

Armagh Baptist Church – 1st August 2010
The Life and Times of Timothy 11
1Timothy 5:1-16
Caring for Older Folk in the Congregation

Introduction

We come this morning to 1 Timothy ch.5. The first two verses are really general remarks from Paul that belong more in Ch.4 than in Ch.5, because they are instructions to Timothy himself, again addressed to him simply because he was a young pastor trying to deal with a difficult situation in Ephesus, correcting those who were older than himself. His job was to stop the Elders who had gone off the rails and were preaching false doctrine, and to do that he would obviously have to rebuke them and correct them using God's Word. That's partly what God's Word is to be used for (2 Tim.3:14-17).

However in vs.1 & 2 Paul tells Timothy to **be careful how he does it**.

He's telling Timothy not to rebuke an older person harshly but to try to do it in a positive way. In other words, not with the desire to win the argument and to lose the man, but to be more concerned about winning the man back to the Lord, regardless of whether he himself won the argument or not.

I'm sure if you think about it, you'll realise that is a very difficult thing to do. To tell somebody they are wrong, to try to correct them, and to bring them back to the Lord and back to the Truth of His Word, all the while not being harsh with them or angry with them, or losing your temper with them. And yet that was what Timothy was being asked to do. He was to encourage these people back to the Lord, not to turn them away from the Lord by treating them too harshly.

That is a very fine line to travel, and a very hard task to perform, but the key that Paul suggests is to see those people you are correcting as family members - part of the same family as you are - the family of God.

He says, **treat older men, as you would treat your father**, even when you are rebuking them. It's extremely hard to rebuke your own father, so maybe that's why Paul tells Timothy to correct an older man as if he was your own father. If you think about it like that, you'll not rush into doing it too often!

He also tells Timothy to **treat younger men like brothers** - as equals, not people to put down or lord it over, but to encourage them to go on with the Lord even as you try to do so yourself. Give them someone to look up to.

He was also to **treat younger women as sisters** - but with absolute purity. Recognise that the women younger than him in his church were also part of the family of God, so he was to treat them with care. He was to love them as he would his sisters, but he was to make sure at all times that he treated them

with care, and that his relationships with them never became risky or dangerous, and that they were always kept above board.

Then Paul also told Timothy to **treat older women like mothers**.

To have a high regard for them, to treat them with care, maybe even sometimes to seek their advice or counsel about certain matters. If he treated them as if they were his mother then he would certainly have respect for them

So in the Church, as fellow believers, we are members of the Family of God, and within that family we must work hard at our relationships so that they might be an example to the watching world of what a close family should be like, not a dysfunctional family, as is more often the case!

Incidentally if you want the other side of the coin of what Paul was saying here, look at **Titus 2:1-8**. There you'll find the responsibilities of older men, older women, younger women and younger men. And of course Timothy was to set an example to them all!

But if you'll come back now to 1 Timothy 5, you'll see that from v.3 right down to v.16 Paul takes a whole section to deal with the subject of **Widows**.

Why does he spend so much time on widows?

Well if you look at Acts 6:1-7 you'll see that it was in order to care for Widows that Deacons were first appointed in the Early Church. So it's obvious that from the earliest days of the church there would have been a recognised list of widows that the diaconate of each local church would have been responsible for feeding and caring for on a daily basis.

You see in those days there were no State Benefits, no Social Security, and no Pensions. Most of those things are only an invention of the 20th Century!

So a woman really did depend on her husband, or her male children, to support her completely. If she lost her husband and had no sons, she was absolutely destitute. She had no income, and no means of support. The Early Church obviously saw this need, and very early on in their existence they sought to meet that need as best they could.

Think about it, 2 out of the 3 people that Jesus raised back from the dead while he was here on earth were men who were needed to go on providing for their relatives who were women: The son of the Widow of Nain, and Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Without her son and without Lazarus those women had nobody to provide for them. That was the harsh reality they faced. So the church was simply carrying on doing what the Lord had begun to do: To look after 'those who were really in need'. The key phrase in this passage. James says in his letter that this is a mark of real Christianity (1:27) –

“To look after widows and orphans in their distress.”

Within the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland, we have what is known as the Irish Baptist Orphan Society, which is a fund that enables us to do the same. Incidentally, if you know of any widows or widowers with school age children (single parent families) who are finding it hard to make ends meet, and who are in some way connected to our church, then let us know, and we might be able to help them in this very practical way on a monthly basis.

But why did Paul need to take 15 verses to talk about how the church at Ephesus should care for these widows?

Well it seems to me that in Ephesus, if you look carefully at this passage, they had a very definite **list of widows** that they helped as a church (v.9 & 11). But more than that, it seems that this wasn't just charity they were receiving, it seems that these widows actually performed a service for the church in return. They were almost like a band of workers in the Church at Ephesus. They had something to contribute to the life of the church, even as the church contributed to meet their needs on a daily basis.

- **That's Fellowship; it's not Charity.**

It was as if the church had given them a part-time paid job, at a time when nobody else would have employed them. The Church was meeting need in a very practical way. I wonder have we something to learn from them today?

(N.B. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 Paul's principle was very clear. If you haven't got a job, well you're not going to be idle, the church will try to help you as best we can, but you're going to do something in return on order to get that help. You have something to offer the church even as the church tries to help you. He didn't encourage idleness - in fact he was doing the opposite - he was putting people to work, so that they wouldn't be idle, in order that they might get something to live on.)

I think if you look at verses 9-14 in the light of what I have just said, you'll see how Paul is concerned to avoid idleness (v.13), and to only help those widows who were busy helping others with good works & service to the saints (v.10). I wonder is there a link with 1 Timothy 3:11 here? Maybe we are wrong to translate that as meaning just deacons' wives; maybe it should be 'women.' Were these 'widows' like 'an order of women workers' within the church?

Now I'm sure the Ephesian Church wasn't able to help absolutely everybody who came knocking on their door. Any Church's finances are limited - they are not a bottomless pit. So in this chapter Paul is giving guidelines to Timothy about those widows that were the church's responsibility, distinguishing them from others who were clearly *not* their responsibility.

1. SOME WIDOWS HAD RELATIVES STILL LIVING. (vs.3-8 & v.16)

Here we have a very important Biblical principle that all of us need to take on board. The Commandment to *“Honour your Father and Mother”* doesn't stop whenever you leave home and get married. It continues as long as you, or they, live. If they become too old or frail to look after themselves then we as children, or even grandchildren, have the first responsibility to look after our elderly relatives. None of us knows what way we are going to end our days here on earth, but if it came to it, I'm sure most of us would like to be cared for, in our closing days, by our loved ones. Hard though that may be!

(v.4) This is putting our religion into practice, and it is pleasing to God. (cf. James 1:27).

(v.8) But men, don't just leave it to the women to do! Here this verse says, *“If anyone does not provide for HIS relatives, HE has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever!”*

That is strong language. We all have the first responsibility to look after our own elderly relatives. Obviously there may come a time when they need full-time nursing care, and we are no longer able to give that. But nevertheless **we** have the responsibility of making sure they are properly taken care of.

(v.16) Here it gives the reason why we should first of all care for our relatives, so that they will not be a greater burden to the church with its limited resources.

Or maybe nowadays, no greater burden than necessary on the State. On Panorama last Monday night – It said that now in 2010 there are 4 people working for every one retired person. In 2050 there will only be 2 people working for every retired person. So providing a State Pension for everybody is going to be a huge burden on the tax-payer by then!

The principle behind this passage is a positive one. The reason given for providing for some more than for others, is so that limited resources can go to those who are really in need - those who have no-one else to look after them.

(v.7) Paul tells Timothy to give these instructions so that no-one could point the finger of blame at us as a church. He is probably meaning from the outside watching world. *i.e. “If that's Christianity, they're not very good at looking after their old people!”* – It would be far better if the opposite could be said instead!

2. SOME WIDOWS WERE YOUNG ENOUGH TO RE-MARRY. (vs.11-15)

A second reason for not including some widows on this list was their age. According to Paul, if they were younger than 60 they shouldn't go on the list of widows who were really in need of the church's help. He's probably not thinking of 59 year olds here, but he's talking about "younger widows" - he's probably thinking of *much* younger ones. He says they shouldn't be put on this list. They should regard themselves as eligible to re-marry.

(v.14) He counsels them to get married again if they can. Her new husband could then support her, and indeed she could find useful service again by raising children and looking after her home. She shouldn't in all the mixed emotions of those early days of bereavement put her name down to commit to service in the life of the church, and to dedicate the rest of her life to serving the Lord in this way. It could be that the Lord had some-one else for her, so she should wait to see if the opportunity for re-marriage would come along.

Now in (vs.11-13) Paul sounds very hard on these younger widows who want to get re-married, but he's not. He just seems to be speaking from experience. That if they felt the need to marry before, then it was likely they would feel the need for such companionship again. It's the going back on a solemn promise to serve the Lord in the church context that he is concerned about. Better for them not to make it in the first place, if remarriage was remotely possible, than to make such a pledge and then go back on it - that's what Paul was saying.

3. SO IT WAS ONLY CERTAIN WIDOWS THAT WERE REALLY IN NEED. **(vs.9-10)**

Paul has been whittling down the list of widows to those who were "*really in need*" of the church's help. It's not that he begrudges the help, it is simply that there was only so much to go around. He wanted the church to be as big a help as possible to those who really needed it.

This phrase occurs again and again throughout this chapter:-

(v.3) "Give proper recognition to those widows who are *really in need*."

(v.5) "The widow who is *really in need* is the one who is left all alone. She puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and ask God for help."

God is the only one she can turn to. She is all alone in the world.

(v.9,10) Here Paul recommends that such a person will be 60+.

But more than that he lists the following further criteria:-

* She must have been faithful to her husband while he was alive.

* She had to be already well known for her good deeds e.g. bringing up her children, showing hospitality, washing feet, helping those in trouble, and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. These were areas she could now help with in the life of the local church.

So v.16 ends reminding us again that "the church must help those... *who are really in need*."

CONCLUSION

Times of course have changed, but there are principles here that we can and should apply to church life today.

May God open our eyes to see those who are really in need around us and may He give us great wisdom and compassion to seek to meet those needs as best we can as a Church in the coming days. Amen