

1 Timothy 5:9-16 — What Does The Bible Say About Single Moms And Elderly Women?

May 28, 2017

Welcome to the CrossWinds Spirit Lake Campus. We are back in our study of 1 Timothy after a one-week siesta for graduation. Daniel — my youngest son — graduated last weekend. Our family was busy hosting and attending graduation parties. Right now I have enough leftover pulled pork that I will still be eating it until next Christmas.

I was especially thankful for Pastor Stephen filling the pulpit, not just because he allowed me a chance to enjoy the weekend, but like many of you, I was thankful for his message to our students. I was thankful for his challenge to our graduates to make sure they take time to celebrate this important moment but that they would also cast all their anxieties about the future on Jesus knowing he cares for us, as it reminds us to do in 1 Peter 5:7.

This morning, as we dive back into 1 Timothy, Paul is talking about a very important subject. We are looking at women that are left alone and vulnerable in the world. We will see what God wants younger women to do after losing their husbands. We will also see what God wants older women to do after their husbands pass into the arms of Jesus. We have a lot to cover. We will also have some fun along the way. We will learn what it takes to be a good nun, and we will throw in a little Maria Von Trapp and the “Sound of Music.” Hold onto your seats as we dive in.

Since this is the beginning of summer and a number of you are new, let me take a moment to set the scene. The book of 1 Timothy was a letter written by

the Apostle Paul to a young pastor named Timothy. Paul left Timothy in charge of the church in Ephesus. Pastoring this church was stressful. Ephesus was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The church in Ephesus was a mega church of thousands of people. Timothy was only a little older than 30 when Paul gave him the difficult job of leading this church and addressing a number of issues that had taken the church off track.

In the first third of 1 Timothy Paul told us people in the church, and even leaders in the church, were drifting away from Jesus. They were treating Jesus like a pair of bell bottom jeans. Once he was in style but then he was out of style. They were looking for something new in church that they could enjoy instead of Jesus. Paul was adamant in the beginning of the letter that Jesus never goes out of style. He is the only way to know God. Jesus must always be the central focus of the church. We can never allow ourselves to be distracted from him. That is why the church is still all about Jesus 2,000 years later.

In the middle third of the letter Paul instructed Timothy on godly leadership. Timothy was to restore order in a church that had drifted away from Scripture. Paul taught what godly church leadership looks like with proper elders and proper deacons.

Two weeks ago, when we were last in the book, we began the third portion of the letter where Paul started teaching us about relationships in the church.

We learned the church is not like your CrossFit class or the noon hour Kiwanis. The church is not a club. It is a family. We treat those who are older than us like mothers and fathers. We give love, honor and respect. We look out for

them and care for them. We treat those who are our age and younger as brothers and sisters and help them like we would our own family.

After only two verses on the church as a family, Paul jumped into a pressing problem faced by the early church and the modern church. **How do we treat widows?** I say this is a pressing problem in the modern church because the biblical definition of a widow is not just an 80-year-old elderly woman with a recently deceased husband. The word widow in the Greek literally means a woman left without care and protection in the world. *A widow is a woman of any age whose husband either died, deserted her or divorced her.* Single moms, when you read about widows in the Bible, it is talking about you. You are a woman without a husband, left without care and protection in the world.

Since widows were so vulnerable, the first ministry of the early church was to widows. We read about it in Acts 6. We see throughout the Old and the New Testaments that God has a heart of great compassion for women left in a vulnerable position after the death, divorce or desertion of their husbands. The Bible is filled with passages that show God's loving heart toward widows. We don't have time to go through them this morning so I will simply show you one from the book of James.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction... James 1:27 (ESV)

If you want to do what is close to the heart of God, take care of orphans and widows that are left alone and vulnerable in this world.

Let me show you why care for widows was so important in the ancient world. There was no government assistance programs to help you after your

husband left you. You didn't get alimony checks from your spouse. His wages were not docked to pay child support. You had to fend for yourself. Divorced women or deserted women were also considered undesirable. They had a hard time finding working work. They also had a harder time remarrying. Many of them were forced into prostitution to survive. This is why the early church in Jerusalem set up food distribution for the widows in the church. Many other churches in the ancient world did the same.

This is apparently what happened in the church at Ephesus. It had a list of widows in the church for whom it provided care. It was a long list of widows on the free church lunch program. Here is where it gets tough. Paul told Timothy it was time to shorten the list. The church would care for fewer people. Last time we were in this passage, Paul told Timothy two ways to shorten the list.

The church should limit its long-term care to those who are true widows.

- 1. If any widow has family members, like children or grandchildren, it is the family's responsibility to care for its relatives.** As Christians, when our parents or grandparents age, it is not the government's responsibility to care for them. As Christians, it is our responsibility to care for them. Nursing care facilities are great. Many of them provide amazing care to people in need. Unfortunately, some people use them as nothing more than granny dumping zones so they can live their own lives without the inconvenience of caring for an elderly parent. That is not Christian. We have a biblical responsibility to obey the fifth commandment and honor our fathers and mothers in their elderly years. That is not extraordinary Christianity; that is ordinary

Christianity. If a widow in need has biological family, it is their responsibility to care for their family members, not the church's responsibility.

2. **If a widow can provide for herself, she should.** The second way Paul gave to trim the list was to remove widows that were in a position to financially care for themselves. Paul talked about the danger of a self-indulgent widow. This is a woman whose husband died and left her plenty of money to survive. Instead of using her finances and freedom to serve her family and serve others, she used the freedom and finances gifted to her in her elderly years to serve herself. This is a widow that has expensive plastic surgery to look 20 years younger. She takes exotic trips and buys expensive clothes. By the way, there is nothing wrong with caring for yourself, going on a trip and buying clothes. Those things are not wrong in themselves but don't make those things the focus of your life. If you have a new-found freedom and finances in your elderly widowhood, use that freedom and finances to help you serve others, not focus on serving yourself. Paul said the elderly widows that just serve themselves are zombies. Their husbands may already be dead but they are as good as dead because they don't do anybody any good. Take them off the free church lunch list. They don't need the money. They should be using their finances and freedom to serve others instead of just pander themselves.

Let me clarify. Should the church extend benevolence to single mothers, elderly women and those facing a crisis? Yes, of course. Benevolence is one thing. When it comes to long-term care, if a widow has finances to care for herself, she should for herself. If a widow has family that can care for her, they

should provide the long-term care for her. It is when a vulnerable widow has no finances and no family that the church family steps to the plate and assumes long-term care.

As we dive into this next section on widows, Paul talked about a special list of widows. These are elderly widows that lost their husbands but instead of wanting care from the church and being self-indulgent and thinking their elderly widowhood is all about serving themselves, these elderly widows wanted to give the remainder of their lives to serving others full time in the church. They didn't want to make a lot of money. They just wanted help surviving. Today, we call these kind of women nuns. As we jump in we are looking at nuns.

What does the Bible say to older widows and nuns?

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 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)

In the early church there was a group of widows that served in some kind of officially recognized role. The Bible doesn't give us many details but we see a group of these widows hinted at in Ephesus. Paul was talking about a group of widows that could be enrolled on a list. Remember these are not qualifications for a widow needing care from the church but they are qualifications to be an elderly widow that officially represented the church and gave care to other people.

By the time you get to the first and second centuries, just after the Bible was written, Ignatius and Polycarp — who were second generation church leaders — wrote about orders of widows that gave themselves to the care of others in the church. We call them nuns. Tertullian, who is another early church

father that lived at the end of the second and into the third century, also wrote about this order of widows that gave the remainder of their lives to serving others in the name of Jesus.

These early church fathers told us what these nuns did. The nuns gave themselves to prayer, nursing the sick, caring for orphans, visiting Christians in prison, evangelizing women, teaching new Christian women the Bible in preparation for baptism, discipling younger women, helping them raise their children and showing hospitality to strangers.

What were the qualifications for widows that wanted to join one of these orders and give themselves to full-time caring for others in the church?

1. **You must be over 60.** Notice Paul was not talking about financial need at this point. He was talking about age and Christian character qualifications. Age 60 was considered retirement. It was considered the age when someone's sexual passions had cooled sufficiently that she wouldn't be driven by her sexual desires. If you wanted to be part of this nun order that gives itself to caring for others and were funded by the church, you needed to be a widow over age 60.
2. **You must have been a one-man woman.** This is how it literally reads in the Greek. It doesn't mean married only once. It refers to fidelity of heart and life. It is the mirror image qualification for elders and deacons who were to be a one-woman man. This was a one-man woman. These were ladies who lived in complete fidelity to their husbands. They never slept around. There was no extramarital involvement. They were not flirts. If you were a woman over 60

but didn't live in your 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s a life of exemplary sexual fidelity, you were disqualified for this group. Why was sexual faithfulness over the course of a lifetime so important? These elderly widows, the nuns, were teaching young mothers how to raise their children and live their lives. They didn't just teach with the words of their mouths but they also taught by the example of their lives. These elderly widows needed to have modeled sexual fidelity to their husbands so the younger women had someone to look up to in this area and want to emulate.

3. **You must have a standing reputation for good works.** There are five ways this reputation for good works would have been seen in an elderly widows's life.

3.1. **Brought up children.** This literally says nourished children. That doesn't mean she just fed them. It means she brought up her children in the Lord. She may not have all perfect children but they were looking for elderly widows that did a great job raising children to follow Jesus. That way these women could teach the younger women how to raise their children to follow Jesus. Incidentally, I think the reason this heads the list is because it is the most important work a mother can do. You may be a woman that was the CEO of Coca-Cola but if you didn't do a good job of raising your children to love Jesus, you don't qualify for this list. If God gives a woman the opportunity to raise children, raising those children for Jesus is the most important work she can do.

- 3.2. **Shown hospitality to strangers.** She must have had a reputation for responding to the needs of people she did not know in the community. This was especially important in the ancient world where motels and inns were trashy and dangerous places. The church was looking for women that had a reputation for joyfully opening their homes to give strangers a bed to sleep in, a warm nourishing meal around the family dinner table, and when everyone went to sleep, she put her guest's dirty laundry in the washer and dryer so she could bless him or her with clean clothes when he or she left in the morning. That was a woman of legendary character when it came to hospitality to strangers.
- 3.3. **Washed the feet of the saints.** Our house was surrounded by mud. We only planted grass this Friday. For more than a year every time we walked in the yard our feet were covered with dirt. Mud was everywhere around the garage, and it was impossible to keep out of the house even when we left our shoes in the garage. In the ancient world it was a muddy mess all the time. The roads were not paved. They were made of mud and animal droppings. People wore sandals. When you arrived at a home, your feet were disgusting. Before anyone came into someone's home, their shoes were left at the door, then the mud and dung were washed from your feet. Typically, it was the lowest slave in the house that washed the stinking manure from between your toes. Paul said, "You are looking for elderly women that had a reputation for joyfully humbling themselves to do the most menial tasks when it came

to serving others. You are looking for women that washed the feet of everyone at the church door when they came for worship. They washed the feet of the saints, not because they were lowly slaves, but because while they were dignified and respected women. They were extremely humble women that gladly served others no matter what it took.” If you were a woman that said, “I am too good to get on my hands and knees and wash feet,” you didn’t qualify.

- 3.4. **Cared for the afflicted.** This could also be translated as *to help those under pressure*. That could be emotional, mental, physical or even financial pressure. The church was looking for elderly widows that had developed a reputation for caring for others when they were under pressure. This would have been an elderly woman that was known for nursing the sick to health. She was known for making meals and giving them to families in need. When a family was under pressure, she would give of her time to help a woman pack and move. She would give of her time to help clean a friend’s house because the family in the house couldn’t because they were so overwhelmed in a crisis. This type of woman was also known for adoption. People in the ancient world didn’t have the technology to produce easy abortions. Unwanted children were abandoned after birth. This was common practice in the ancient world. Those unwanted children were left in the woods to die of exposure or to be eaten by animals or birds. Some of the children found in the woods were taken by people of wicked desires and used for the

purposes of prostitution or slavery. Christians, especially Christian women, were known for rescuing these abandoned children in the night and adopting them as their own. Christians were the first to set up orphanages. The homes of many Christian women in the first century were recognizable because they had big families and many of the children were obviously adopted. These Christian homes screamed to the watching world that good Christian wives and mothers were different. They used their homes to bless unwanted children with life when they were facing certain death.

- 3.5. **Devoted themselves to every good work.** Devoted is a strong verb. It means to energetically and diligently give oneself to good deeds. The elderly widows the church was looking for were women that bubbled over with good works toward others throughout their lives.

Those are the kinds of widows they wanted on the list of widows supported by the church to care for the needs of others in the church. They wanted mature, proven, godly Christian women whose husbands were dead, and family was moved out of the house but they still had an incredible reputation as an exemplary wife and mother. They had legendary standing in their care for people in need and for doing all kinds of good work. Those are the kind of women you want the younger women following. Those are the kind of women you want leading the women's ministry in your church. Those elderly widows are as precious as gold to the church when it comes to blessing others. That is why the church would support them to do their work.

Now, I realize as soon as we talk about elderly widows and nuns, this whole thing feels foreign. We don't have an order of elderly nuns over the age of 60 at CrossWinds that are dedicated to doing good to serve. If we did, I am not sure they wouldn't look good in a black and white habit.

While we don't have this order of elderly widows, all of us will agree that those who qualified for this list were women that were known for living successful and exemplary lives as Christian women. These were the heroes every younger woman was to admire and follow.

In addition, I want you to notice no woman made this list by starting to build these qualities into her life when she reached age 60. She built these qualities into her life as a woman in her 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s. It was after she developed a legendary reputation as a mother and wife in her younger years that she was given the honor of being supported by the church and recognized by the church for her exemplary character in her years as an elderly widow.

Young women and women in mid-life with a family, these verses give you a job description of what it looks like to be a glowing success as a Christian wife and mother. When you wonder if your life matters, if you are making an impact and what it feels like to be a success when you don't get a paycheck, look to these verses. A successful Christian wife and mother is not judged by the size of her paycheck, she is judged by these qualities and the excellence of her home and children.

What does the Bible say to single mothers?

But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having

abandoned their former faith. 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. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. 1 Timothy 5:11–14 (ESV)

In the “Sound of Music,” Maria Von Trapp was a young woman planning to be a nun. Part of her duty as she prepared nunhood was to care for the six children of Georg Von Trapp after the death of his wife. Maria did a wonderful job with the children. After Georg saw she was an excellent mother, he asked Maria to become his wife. Torn over what to do, Maria ran away. She eventually came back and agreed to marry Georg. Maria says in her biography that she was angry on her wedding day. She didn’t want to marry Georg. She wanted to be a nun instead of a wife. She said she married Georg for the sake of the children and eventually learned to love their father.

Was it right for young Maria to want to be a nun instead of a wife and mother? According to this passage, absolutely not. She was a young woman. She wasn’t even close to the age of 60, which was the youngest age Paul said was allowable for a woman to enter that order.

This order of nuns, dedicated to serving others, started out biblically based as something for widows over the age of 60. Over time, the Catholic Church lowered the age and qualifications so young women, like Maria Von Trapp, could become nuns. Why did this happen? They drifted away from these texts where Paul forbade younger widows from committing themselves to the order of nuns.

If you are woman whose spouse died, deserted or divorced you, the Bible gives you clear instructions. Don’t become a nun. After the grief over the loss of your husband passes, get remarried, have children and devote yourself to

managing a family. Now I realize finding the right guy to marry is a problem in and of itself that keeps some young widows single for a long time, and I can't solve that one this morning.

Paul's concern was younger women whose husbands either died or divorced them were so heartbroken they thought they would never love again. In a younger widow's grief she may have wanted to commit herself to this order of nuns and serving others in the church for the rest of her life. Paul said, "That will not work out well." After the grief passes young widows will desire to marry and have a family. Younger widows will get tired of the lonely night and the empty days. They will seek a relationship. If she doesn't seek a relationship, she will eventually find herself vulnerable to inappropriate relationships because she is lonely. Isn't that true single moms?

If you are a younger widows, aspire to remarry and to create a family and a home that will bless children and countless others.

Additionally, if you are a young widow that makes a promise before God and before the church that you will give the rest of your life to singleness and serving, it isn't a good idea to go back on your promise to God and the church when you meet someone and want to get married. It is dishonest before God and gives the wrong impression to others when you make a promise and then you break a promise. You will become known as the promise-breaker girl, not the promise-keeper girl.

Paul said it is a good idea for younger widows and single moms to receive benevolence but to set their hope for the future on getting remarried, having

children and raising a family, not on staying locked in perpetual grief and singleness.

Watch out for the trap of idleness.

Paul said there were other problems with younger women getting on the list of nuns who were supported by the church to do full-time ministry. He said they became idlers. That means they got lazy. They got used to sitting around and wasting their time. Since the church was footing the bill for their rent and food, they wasted time acting like social butterflies going house to house doing nothing productive with their lives.

Idleness and a lack of adequate work contributes to other things. A life of idleness is a major contributor to depression. If you are depressed, it may be because you don't have enough work. Idleness is also a serious contributor to controversy. In the ministry, people say to make sure your church is focused on doing something or it will be focused on fighting about something. When people aren't busy on a project, they will focus on petty grievances.

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 (ESV)

The other thing that happens to younger widows that take a vow of celibacy to serve others in Christ is they are prone to the trap of becoming gossips and busybodies.

Watch out for the danger of gossip.

Gossip is senseless talk. It means talking about everybody else's business instead of worrying about your own business. The reason younger widows gossip

about everybody else's lives is because they have so little to talk about in their own lives. Gossip is a particular struggle for some women.

The easiest way to see this is to look at daytime television. There is no football or baseball. The guys are working. Daytime television is filled with soap operas focused on relationships, affairs and family. Who watches soap operas? People who are idle. People sitting home in the middle of the day with no life of their own so they want to hear the juicy gossip about somebody else's life. If you are a young woman that was deserted or divorced, get married to a good guy and you won't have time to tweet about everybody else's business when you are so busy taking care of your own business.

Watch out for the danger of becoming a busybody.

The other things single, young widows do is become busybodies. A busybody isn't somebody who talks about other people's business. They are people that sticks their noses in other people's business. They meddle. This is the classic mother-in-law that sticks her nose in her daughter's marriage and meddles. Refuse to meddle in other people's lives. Get busy. Get a family of your own and you will be too busy to meddle.

You see, if you were going to be enrolled in this list of widows that served others in the church, you needed to be a very mature woman because you would spend time counseling other women, children and families. If the struggles in a family was something you blabbed about, you would ruin it. These nuns needed to be mature, responsible women of character.

Paul said younger widows should marry, bear children, manage their houses and give no opportunity for Satan to produce slander against them. It is God's desire for widows after death, desertion or divorce to focus on remarrying, having a family and pouring their gifts and energies into creating households that blesses countless others. Staying in singleness and grief over the loss of a husband leaves a young widow emotionally vulnerable, tending toward idleness, gossip and meddling.

Use your home to care for the lonely and vulnerable in your family.

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 5:16 (ESV)

Paul summed up his emphasis on the family. If you are a Christian woman and there are widows in your family left alone and vulnerable in this world either through the death, divorce or desertion of their husband, it is the family's responsibility to care for them. It is the church's responsibility to care for those who are truly widows. True widows don't have a family or finances behind them so the church family steps to the plate and offers them long-term support.



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