out further, doesn't it?

Into their relatives, and especially their own household. In other words, they have an immediate primary responsibility to the closest relatives, but then it extends out further too.

[10:31] So that would be a mandate to be concerned for widowed aunts and great aunts and cousins of various flavors and so on. And similarly, whilst Paul is certainly talking primarily here about widows, the word relatives of verse 8 is a pretty general term.

So the idea of failing to care for an orphaned nephew and niece would surely be equally abhorrent to Paul, wouldn't it? That might not be the particular problem in Ephesus, but it surely wouldn't be outside of his concern if it were.

And let's be clear, he is very concerned about this. He has strong words for those who fail in this regard. Verse 8. Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Now as ever, Paul is not saying, and we must not ourselves say, that Christians earn favor with God by caring for their relatives. They are not saved by their works. But the consistent witness of Scripture is that it is also possible for us to either show our faith in action or by our deeds, deny that the faith is really there.

It is possible for our actions, as they depart from what God has set out for us, to show that we have not understood the faith that we might profess. It's possible for us to demonstrate that we don't understand the love that we are called to.

[12:05] It's possible for us to indicate that we don't grasp the enormity of God's goodness to us, because if we did, of course it would overflow into actions in particular areas, into love of others, into concern, into caring here for family who are in need.

And remember too, that a number of times through this letter, Paul has shown us that he has a concern for the public perception of the church. He's worried about how this church in Ephesus looks to the world outside.

And that concern shines through again here, doesn't it? Even the pagans know how to look after their widows. How dare you make the church look immoral by failing on such a basic level?

That's what he means by saying such a person is worse than an unbeliever. Even those who don't believe in God can manage that kind of basic human respect. So verse eight, if you like, forms the negative, forms the caution, forms the stick.

To fail to provide for your widows is to deny the faith. More positively, we could return to verse four, couldn't we? Because there are here two other arguments given for making provision.

[13:23] Firstly, it is right repayment for what they have given to you. Paul brings to mind here the many years that these mothers have spent devoting themselves to the care of their children.

How many meals did your mother cook for you? How many nappies did she change? How many hours did she spend sitting outside the swimming pool or the dancing classes or the football field waiting for you to be finished?

How many sleepless nights did she have? How long did she sit with you teaching you to read and to write and to add up and going through your homework with you? Did she do those things gladly?

Well, we certainly hope so. But those things also mean that it is right and proper that now in her time of vulnerability and need, you make proper repayment for that.

So that's the first positive reason, if you like, of verse four, to make repayment. And secondly, verse four, also obviously the positive reason, that is his pleasing to God. Now on many levels, this should be the ultimate reason, shouldn't it?

[14:29] This should be the most compelling reason, should be the only reason that we need. And what a joy it is to be reminded of this, that God is actively pleased by the obedience of his people.

God likes it when you do good things. We don't only do things in order to avert God's wrath, but rather it is actively, positively good. It's helpful to us not always to see the commands of the Bible as

some scary thing, as things that we must obey in order to turn away God's anger. Because nothing can suffice to turn away God's anger. Nothing we can do. But we can. We can please him in our obedience. We can please him in our demonstration of love.

A fourth reason is also given for why families should support their own widows. Maybe implicit in verse three, but much clearer in verse 16. Paul's bringing this up now.

This is something that Timothy has to go and instruct verse seven because the church can't afford to help everyone. The church needs not to be burdened with those who have other support, precisely so that it can better help those who do not have other support.

[15:44] The church must spend its money where it does most good. And it seems like, as Paul's writing this, it would seem that the situation in Ephesus is that the church is overstretched. The church is trying to do too much.

Maybe from some misguided definition of equality, or maybe out of an unwillingness to have the difficult conversations that say, no, I'm sorry, we're not going to help. Or to go to the family and say, come on, what are you playing at?

Maybe out of an unwillingness to have those conversations that the church has overstretched itself and cannot adequately provide for the helpless. That is not wise for the church.

That is not sustainable. And so Timothy has to go and have those difficult conversations. Timothy has to go and say to those families, it is time to step up. It is time to do what you ought.

That's what Timothy has to go and do in Ephesus. I think two applications of what we've seen here are then fairly obvious to us.

[16:51] Firstly, each of you, if you have relatives who are in financial need, then you have an obligation to provide for them. Even in this modern era, even with the provisions that are made for us by the government, even with the National Health Service and so on, it is still true that there are elderly people in our society who face genuine financial hardship.

And we hear stories, don't we, of people who are choosing between buying food and heating their homes. And it should go without saying, but nevertheless, let me say it, you have an obligation to provide for your relatives.

Secondly, I think equally obviously from these verses, these verses tell us that we as a church have an obligation to provide for widows who do not have sufficient support from family and other sources.

Certainly widows, and I would suggest, legitimately extended to those who are destitute for other reasons as well. We're going to come back to these verses next week and we'll see that there are a few other criteria in these verses for who should and shouldn't be supported.

But broadly, there is an obligation to be willing to support those who are in need. Act 6, and the Bible as a whole, would seem to suggest that the deacons of the church have a particular responsibility to make these kinds of arrangements.

[18:15] I've mentioned to you a couple of times as we've gone through this series that we are in the process of looking to appoint deacons. I'm pleased to tell you that that process is progressing well and the session are going to be asking you to elect deacons at our next congregational meeting.

And that should, if all goes to plan, that should be at the end of August that we should be having that meeting and electing deacons at Covenant Church.

But of course, the fact that the deacons have that particular responsibility doesn't mean the rest of us just kind of leave it to them to get on with. If nothing else, the deacons can't distribute funds that aren't there.

Third application. Here's maybe where it's slightly less obvious, but also maybe where it hits a little closer to home. Now yes, as I've said, Paul's primary concern in these verses is financial destitution.

But that isn't all it means to honor the elderly, is it? The fifth commandment, to honor your father and mother, certainly that includes making financial provision for them.

[19:24] Jesus is very clear on that in Mark 7. But that isn't all that it means to honor your father and mother, is it? Nobody would think well of somebody whose attitude to their parents is simply to throw money at the problem.

We would not think well of that decision. And yet, too often, too often we do see the elderly as a burden. And too many people do precisely that.

They just throw money at the problem and hope that someone else will deal with it. Friends, we have in this country an aging population. Now it is good and it is helpful that the government provides, and for that matter various private companies provide, they provide sheltered housing and hospital wards and care homes and so on.

These are good and helpful provisions to make. It's good that we have a variety of these things. Good that there are places where experienced carers can be on hand and places where medical help can be quickly available.

And it is often wise to make use of such resources. But, but not if that means that these senior citizens are being abandoned by their own relatives.

[20 : 40] That is not honoring. John Stott says that African and Asian cultures that have developed the extended family in place of the nuclear family that we in the West have developed.

That those countries are a standing rebuke to the West in this matter. And I think he's right. Friends, it ought to be the case that the way Christians treat our family members should be markedly different to the world around us.

We should be making it our business yes to make sure they're getting the medical and practical attention that they need and that might involve professional help. But we should also be making it our business to ensure that they are getting the emotional attention and the spiritual attention that they need.

Those reasons that Paul gave for why families have an obligation to care for their relatives, I suggest that those reasons apply equally to an obligation to provide that broader sense of care as well as the practical and the financial.

Application 3A, again, this applies to the church. So again, if faithful believers, if members of our church do not have relatives to care for them or if those relatives are failing to sufficiently care for them, then we as a church must be willing to step up and shoulder that.

[22 : 17] We shoulder a financial burden, yes, but we also shoulder that responsibility for their emotional and spiritual needs as well. Friends, this shouldn't be difficult.

This shouldn't be controversial because this should be a natural outworking of our love for one another. This should be an inevitable consequence of the idea that church is a family.

Now, so far in these verses we have tackled the distinction between widows who have relatives to provide for them and those who do not and how we address each of those situations.

But these verses also offer us other criteria for widows who should and should not be enrolled for official church support. and these verses also offer counsel and concerns particularly for younger widows.

So there's more in these verses than we've had time to look at this evening. So if you're wondering why I've not tackled a particular question, don't worry. Just come back next week and we'll return to those questions.

[23 : 27] But for now, for now let's rejoice that God places people in families. That God puts people in families of all different kinds. That God puts people in natural families, in adopted families, and in spiritual families in the church.

And let us seek to love one another, especially those who are most in need of it. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that you are concerned that through your servant Paul you expressed your concern, not only for the big abstract ideas, but for the details of how we care for one another. Lord, would you give us the sense of family that will drive this desire to see one another well looked after. That we'll see each other not as burdens, but as people to be naturally loved and cared for. We thank you for this model that you present to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.