

Family Matters: Honouring the Elderly

*Honor widows who are truly widows.
(1 Timothy 5:5 ESV)*

*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.
(James 1:27 ESV)*

Honouring the Elderly

October 22nd, 2017

1 Timothy 5:1-16

Assistant Pastor Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 5.

Today we are continuing through our Family Matters series. Pastor Paul mentioned a few weeks ago that Christian ethics can be summed up like this: Live like who you are and love others as God in Christ has loved you.

The Gospel changes us. It has to. If you're not changing from one degree to the next then you have not seen the grace of God in Christ. As we walk through this series we're shining the light of the gospel into every corner of our family life to see if true, Christian change is taking place. This series is something of a "checkup".

Today we're shining that light into the nursing home and we're asking the question: Has the Gospel changed the way that we view and care for the elderly? Today's topic is not remarkably dissimilar from the topic of adoption that we discussed two weeks ago. In fact, the Apostle James put these two together when he wrote:

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:27 ESV)

James teaches us that right religion does not turn a blind eye to the vulnerable. Those who are in greatest need ought to be our greatest concern. That's really something to think about isn't it? James

says that Christian living – Gospel centered living – seeks out those who are neglected and loves them as Christ has loved us.

This is true of those who are just entering into the world, and this is true of those who are preparing to pass on into eternity. Today we are asking the question: How should we honour the elderly? To answer that question, please look with me at 1 Timothy chapter 5. We will read from verses 1-16. Hear now from God's holy, inspired and transforming Word:

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers,² older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

³ Honor widows who are truly widows. ⁴ But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. ⁵ She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, ⁶ but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. ⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

⁹ Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, ¹⁰ and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. ¹¹ But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry ¹² and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. ¹³ Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. ¹⁴ So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. ¹⁵ For some have already strayed after Satan. ¹⁶ If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows. (1 Timothy 5:1-16 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Paul gives us some helpful principles here that inform how we ought to go about honouring our elderly but before he gives those instructions he sets out something of a foundation. Before walking Timothy through all the nuts and bolts of church benevolence he reminds him of this basic, foundational truth. The foundation is this:

The Foundation: The Church Is a Family

Look at the way he instructs Timothy in verses 1 and 2. He says:

“Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers,² older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.” (1 Timothy 5:1-2 ESV)

This is a family affair Timothy. These aren't your constituents. They're not your audience. We're not business associates. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ then you have been born into a new family.

In the same way that Timothy needed that reminder, I am convinced that we need that reminder as well. We can nod our heads in approval until the cows come home but do we really LIVE like a family? Do you really treat the older men and women in our congregation as fathers and mothers? Do you really view the younger men and women as brothers and sisters? It's a probing question, but we need to ask it of ourselves because everything that Paul is about to explain will be built on this foundation.

Do you understand that part of your new identity as a Christian means that the church is your family? Jesus was clear about this teaching. He said:

“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold **now in this time**, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.” (Mark 10: 29-30 ESV)

For many people, following Christ means leaving behind a family. For some of you who are here today, your relationship with your biological family has been altered forever because they do not approve of your faith. Some folks who are with us today don't get invited to the family parties anymore. But Jesus gives this beautiful promise: He tells us that we will receive *right now* a hundredfold of that which we lost. You may have lost your mother when you chose to follow Christ, but you have received a church full of mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters!

Do we believe that church? Are we inviting our church family into our homes to share meals together? Are we carrying each other's burdens? I would hazard a guess that there are people in this room who feel terribly alone. We are called to take that very seriously. We are a family in Christ and we must commit ourselves to live that truth out every day. Amen? Amen.

So, with this foundation in place, Paul puts forward two basic principles that inform how we should honour the elderly.

Two Principles for Honouring the Elderly

Paul uses the term “widow” in this section, and I want to briefly explain the cultural significance of the term. In the first century world, societies didn’t have welfare plans, RRSPs or retirement homes. In that culture, there was nothing for a widow to do to provide for herself. If an elderly woman’s husband died then she was left to depend entirely upon the generosity of others.

Therefore, Paul understood that Timothy needed some thoughtful direction regarding how he should care for this pressing need.

With that in mind, when we talk this morning about how to honour the elderly, I’m thinking less about the “freedom 55” grandfather who is golfing three times a week and more about the elderly man or woman who is living in a state of dependence. I’m thinking of the men and women who are living in the nursing homes, or who have enormous mobility issues, or who are wrestling with dementia or Alzheimers. This text teaches us how to care for the people that the culture has turned a blind eye to. And the first principle I see in Paul’s text is this:

1. Unashamedly Prioritize the Household of Faith

Listen to what Paul says in verses 9-10:

⁹ Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, ¹⁰ and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. (1 Timothy 5:9-10 ESV)

Look at that first sentence. “Let a widow be enrolled.” Clearly, there was a list of sorts that Timothy was in charge of. And Paul says, “If you’re going to add someone to that list of widows that we support, you make sure that she is a godly woman. You make sure that she is a Christian.”

As I say that, I imagine that there are some folks here who find this a tad offensive. But we need to look past our cultural offense and wrestle with this because here it is in God's Word! The church has a limited amount of resources. If you need to choose between supporting a woman who has served the Lord faithfully for her entire life or a woman who does not know or love Christ you support the woman who loves the Lord. She's your mother in Christ. End of story. The church can't put unrepentant rebels and sinners on the payroll while servants of Christ languish and suffer. You need to prioritize care for your church family.

Jesus said this very thing. This is Jesus' description of the coming judgement day:

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these **my brothers**, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:31-40 ESV)

Did you catch that last line? "As you did it to one of the least of these **my brothers**, you did to me." Who are the brothers and sisters of Christ? Christians! We will give an account for how we cared for the Christian brothers and sisters among us who were in greatest need. We will give an account for how we loved a brother through his final days with Alzheimer's and for how we did or did not make time to visit our sister in the nursing home.

Are we to overflow with love and generosity to the outside world? Of course we are. God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45) and we're called to adorn the Gospel with good works (Tit. 2:10), BUT the clear Biblical principle is that we must unashamedly and unapologetically prioritize the household of faith.

The second principle I see here is this:

2. Unashamedly Prioritize Those with Less Support

Look again at verses 3-4:

“Honor widows who are truly widows. ⁴ But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.” (1 Timothy 5:3-4 ESV)

In a similar vein, he says later:

“Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age,” (1 Timothy 5:9a ESV)

Once again, Paul is helping Timothy to make wise decisions with the limited resources at the church’s disposal. “You can’t help everyone, Timothy. If you try, you’re going to stretch yourself too thin and you’ll be a help to no one.” Paul is teaching Timothy to have the hard talks with the church.

The hard talk goes something like this: Hey Steven, your mother is applying to come under the church’s provision as a widow but we don’t have the resources to care for anyone else at this time. You need to be caring for your mom. I know you’re busy and I know it’s hard, but your mom is your responsibility.

I can imagine Timothy sitting with his “widow care committee” and having a tough discussion like this: “We have ten new applicants to come under the church’s care, but as of right now we only have the resources to care for two more. Of the ten, only five of these women are followers of Christ, so that narrows things down. Of the remaining five, two have children and grandchildren who are still alive. Of the final three, one is still only 37 and able to work or find a new husband. So, I think we know what our decision ought to be today.”

We’re going to walk through some of the familial applications of this principle later on, but the take away for us as a gathered church is this: We must unashamedly prioritize those with the least support.

It is not the job of the church to support Stanley’s grandma while Stanley catches rays in the Bahamas. It is not the job of the church to payroll a young, able-bodied believer who just doesn’t feel like working.

For some people, the church is the only support network that they have. If we are careless and foolish with our resources, those folks will be left with no one. We will wind up hurting the people who are biblically mandated to be helping. We need to be wise. We need to actively find the people who need the most help and we need to give them our best.

Response

Those are the two principles I see in this morning's text. While we may not be facing the exact cultural circumstances that Timothy was facing with the widows in Ephesus, those principles certainly ring true for us today. There are a great number of people in this city who need support and assistance. We need to be good stewards of the time and the resources that God has entrusted to us. So, with these principles in mind, I want to put forward three practical implications that spring from this text. The first is this:

1. We Must Provide for Our Biological Families

The Apostle Paul couldn't be clearer on this issue. Look at what he says in verse 8:

“But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (1 Timothy 5:8 ESV)

I don't want to soften this rebuke. It needs to be said and it needs to be heard. If you are unwilling to care for your parents in their old age then you have denied the faith. The welfare systems of the state and the generosity of the church do not exist so that you can hand your parents off as if they are someone else's concern. They are primarily and fundamentally YOUR concern.

If that means building an in-law suite then get building. If that means cancelling the family vacations for the next few years than so be it. Think about it: Would we turn a blind eye to a young couple who continued spending their money on vacations and luxuries while their newborn was malnourished and was cared for by a rotation of volunteers assembled by the church? Absolutely not! We would say, “The party is over you two! This is your child and it is your responsibility to care for him.” In the same way, there will come a season when we will need to care for our aging parents. That season will be hard. That season will be expensive. We will sacrifice former luxuries and comforts in that season and, God says, so we should! What is the fifth commandment? Honour your father and mother.

Before we move on, I want to clarify something. This text reminds us that the financial care for our elderly should fall on the shoulders of their children. I wanted to make sure we heard that loud and clear. However, I also want you to hear this morning that we want to support you as you honour your parents. It's your job to walk with Dad to the finish line as his mind is eroded by dementia, but it is our job to support you as you walk in obedience. It's our job to pray with you, to ask how we can help, to grieve with you. You don't have to walk through this impossibly difficult season alone. The principle here is not that we can't walk with you. The principle is that we can't walk this path for you.

2. We Must Provide for Our Faith Family

The biological family unit is the primary line of support. And, according to Scripture, the church family is the secondary line of support. Let's hear that this morning. The government is actually third in line. When God's people are in need, we don't pawn them off to the state, we roll up our sleeves and we get to work.

That said, I want to think with you this morning about how we can care for the elderly in our church community. I talked with Pastor Bill on Monday of this week because I wanted to make sure I put forward some practical ways in which we could respond to this text. Here are some things you could start doing today to serve God's people:

- You could volunteer with the congregational care committee. If you know Pastor Bill at all, you know that he and June tirelessly visit the seniors of our church in their houses and in nursing homes. They do an incredible job, but we can't sit back and leave that enormous responsibility to one couple. For this reason, we established a committee that serves under pastor Bill. If you think you could bring a frozen meal to someone's home and sit down to have a conversation with them then this is a great opportunity to serve. We need your help.

- Another helpful idea is this: There are people in this church who are caring for loved ones with demanding needs. In some instances, those needs are so demanding that the family member providing care can't find three hours to get out of the house to do errands. Some of us are not able to volunteer at the youth group or to stack chairs at RCC. But do you think you might be able to volunteer three hours to sit with a brother or sister in Christ with Alzheimer's so that their spouse can go grocery shopping? Three hours of your week could change someone's life.

These are just two simple and practical ways in which you could honour the elderly in this church. Perhaps you were touched by the sermon on adoption but find yourself unable to bring a little person into your home right now. Maybe you could adopt a mother or a grandmother in the nursing home and commit to visiting them weekly.

Let's think creatively about how we can honour the elderly. Finally, the last implication I see before us is this:

3. The Household of Faith Should Stand in Beautiful Contrast to Culture

Our culture does a lousy job of honouring the elderly. Our North American worldview seems to view older people as an inconvenience – a drain on tax dollars. How many men and women sit alone in our nursing homes with no one to visit them? In our high-speed, consumer-driven, pleasure-pursuing culture we just do not make time to honour grandma.

And unfortunately, the church began to look like the world for a season starting in the 90's. We adopted the “targeted church” model and we began to promote ourselves and cater our services to reach particular demographics. Strangely enough, nobody in the targeted church world ever thought to target the widows and orphans. Seniors across North America were not-so-subtly pushed out of the church in the name of evangelism.

I'm sorry. That was a tragic season in the church, and as someone who was coming into his teens right in the thick of it I will confess that I bought it hook, line and sinker.

It humbles me when I consider Jesus' words that we quoted earlier:

And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:40 ESV)

The way that you treat “the least of these” says everything about the reality of your faith. Christians should be leading the charge in caring for the most vulnerable. And the great lengths at which we go to love the elderly in our midst should cause the world to take notice.

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35 ESV)

Why does God call us to prioritize the household of faith in our generosity? So that God’s people will be noticeably distinct! Think of it this way: Imagine you met a guy who coached the local soccer team, volunteered at the food bank and always made everybody around him feel like a million bucks. Well, suppose you visit that man’s house, excited to learn more about what makes him so special, only to discover that his kids are malnourished and his wife is miserable and neglected. That would be a little disillusioning, wouldn’t it?

Well let’s make sure that this never happens to the church! Let’s make sure that we don’t spend all our time and resources helping the local humanitarian organizations before first caring for the people who are in need amongst us.

I think it would say something to the watching world if the staff at the Leacock Centre started saying, “Hey, did you ever notice that our Christian residents are getting visitor after visitor?” Perhaps God will use our care to stir up the hearts of lonely nursing home residents to say, “Whatever you people have, I want it!”

Can we acknowledge this morning that the aging process is a miserable process? We hate that our bodies break down. I think that’s a large part of why our culture treats the aged the way that they do. We put the elderly away in nursing homes and keep them out of sight and out of mind. We don’t want to be reminded that our bodies are but dust.

Christians, we need to see aging and death differently. It’s true that we are not now what we were made to be. Because of sin – because we live in a fallen world – our bodies get sick and our minds deteriorate. But thanks be to God, He hasn’t left us this way! He is going to restore that which we have lost. He is going to make all things new! He is going to bring us into His glory forever and there we will be glorified with Him! These broken bodies will be restored and we will become that which God made us to be!

You see, we care for the elderly because, even though the world has written them off, we know who they are becoming. My friend and mentor Tim Kerr reminded me of a beautiful sermon that C.S. Lewis preached entitled “The Weight of Glory” and in that sermon Lewis says this:

“It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor...

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship...

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal...

Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”¹

The elderly Christian man who can't remember his own children is a tragic sight in the world's eyes. But we know that he is living on the cusp of glory. There, he will be given a glorified, eternal body and a brilliant and renewed mind. There his face will shine like Moses after he descended Mount Sinai and, if the world could see him in that glorified state, they would be tempted to fall on their knees and worship him! God is going to finish what he started! He's making all things new! We are to be a people who look beyond that which is seen into that which is eternal.

So church, let's recommit ourselves to caring for those who need us the most. Let's extend the life-giving love of Christ to those who are considered the least in our world. Let's invite God to open our eyes to see who our elderly brothers and sisters are becoming in Christ. Let's pray for the families who are running the last leg of the race. Let's care for our loved ones even at great cost to ourselves. Let's do all of this to display the great wonder and splendor of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We belong to him, and behold! He is making all things new!

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.

¹ Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory*. (HarperOne, 2001), pp. 45-46.