

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Christian Culture: Caring for Widows

Honour widows that are widows indeed. (1 Timothy 5:3; recommended reading 1 Timothy 5:3-16)

While only one verse appears above, your reading should include verses three through sixteen of this chapter. Throughout this paragraph Paul treats the question of "widows indeed" at length. What is a "widow indeed"? How does this lesson apply to us and to our church culture today? In an age where far too many professing Christians operate from the "What's in it for me?" perspective, whether they ever state their thought so directly or not, this benevolent and caring spirit must be taught and practiced in the church. If such godly traits are contagious, we need to start an epidemic.

First century Roman culture did not offer Social Security, Medicare, or other senior/retirement benefits to its citizens. Even if it had done so, many first century Christians were slaves who had no legal standing or protection under Roman law. Thus a widow had no means to provide for herself. How would she survive? Instead of trying to reform the governmental culture, Paul urged Timothy and the churches to whom he wrote to reform their own lives and culture.

In another societal issue Paul urged Philemon, a wealthy believer, to take his former run-away slave back into his home, not as a rebellious slave to be punished, but now to be received in loving fellowship as a brother in Christ. Instead of organizing an anti-slavery movement against the Roman government, Christianity fostered the equality of the brotherhood of believers within its subculture, thus eliminating the basis for slavery. Contemporary Christians who attempt to transform civil government could learn a profitable lesson from these New Testament examples. We shall never realize utopia in this world, but within our church cultures we can establish little beachheads of godly and nurturing embassies that look forward to our homeland and an eternal utopia to come.

Under Paul's instruction, Timothy was to establish a concept within the Ephesian church that ensured sufficient care for those who could

not care for themselves, in this case, older widows.

Paul lists a number of qualifications for this unique category of "widows indeed." The establishment of the office of deacon (I believe) occurred in Acts 6 due to an oversight in the church's care for a group of Gentile widows. Unlike the office of ministry, the office of deacon does not appear from the beginning of the church. It exists to address specific needs, so it was implemented when that need first surfaced. Based on this passage in Acts and Paul's instructions to Timothy in this letter, we could make a substantial case that the care of widows in Ephesus was to be administered by the deacons, a specific reason for Paul to go into significant details regarding the office and qualifications in the third chapter.

Paul's list of qualifications serves to guide a church's benevolence well, even in our vastly different culture today.

1. A widow with surviving family members is the responsibility of her family, not the church. The family should see that her needs are met. Even in our culture, it would be wise for a church to exercise caution in supplementing a widow who has surviving family members. The church's influence should be to urge them to accept her care as their responsibility, even if governmental programs exist that facilitate that care.
2. Verse 8 emphasizes this family responsibility quite clearly. Any family member who refuses to accept the care of a widow within the family has denied his faith and is less caring than an unbeliever. In Mark 7:9-13 Jesus confronted the Jews with their traditions that contradicted the word of God, their Old Testament Scriptures. He chose as an example of their traditions that conflicted with Scripture their forsaking

of parents in need, not at all unlike our passage and its “widows indeed.” The Jews avoided caring for their older family members by asserting that they had pledged all of their surplus funds as a gift to God in the temple. They set up a nicely crafted “guilt-trip” for their parents. “Do you want me to give this money to you or to God?” Jesus saw through their sinful practice and condemned it. He reminded them that God required honor, including personal care, of parents in the Ten Commandments. They could not neglect their parents out of pretentious devotion to God.

3. A “widow indeed” must be at least sixty years old. Paul urged the younger widows to remarry and engage themselves in productive family life as a wife and mother. Take the time to study the word “guide the house” in 1 Timothy 5:14. She is to accept her role as an active and productive member of family life. A younger widow who receives the church’s financial assistance would be liable to become a gossip rather than a servant of spiritual maturity. A word to the wise, does this point not make it crystal clear that no Christian should engage in any conduct that might be interpreted as prying into others’ personal lives or gossiping about their personal lives?
4. To qualify for the church’s care under this concept, the “widow indeed” must have lived a consistent life of devotion to the faith. Over a long and productive life in the faith, she must have demonstrated selfless care for others in the faith. She would likely be the last person who would expect the church to care for her. If possible, she would still be looking for ways to minister to others rather than receive the church’s care. She doesn’t expect services from the church; through a lifetime of devotion to the faith she expects to serve.

First of all, this lesson assigns a specific responsibility to the church for the care of its older members. In our culture various governmental social programs assume a significant financial burden for their care. However, the fact that government has taken this

role does not exempt a church from ensuring that its true widows, its “widows indeed,” are adequately served during their final years. It would be altogether fitting that a church provide supplements to the less-than-adequate care provided by these programs. More to the point, such care presumes that the church, particularly its deacons, is intimately involved in the personal life of its members. Visitation among the members should be so commonplace that the church is constantly aware of its members’ needs and circumstances. Rather than soliciting contributions from widows to fund their lavish lifestyles, as with the case of some highly public television ministries, the New Testament church culture seeks opportunity and legitimate needs to which it can minister.

Even in our setting, a church should exercise wise caution in providing for widows who have family members. Paul prohibits the church’s care for widows with family members as clearly as he urges the care of those who do not have a family. The church should wisely respect this example. Like many of the governmental assistance programs that were espoused with good intentions, the church should not communicate to family members that their obligations are optional. It should clearly communicate the gravity of a family’s personal responsibility for its senior members. The New Testament church culture should never communicate to any of its members that they are entitled to a “free ride.” Paul rather directly warned against extending care to those who are able to work (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Our society has witnessed the erosion that inevitably follows when able-bodied people who are able to work receive financial aide. Human nature, unchecked by the moral ethics of the Holy Spirit, will take advantage of any “free ride” available.

Our particular church sometimes refers to itself as a “commuter church.” We live across a wide geographic distance. That complication, further aggravated by the growing traffic problem in the Los Angeles basin, makes regular visitation quite difficult. It does not exempt us from this Biblical mandate. Occasionally our women have organized visitation to older members who cannot attend services or take care of many of their personal needs. More power to this ministry, may it become more routine than novel. In addition several of our members, who are retired, but still healthy and active, spend regular time ministering to our older members who cannot care for themselves. May their tribe increase!

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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