

## The Character Of A Deserving Widow

### 1 Timothy 5:9-10 (NASB):

<sup>9</sup> *A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man,*

<sup>10</sup> *having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work.*

“Nobody grows old by merely living a number of years. People grow old only by deserting their ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up interest wrinkles the soul. Worry, doubt, self-distrust, fear and despair ... these are the long, long years that bow the head and turn the growing spirit back to dust.

“Whatever your years, there is in every being’s heart the love of wonder, the undaunted challenge of events, the unflinching, childlike appetite for ‘what next,’ and the joy and the game of life.

“You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubt; as young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear; as young as your hope, as old as your despair.”

—Douglas MacArthur.<sup>1</sup>

“John Wesley traveled two hundred and fifty miles a day for forty years; preached forty thousand sermons; produced four hundred books; knew ten languages. At eighty-three he was annoyed that he could not write more than fifteen hours a day without hurting his eyes, and at eighty-six he was ashamed he could not preach more than twice a day. He complained in his diary that there was an increasing tendency to lie in bed until 5:30 in the morning.”

—*The Arkansas Baptist*.<sup>2</sup>

There are many points of view about aging. We have just read a couple of them. But in this section Paul addresses an issue involving widows who are beyond the age of sixty. I think we will see here the high regard God has for women.

In verses 3-8 Paul spoke of the “needs” of widows. In verses 9-16 he is referring to the

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<sup>1</sup> Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers*. Garland TX : Bible Communications, 1996, c1979.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

work they do. The first verses dealt with all widows, but here in verses 9-10 he is speaking of widows who have been placed on some kind of list. So who are these widows on this list? Well, first of all we know that they are over sixty years of age.

Now should this support be provided to all widows over the age of sixty, or only to those who are willing to work in the church? Another question also arises. Would the church categorically deny support to a woman under the age of sixty? Well, were these questions not dealt with in 1 Timothy 5:3-8? Is it necessary to go over this ground again? Well, I do not know if there is an answer to that question. If there is, I have not been able to find it. We can, however, recognize that these widows have the qualifications required to perform a number of functions within the church that were first stated in 1 Timothy 3:11 (NASB): "*Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.*" That description seems to fit quite comfortably with Paul's description here in 1 Timothy 5:10 (NASB): "*having a reputation for good works; and if **she has brought up children**, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work.*"

From verse 10 we may gather that widows who have brought up children are capable of passing on good advice to younger women. They can help advise them how "*to love their husbands and to love their children,*" as well as providing other valuable advice.

Titus 2:3-5 (NASB):

<sup>3</sup> *Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, **teaching what is good,***

<sup>4</sup> *so **that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children,***

<sup>5</sup> *to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored.*

As a matter of fact looking again at verse 9, is it not implied that these older women are capable of providing all kinds of sound advice to those who are younger? Tertullian suggested that such women "*utilize their experienced training in assisting all others with counsel and comfort*" (*On The Veiling Of Virgins, IX*).<sup>3</sup>

*"In the early church such a widow was called 'the intercessor of the church,' 'the keeper of the door,' and 'the altar of God.'* Their duties seem to have been: giving good counsel to the younger women, praying and fasting, visiting the sick, preparing women for baptism, taking them to communion, and giving guidance and direction to widows and orphans who were supported by the church (see article "*Woman*" in I.S.B.E., IV. 5, Vol. V, p. 3103)."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Baker New Testament Commentary, p.174.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Almost anyone who is sensitive to the needs of others in the church knows the value and credibility that most people (men and women) place in older women. They may not follow such advice, probably out of pride or foolishness, but we would bet they know the advice is sound.

Paul lists his reasons why *the younger widows*—those less than sixty years of age—were to be excluded from much of this work in 1 Timothy 5:11-15.

1 Timothy 5:11-15 (NASB):

<sup>11</sup> *But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married,*

<sup>12</sup> *thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge.*

<sup>13</sup> *At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention.*

<sup>14</sup> *Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; <sup>15</sup> for some have already turned aside to follow Satan.*

Going back to 1 Timothy 5:9 we see that Paul states a second requirement for being included on this list, “*having been the wife of one man.*” This does not mean that she could not have remarried if her husband died. Had Paul meant that he would have been contradicting what he said in verse 14: “***I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach.***” It would therefore have been unreasonable to ban them from the widows’ list for being obedient to what Paul instructed them to do.

The expression “the wife of one man” simply means that while married she had been faithful to her one husband. Then the list of requirements continue in verse 10: “*having a reputation for good works.*”

**Anyone who functions in a role that represents the church must have a good reputation.** Then Paul follows with five “*if*” clauses:

She can be placed on the list if she also has brought up children, shown hospitality to strangers, washed the saints’ feet, assisted those in distress, and devoted herself to every good work. That might result in a very short list of women if we applied it to the church today.

As I was deciding to use a couple of verses from the following passage to emphasize how women in that time treated those in need, I could not help but be moved by the total message of the passage, so we will read all of 1 Kings 17:1-23 (MSG):

<sup>1</sup> *And then this happened: Elijah the Tishbite, from among the settlers of*

*Gilead, confronted Ahab: "As surely as GOD lives, the God of Israel before whom I stand in obedient service, the next years are going to see a total drought—not a drop of dew or rain unless I say otherwise."*

<sup>2</sup> *GOD then told Elijah,*

<sup>3</sup> *"Get out of here, and fast. Head east and hide out at the Kerith Ravine on the other side of the Jordan River.*

<sup>4</sup> *You can drink fresh water from the brook; I've ordered the ravens to feed you."*

<sup>5</sup> *Elijah obeyed GOD's orders. He went and camped in the Kerith canyon on the other side of the Jordan.*

<sup>6</sup> *And sure enough, ravens brought him his meals, both breakfast and supper, and he drank from the brook.*

<sup>7</sup> *Eventually the brook dried up because of the drought.*

<sup>8</sup> *Then GOD spoke to him:*

<sup>9</sup> *"Get up and go to Zarephath in Sidon and live there. I've instructed a woman who lives there, a widow, to feed you."*

<sup>10</sup> *So he got up and went to Zarephath. As he came to the entrance of the village he met a woman, a widow, gathering firewood. He asked her, "Please, would you bring me a little water in a jug? I need a drink."*

<sup>11</sup> *As she went to get it, he called out, "And while you're at it, would you bring me something to eat?"*

<sup>12</sup> *She said, "I swear, as surely as your GOD lives, I don't have so much as a biscuit. I have a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a bottle; you found me scratching together just enough firewood to make a last meal for my son and me. After we eat it, we'll die."*

<sup>13</sup> *Elijah said to her, "Don't worry about a thing. Go ahead and do what you've said. But first make a small biscuit for me and bring it back here. Then go ahead and make a meal from what's left for you and your son.*

<sup>14</sup> *This is the word of the GOD of Israel: 'The jar of flour will not run out and the bottle of oil will not become empty before GOD sends rain on the land and ends this drought.' "*

<sup>15</sup> *And she went right off and did it, did just as Elijah asked. And it turned out as he said—daily food for her and her family.*

<sup>16</sup> *The jar of meal didn't run out and the bottle of oil didn't become empty: GOD's promise fulfilled to the letter, exactly as Elijah had delivered it!*

<sup>17</sup> *Later on the woman's son became sick. The sickness took a turn for the worse—and then he stopped breathing.*

<sup>18</sup> *The woman said to Elijah, "Why did you ever show up here in the first place—a holy man barging in, exposing my sins, and killing my son?"*

<sup>19</sup> *Elijah said, "Hand me your son." He then took him from her bosom, carried him up to the loft where he was staying, and laid him on his bed.*

<sup>20</sup> *Then he prayed, "O GOD, my God, why have you brought this terrible thing on this widow who has opened her home to me? Why have you killed her son?"*

<sup>21</sup> *Three times he stretched himself out full-length on the boy, praying with*

*all his might, "GOD, my God, put breath back into this boy's body!"*

<sup>22</sup> *GOD listened to Elijah's prayer and put breath back into his body—he was alive!*

<sup>23</sup> *Elijah picked the boy up, carried him downstairs from the loft, and gave him to his mother. "Here's your son," said Elijah, "alive!"*

Also see II Kings 4:8-11 and Acts 16:40. Now in 1 Samuel we see the humility Abigail was willing to demonstrate.

1 Samuel 25:39-41 (MSG):

<sup>39</sup> *Then David sent for Abigail to tell her that he wanted her for his wife.*

<sup>40</sup> *David's servants went to Abigail at Carmel with the message, "David sent us to bring you to marry him."*

<sup>41</sup> *She got up, and then bowed down, face to the ground, saying, "I'm your servant, ready to do anything you want. I'll even wash the feet of my master's servants!"*

Why would Abigail offer to wash the feet of David's servants? She was a humble servant. One of the first changes that should take place in a believer is that we learn to be humble servants to God and Christ and one another. Jesus set the example Himself.

John 13:10-17 (NLT):

<sup>10</sup> *Jesus replied, "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean. And you disciples are clean, but not all of you."*

<sup>11</sup> *For Jesus knew who would betray him. That is what he meant when he said, "Not all of you are clean."*

<sup>12</sup> *After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing?"*

<sup>13</sup> *You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am.*

<sup>14</sup> *And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet.*

<sup>15</sup> *I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.*

<sup>16</sup> *I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends the message.*

<sup>17</sup> *Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them.*

Jesus wants them to understand the absolute connection between having their sins washed away by their faith in Him and how that faith makes itself evident through humble service. In John 13:12-17 Jesus challenged the disciples on the basis of what He had just done. If the master of the servant is willing to humble Himself and become a servant to His servants, should they not be willing to do the same thing for one another? He was further about to suffer a humiliating and excruciatingly painful death upon the cross so that His servants might receive the gift of salvation and eternal life without experiencing

the same kind of suffering. I must ask myself, would I be willing to do the same thing for any of you? If my answer is not, yes, I should get out of the ministry.

And if your answer is not, yes, you are not following what Chris

If we were in a prison for our faith and the guard said “One of you must die.” Would we be willing to die so the others might live? It would expect you to do. You might want to spend some quiet time thinking about that and asking Jesus to help you do the right thing through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We also need to understand that this command from Jesus flies in the face of the culture of that time. You see, **humility was considered to be a sign of weakness**. Jesus, however, obviously regarded performing the most lowly of acts to serve others as an honorable thing to do. So for someone to wash another’s feet is a definite reflection of their faith in Jesus and willingness to obey His commands.

The next requirement for widows over sixty is that “*she has assisted those in distress.*” Early Christians were persecuted and oppressed. They needed the help of fellow Christians to relieve their suffering.

Galatians 6:1-3 (NLT):

- <sup>1</sup> *Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should **gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path**. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.*
- <sup>2</sup> ***Share each other’s burdens**, and in this way obey the law of Christ.*
- <sup>3</sup> *If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important.*

The last requirement listed in 1 Timothy 5:10 is “*if she has devoted herself to every good work.*” That certainly includes everything else that a Godly woman would do. This may sound like a repeat of the first part of this verse. However, not only must this widow “*have a reputation for good works,*” she must actually have been involved in doing these good works. To be placed on this list she must have demonstrated good works.

If there are any women here today that are over sixty, and I doubt very much if there are. But if there were, do you think you would make the list?

More on this next time.