

1 Timothy 2:3-16

Instructions to Timothy
Fight, Keep Fighting, Finish!

The Complicated Task of Helping the Widows!



After reading this text, most of us will think our text this morning is primarily about taking care of widows in the church. It is actually about church leadership. I think an analysis of today's text should garner some sympathy for the elders of the church. The elders and deacons are tasked with providing for the needs of the congregation – spiritual *and* physical. Our text today is dealing with the physical needs of the people, but the spiritual comes into play as we will see. Caring for people and being able to help them is one of the wonderful things about the position of church leadership. We get to represent both Christ and the congregation to meet the physical needs of our people. Now, the background of this section is that in Paul's day - in the day of the early church - there was no social safety net – no **Social Security**, no **Medicare** or **Medicaid**, no **Unemployment**, or **Disability**, no **programs** for those fallen on hard times whatsoever! The Kings, or city officials were not going to give up their gold for the poor and unfortunate. It never entered their minds. It didn't even enter the minds of the poor and unfortunate that the king should help them! It was not expected for the government to be involved in the care of its people. Government did not serve the people. The people served the government! So the church was in charge of its people - *all* of its people, and the King of Kings was not going to leave people behind. He was a different kind of King than any other on earth, so His followers had to be different! In His Kingdom, people were taken care of – provided for! No one was going to starve. Unfortunately, humanity being what it is and always has been, things usually get complicated. So it was here when the church began getting inundated with the poor! Many widows attached themselves at church, not because of hunger and thirst for Jesus, but simply out of a hunger and thirst for a free meal! Where else could they keep from starving?! Soup kitchens were unknown in those days! So, what happened is that many of these hungry hangers-on tried to blend in with the others in the church, but few of these fake Christians were convincing actors. It becomes clear in this passage that the apostles did not think the church was in the business of across-the-board charity. They thought that even the widows should be required to earn their keep, if possible! It was one way of sorting out who was in the church for Jesus sake and who was in it for their own! **BUT**, having standards of who to help and who to withhold help from, carried its own dilemmas. How do you cut off someone who will then starve? The apostle is trying to help Timothy with that by laying down some guidelines that were probably in place in other churches.

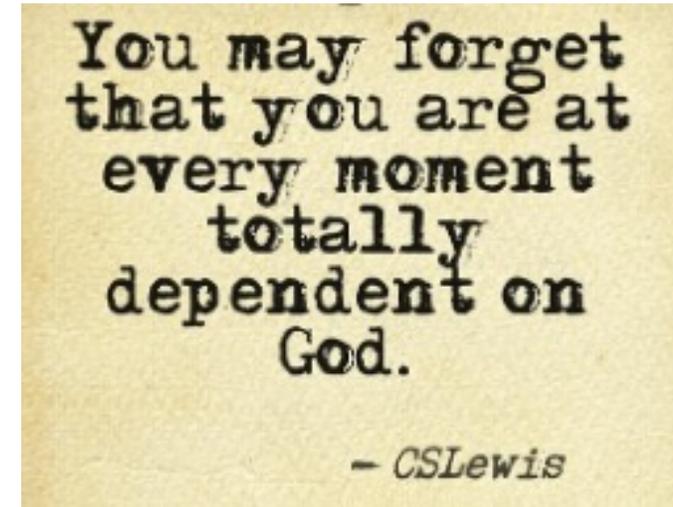


The first problem addressed in vs 3-8 was whether or not a widow had any blood or by-marriage connection with anyone in the church who could see to their survival needs – grown children or even grandchildren – and we can assume sisters, brothers, living parents - any relative who was in a position to help, but especially immediate family! The church was not to take the responsibility of caregiving away from family! He says that when family assumes responsibility to take charge of the care of their widowed relative, “**this is pleasing to God**”! This is a natural obligation. If family members were in the church but did not want to take on the financial burden of supporting their relative, it would have been **displeasing** to God! The church was not supposed to get into the habit of supporting people who were displeasing God! So the issue of need brought up another issue of who was responsible to meet that need! If a widow had family that was not meeting her needs, well then, the elder/overseers had to go to that family and tell them of their obligations. 7 or 8 out of 10 times, that would have been an unpleasant encounter. People don’t normally take the news very well that they need to add to their own financial burden! First, the elders should never have **had to** have that confrontation, but when they did, it may have left that family deeply unhappy with the elders and the church! If that family was more loosely connected to the church body, they may even have left the church after such an encounter! The elders certainly did not want that to happen, but regardless, they were obligated to do the right thing. The family’s reaction to a relative’s need was something the elders could not control! It was simply their obligation of church leadership to separate the widow that **had someone** from the widow that **had NO one**! In the Jewish tradition, the family was obligated to help their family members, but this was a gentile city, and these Christians in Ephesus by-in-large came out of a pagan tradition. I’m not sure we know if they had such traditions as the Jews did. I could not find any information on it. So, if not, the Elders had to **create** such a tradition in the church.



Then, in vs 5, not to ignore abject need, or make light of it, it is pointed out that there is great good that can come from being in a position of helplessness. With nowhere else to turn, a person is completely reliant on God for their help, and is connected to Him continually requesting His help [Vs. 5]! Every challenge in life is an opportunity to run to God, depend on Him, draw nearer to Him! For Christians, every challenge is an opportunity

Dependency is something God wants and even requires from His subjects. We work all our lives to provide ourselves with self-sufficiency and independence. But often times when a person is in their advanced years they lose all that they have worked for in this life. Look into a nursing facility. 30 – 40 years ago, those people were movers and shakers. They were in charge of their lives and, in some cases, in charge of the lives of others! They are us – soon – if we live long enough! We all need to understand just how fragile our grip on self-sufficiency is. Thinking ourselves to be in control is self-deception. Our whole American way of life is based upon this. But this past year should have shaken our faith when it has been revealed just how shaky the infrastructure of our first-world society is. A pandemic or epidemic can destroy the economy! If the electrical grid goes down for any length of time, we are plunged literally and figuratively back into the dark ages! We are trapped, and we starve or freeze along with millions!! If the financial infrastructure goes down, we lose our checking account, savings, our investments, retirement, and perhaps anything we owe money on – homes, cars, and the like. If the supply chain goes down any worse than it already is, the store shelves go empty. *My financial advisor keeps telling us that the place where we have our retirement investment is absolutely safe and secure. I beg to differ! There is nothing in our world that is absolutely safe and secure! But we don't seem to know it. We live in this protected bubble!



The widows in the early church – some of them knew all about disaster. They were living it! Their husband had died. They hadn't expected that! He had been the family breadwinner, so now they had no money, nor the means to get any! They had no food. Some were in danger of losing their home. Some may have already lost their home! Paul says that these destitute widows were learning the most important lesson of all – how to put their faith in God. That almost seems like a cliché, but it is not! They were learning the all-important lesson that when people fail, God does not! When circumstances pile drive us into the ground, God lifts us up! It seems naïve to believe that, but life confirms this truth!

Widows who were to be supported by the church had a litany of tests to pass. [Vs. 9,10] Over 60: faithful to her husband while he yet lived (and, we can assume) of an unsullied reputation since his death; raised her children well; hospitable; was a humble servant in the church - helping the elders with people in trouble, or with troubled people; and known for doing good to people in general! In other words, these widows that qualified, worked hard serving in the church and community! They did not earn a salary. They were simply serving Christ. The apostles thought it was appropriate that church serve them back and help with providing for their physical needs, because they were at an age where they could not work long hours to make the usual pittance that the poor labored for. Unfortunately, the younger widows in the church at Ephesus did not have a good reputation. It appears from the text that they had developed a reputation for trying to lasso another man. On top of that, they were not spending their excess time serving Christ, but causing trouble - prying into things that were none of their business, and were going about spreading and trading juicy gossip and speculation! So, Paul counsels Timothy that these should not be enabled. To provide for them when they were doing nothing to provide for themselves would have allowed them to continue what they were doing! It was bad enough that Paul knew of instances where they had even caused some to turn away from Christ! *I have had people gossip about *me* – total speculation – speculation that they have shared with others in the church, and those people have believed them - were shocked or outraged, and then left the church,.. even though there was not a grain of truth in it – not even a grain! This has happened a couple of times, and I was totally in the dark until years later they came back months or years later and told me what the person had said, and they apologized for believing them! What I am saying is that gossip and speculation are not the harmless pastime that some people seem to think they are! A great deal of damage can be done to reputations, and to that of Christ Himself and His purposes! We all have to think of that before blurting out what “we heard”!



Anyway, the bottom line here is that leading a church can get really complicated. No one can say that leadership in the church is uncomplicated. Working with people can be VERY difficult. It isn't always, but sometimes it is impossible! Many people make such tangles of their lives! To unravel that can be virtually impossible! Even pastors or elders cannot help everyone. If a person is not inclined to follow and obey Christ, our help seems only to further complicate matters. So we have to be careful when and where we step in, or we can easily make a bad situation worse!

Listen - pray for your elder board before criticizing them. Be thankful for you hear of a decision you disagree with, or that makes you mad – ask one of them about it. You will inevitably find that the elders were trying to do the right thing. Maybe they made a mistake. Church leaders are not God and they are certainly not infallible! If it is a really serious issue in your mind, get it clarified by a second elder before you start something! Give your perspective, but do it humbly and not with arrogance or anger! In this way you are careful to be a part of the solution, not part of the problem!

