

1 Timothy 11

1 Timothy 5:1-16

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Paul has written Timothy so that he “may know how one ought to behave in the household of God” (3:15) and in chapter 5 he continues to offer some specific instructions regarding Timothy’s behavior and that of particular groups of people in the church, groups distinguished by age and life situation.

Text Comment

v.2 Timothy was a younger man, as we read in v. 12 of chapter 4. Paul advises him, therefore, on how he ought to relate *as a younger man* to the variety of adults he will encounter in the Ephesian church. For example, if it becomes necessary for Timothy to admonish an older man -- either because he is one of the false teachers himself or has fallen under their influence -- he must do so in a manner appropriate to the difference in ages. There is such a thing, always has been such a thing as the “generation gap.” [Stott, 125]

Now Paul will advise Timothy in regard to his dealings with three more groups: widows, the church’s elders, and slaves. We’ll take just the first of those three groups tonight.

v.3 The Bible has a lot to say about widows and the church’s responsibility for them. The ancient world was a hard place for widows unless they were well to do and, of course, very few were. A woman who lost her husband usually lost her means of support, often lost her home, and lost as well her social position. There are certainly Christians widows today who will tell you that not all that much has changed from that day to this. The Bible describes the Lord as “the defender of widows.” [Ps. 68:5] And the law of God made special provision for them and their welfare. You will remember that the origin of the diaconate, as we read in Acts 6, is found in the need to provide better organized care for the church’s widows. Already, early on, the church knew it was responsible for her widows. James, you remember, defines pure religion as looking after orphans and widows in their distress. *But, not every widow required the church’s financial support!*

The phrase “truly widows” will occur again in v. 5 and again in v. 16. The woman who is truly a widow is the woman who is truly in need of the church’s support. [Mounce, 277-278] She is a true widow in the sense that she is truly alone, with no one to care for her.

- v.4 For the background of Paul's assumption that there were widows who did not require financial help, listen to this explanation of widowhood in the first century.

“The dowry, which was provided by the bride's father, always accompanied a woman to her marriage. It constituted an important legal aspect of marriage... In the event of a husband's death, the laws governing that dowry were clearly defined. A widow was cared for by the person in charge of that dowry. Two options were open to her. If she had children, she might remain in her deceased husband's home. There she would be maintained by the new 'lord' of the household, possibly her son. She could also return to her parents, taking her dowry back to her family.” [Bruce Winter in Stott, 130]

In any case, it is only right that children should look after their parents and God has made it clear in his Law that he expects children to honor their parents. That honor certainly requires financial support for a widowed mother.

- v.6 There are also spiritual conditions attached to the church's support for widows. The woman must be an earnest Christian seeking to live a faithful Christian life, not someone who simply wants the financial support so that she can live as she pleases. In other words, the church is not obliged to provide regular support for anyone and everyone regardless of the circumstances.
- v.8 If Roman law provided for widows, if even pagans know to care for their parents, then Christians most certainly should excel in the discharge of this obligation. It pleases God, it fulfills our obligation to our parents, it adorns our faith, and, as Paul will say in v. 16, it prevents the church from being burdened with an expense that ought to be met by somebody else. The stern language almost certainly suggests that there was a failure to meet this obligation in the Ephesian church, a failure that needed to be addressed. Perhaps the false teachers had secured a following among the widows of the church.

There are any number of implications of this sharp reminder of our duty for our parents and the duty of husbands for their wives. A life insurance policy and a program of savings for retirement are among them. Gentlemen, have you provided for your family in the event of your death and the loss of your income? Single mothers, of whom, alas, there is a growing number, have similar responsibilities for their children. Has someone been appointed to care for them should you die? But it means as well, for example, that if our parents should become infirm -- and many of them do in a culture like ours where people regularly live to old age -- we need to care for them as we are able. If one of them or both should need to move to a nursing facility, as happens often enough, we are not free to abandon them to the care of others, and so on. There was a saying in early Christianity,

“It is good to be old, if one is a Christian.” The reason was that there were folk who would care for you and do it lovingly, which was not regularly the case in the culture at large.

Now we move to consider not widows in general, but a certain class of Christian widows.

- v.9 I should tell you that some reliable commentators do not believe that we are changing subjects in v. 9 or talking now about an order of women church workers to which certain widows could belong. They maintain that the entire section, from v. 3 to v. 16 is about which widows will receive financial support from the church and which will not. Enrolling widows, in other words, was to put them on church support. The older godly widows who need it should receive the support; the younger and ungodly ones should not. That is all that Paul is saying. I’ve read the arguments pro and con and remain persuaded that Paul is talking about an order of church workers here, the requirements for membership in which were not the same as those of receiving financial support from the church. One consideration among others that weighed with me is that the early church very clearly thought that Paul was talking about an order of women workers to which only widows belonged. Origen would later remark that the order of widows “achieved the dignity of ecclesiastical rank.” [*Jo* 32.7 cited in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 1177-1178] The fact that there *was* an order of widowed church workers in early Christianity, and nobody doubts that fact, and that the church found support for it here in 1 Timothy 5 makes it hard for me to believe that Paul was not talking about any such thing here. The requirement that a widow be sixty years of age also makes more sense if Paul is talking about something else than the provision of monetary support. Was a 58 year old widow on her own?
- v.10 Widows would have been free, more than other women, to devote themselves to the ministry of good works and it appears from later sources that this became a feature of early Christian church life. Such women gave themselves to prayer, cared for the sick and orphans, visited Christians in prison, evangelized pagan women, and helped prepare female converts for baptism. The list in verse 10 of the “good works” that such a woman is to be well-known for doing is some indication of the kind of ministry she would undertake if added to the register of widows.

As we said when dealing with the issue raised by Paul’s mention of women in the midst of his list of the qualifications for the office of deacon, that in 3:11, there is a question whether this is the origin of the early church office of *deaconess*; that is, the deaconess was not simply a female deacon who served with the male deacons -- we have little evidence of that in the materials of early Christianity -- but was a specifically female office and, at least originally, an office of widows only. I mentioned then that Olympias,

John Chrysostom's close friend, was widowed as a young woman and it was a matter of controversy that she was made a deaconess long before she was sixty years of age, which seems to suggest that the church thought these verses in 1 Timothy 5 had to do with the qualifications for the office of deaconess. But if this is the origin of the office of deaconess, it becomes less likely, much less likely, that 3:11 refers to women deacons and not the wives of deacons. Hardly anyone has ever thought that there were *two* offices for women in early Christianity: the diaconate in general, open to both men and women, *and* the office of deaconess.

- v.12 This order of accredited women workers apparently required some sort of pledge or vow of continued singleness so as to remain fully available for the service such women were expected to provide. It is not a stretch to see such a statement as we have here as underlying the orders of nuns that were from early on a feature of Christian church life, though, of course, Paul's practical counsel in vv. 11-12 was flatly ignored most of the time.
- v.13 Such a ministry could also be a temptation to younger women, who would use the occasion for chit-chat more than for actual service.
- v.14 Paul has already said at the end of chapter 2 that for most women the primary sphere of their Christian life will be their homes and families. The false teachers were forbidding marriage, but Paul would have none of that. He is all for marriage; but at the same time he acknowledges its implications. With marriage comes a host of time consuming responsibilities. As the Indian proverb has it: "children tie the mother's feet!" There would be precious little time for organized church ministry for a woman responsible for a home full of children. The Bible is very sane about such things -- it has the sanity that our culture has lost -- it recognizes the practical necessities of life and is not troubled by them. Some women, to be sure, may live single lives, but most will not and Paul is usually writing about the general situation, not the exception.
- v.15 We don't know precisely how, but the problem of widows and their support was in some way tied up with the troubles in the Ephesus and the false teaching and false living that was undermining the apostolic foundations of that church.
- v.16 It appears that with enrollment in the order of widows, whatever it may have been called, came some level of financial support, but again, only if needed.

I suspect that the verses we just read give many of you the impression of a world long since gone, of a time and place far removed from our own. How is our church like the church in Ephesus? We certainly have no order of widows. Should we? It's a question worth our asking,

we who take the teaching of the Bible so seriously. But the fact is your deacons are dealing with these sorts of questions all the time. Who ought to receive support and who ought to receive that support on a regular basis? What do we do with someone who needs help and is a professing Christian, but seems to have no interest in living a faithful Christian life? This is the stuff of deacons' meetings month after month and year after year. What is more, a great deal of the church's important ministry is provided by the women of this congregation. It is amazing to me how little has changed from biblical times to our own. Our age is superficially different, but substantially the same. Both in the church and in our nation we are constantly arguing about who should and should not qualify for welfare. We worry about the abuse of generosity, about the effect the welfare state has upon the family and so on.

All of this is because human life -- and Christian life as a subset of human life -- presents us with a welter of very different personal circumstances. Some marriages are intact, faithful, and happy and both husband and wife live to a ripe old age. Finances have been handled responsibly, the children are long gone from the home when one or the other dies, and the remaining spouse is well provided for. I remember how proud I was when I realized how well my father had provided for my mother upon his death. Not only was her physical welfare provided for, a paid for home and adequate income to support her for the remainder of her life -- which, in the event proved to be some twenty three years -- but everything was so well organized that her life continued upon his death without a hiccup. Not the least stroke of a pen was necessary for her to continue to live in her home, to pay her bills, even to pay her husband's funeral expenses. There was money in the bank and more came every month, and it all already belonged to her. *Gentlemen, your marching orders.* Almost all of you are going to die well before your wife does.

On the other hand, many others are not so fortunate. The breadwinner died young, or he abandoned the marriage, or the family's financial affairs are a mess, or there isn't adequate income to provide for the family that remains, and so on. There is government aid in our day, as there was not in the first century, but, as we know, that can create its own often intractable problems. Should a single mother search for a job if any job she is likely to find will actually reduce her family's income? And so it goes. At prayer meeting we read the heartbreaking account of a little five year old boy on the Yakama Reservation, with no parents to speak of, being shuttled from house to house, effectively an orphan but too young to know what that means. Such is the Sacred Road ministry in White Swan! Someone has to care for that little boy! Someone has to pay his bills. But much more, someone has to love him and tell him how important his life is and teach him of God's love. And true Christianity, true devotion to God, true loyalty to Jesus, James said, will always be demonstrated in generous ministry to orphans and widows. (So be here Wednesday night to hear about the ministry of Safe Families!)

It is that principle that is being applied in Paul's remarks here and it has literally a thousand applications, hardly only to widows. The church is to care for people, generously, lovingly, and

practically. But it is to provide that care and support with discrimination and judgment. Its support is not to undermine the obligations that family members have for one another. Its support is not to encourage lax or self-indulgent living. These concerns are so fundamental and so inevitable that we should not be surprised that we face them today as a nation. The destruction of the inner city family and especially of responsible fatherhood was no one's intention when the Great Society programs were introduced in the 1960s, but those certainly were some of their most permanent consequences. Indeed, efforts at welfare reform during the Clinton administration were, in some significant degree, motivated by the fact that it was no longer possible to deny the sinister human and familial consequences, however unintended, of programs of government welfare.

Human nature is human nature. And the church, Paul is saying, should be the first to reckon with such practical considerations. Support unwisely given can encourage bad behavior, undermine the family, and destroy the reputation of the church, the very reputation that ought to be burnished and enhanced by Christian generosity to the needy. It is this dialectic of hard-nosed realism and open-hearted charity that is to mark the life of the Christian church. It is the worldly wisdom that is to characterize her judgments about people. It is this down-to-earth recognition of the realities of life at which the church ought to excel.

But I want to draw attention to this same sanity, this practical wisdom and realism that Paul is talking about in the first two verses of the chapter. Simple truth, but the more important in our day, when an entire generation appears to be forgetting this sensible, practical, and necessary advice. Men and women are not the same. Older people and younger people are different in highly important ways. We must relate to one another in ways that are appropriate to our various roles and stations in life. Before you think this not a very important point to make the subject of an evening sermon, let me tell you that there are a great many American Christians, including PCA Christians and perhaps particularly young PCA Christians, who would never think to say what Paul says in the opening verses of chapter 5! And never thinking to say it themselves, they will never teach it to their children.

Take, for example, Paul's admonition to Timothy to treat an older man differently than he would treat someone his own age. In almost all of human history and in almost all cultures this has been regarded as a sacred obligation rooted in the nature of things. But no longer in the modern west! Nowadays, young people speak to older people as if the difference in age and maturity were inconsequential. I remember Bill Buckley remarking on this profound social change, a change he had observed within the time of his own life. A young person trying to sell him something on the phone would ask, "May I call you Bill?" And Buckley would reply, "No; you may not!" His point was that this sort of chatty familiarity, this chummy egalitarianism is inappropriate. It is unreal. I am not a buddy of the young telemarketer on the phone. He's not my friend. He isn't a

sixty-five year-old's peer! And to act and speak as if he were is the communication of pride and disrespect. It is disrespectful to the older person and it is unhealthy for the younger.

I've lost count of how many young waiters and waitresses, young people at cash registers, and so on have looked at Florence and me and said, "How are *you guys* doing today?" A young person today, if the issue is raised, is very likely to say, "Well, so what? What does a person's age have to do with it? That isn't our culture anymore. We don't say 'Sir,' and 'Ma'am.'" But is it really a harmless innovation to remove the more elaborate courtesies that once distinguished the sexes and the ages? Here is John Stott.

"It seems to me artificial in the West when students breeze up to me and hail me by my Christian name, even though I am old enough to be their great-grandfather! The Asian and African cultures are wiser, since they encourage young people to address the older generation as 'uncle' and 'auntie.'" [Stott, 125]

Stott does not explain himself, but the fact is the manners that once governed exchanges between younger and older people and still do in many cultures, were and are meant to instill, preserve, and convey a sense of obligation, of submission, of respect and recognition, and of appreciation. They also were an important means of cultivating humility and responsibility in the young. And when those manners disappear, eventually the inner states and convictions they were meant to express and preserve disappear as well. It is arrogant for a young person to treat an older person as a peer and the fact that he or she doesn't know that is what ought to be most worrying!

In Leviticus 19:32, for example, we find the commandment: "You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God; I am the Lord." Is this simply an ancient convention that we are free now in the modern west to discard? Several replies to that question are appropriate. *First*, the obligation of the young to respect and honor the old is trans-temporal and transcultural. That is why it is enshrined in the Ten Commandments. As we know from our *Shorter Catechism*, the fifth commandment has to do with all relationships between inferiors and superiors, not just children and parents. So this was as much an obligation in the first century as it had been in ancient Israel and so as much an obligation in our day. What we have here in 1 Tim. 5:1 is a divine command. Young people are to respect older people for their age, for their seniority, for their experience and station in life. To fail to do so is always pride and usually foolishness. The young person who calls a much older person by his or her first name as if they were pals is likely a younger person who actually believes that he or she stands on a par with someone of much greater age and experience. He or she is likely to be a person who has little regard for authority and little understands how little he or she has to offer in comparison. This is all of a piece with the way God has organized human life and has taught us to cultivate virtue. It is God's law that we honor our parents, that we obey them, and that we submit to them *and it is God's law that we embody that respect and honor and obedience in our*

formal behavior. In the manners of the kingdom of God this healthy structure of life is instilled, preserved, and commended.

When William Wilberforce spoke of the need to “reform manners” in late 18th and early 19th century Britain, this is what he meant: the instilling of a social conscience by the establishment of a system of manners, of social behaviors consistent with a just and noble human life. Good manners are based on the value of other human beings and how we ought to treat people. Even on a smaller, personal scale, they are intimately related to the life of society as a whole. How we view the dignity and value of other human beings should influence the way we treat them in both small ways and large ways. If there are no small ways, the ways that come first, the ways of private and family life, the ways of ordinary behavior in the street and the market and the school, eventually there will be no large ways either! *Here are some examples.*

We are living in a culture in which older people are becoming increasingly disposable. Old people themselves in our culture worry in a way people did not worry even a single generation ago about becoming a burden to their relatives. Where did they get the idea that if they were old and infirm they would be a burden to their relatives? They got it from a culture that no longer expresses its reverence for age and maturity. Their only protection in that vulnerable stage of life is the respect that younger people have been taught to have for those older than they. If that respect is diminished or lost altogether -- as it must be if it is no longer expressed in public behavior -- no wonder we are talking more and more about assisted suicide!

We also live in a day when some children call adults and even their parents by their first names. Do you suppose that such children have the same respect for their parents, the same sense of the difference in their respective stations in life, the same sense of obligation to obey them? Almost certainly not! Are teachers more respected because students half their age call them by their first names as if they were peers? There is very little to suggest that they are. Is that leveling good for students or teachers? Do teachers retain the same sense of the dignity of their calling? And do such students appreciate how much they are dependent upon the wisdom that years of study have imparted to their teachers? Humility is a bottom grace. All the other virtues depend upon it, and the social conventions that used to cultivate humility in the young are all disappearing in our time. Isn't it interesting that the dysfunctions in our cultural life are almost all made visible in some fashion by the glaring absence of the very sort of considerations Paul urges upon Timothy in the first two verses of chapter 5. This is not irrelevant to modern life! The military is virtually the only institution in American life that still understands that if you do not instill a sense of these relationships of order by elaborate courtesies and disciplines, you will not retain that order or the respect it requires.

A second way of making this same point is that, according to Lev. 19:32 it is not enough to have respectful thoughts toward the elderly. One's respect and the recognition of one's obligation to

show that respect need to be embodied in behavior. It is a social act, a part of community life to embody the proper behavior so that all can see it, so that children will learn it, and so that we all will be constantly reminded of the nature of these relationships and the obligations that go with them. This is the power of culture to form and shape the deep patterns of a people's thought and life. What Paul is describing here, what Lev. 19:32 described before him, is a Christian *culture*, a way or pattern of life. Christians who nowadays talk so much about reaching *the culture* should be the last ones to fail to grasp how a culture subtly but profoundly shapes the way people think by shaping the way they behave; how outward patterns of behavior reflect inward convictions.

We are likely to hear young people nowadays quibble that such outward things don't matter; it's what is in the heart that counts. *That is never the Bible's viewpoint.* The fifth commandment places us under the obligation to respect our superiors, whether superior in station or in age, and no one should have to guess whether you do that. We are not Gnostics and none of us is just a soul! The mind and the body work in tandem and the Bible has never permitted us to think that if the mind is right it matters not what we do with our bodies. "You shall *stand up* before the gray head..."

The same applies to the manners that once governed men's interactions with women: opening the door for them, standing up when they entered the room, guarding their speech to a greater degree when women are present, and so on. No one imagined that if there were no man about, women would collect behind a door unable to open it for themselves. The point of the behavior was educative, preservative, and emblematic of what was understood to be the proper relationship between men and women and the special obligation of men toward women. No one should imagine in our day, no one can any longer imagine in our day, that the loss of that etiquette has left male/female relations unharmed. The loss of that elaborate etiquette has accompanied and helped foster the transformation of both the way men think about women and the way they treat them.

Ask a military person, how much time, how many millions of your tax dollars, are being spent dealing with sexual harassment in the armed services because they are dealing with a generation of young men who were never taught that they had a particular responsibility to respect women; that the nature of men and women made such respect a chief part of masculinity. What American boys are being taught nowadays of the special obligation they will have to treat women with a particular reserve and a greater respect? And what American girls are still being taught to demand such treatment of boys when they are men? In fact it is regarded as a crime against the modern insight to make such a demand. And what American feminists any longer think this has been good? Are we better off for this? Who thinks so? Even feminists have made a cottage industry of complaining about the boorishness of the American male, a boorishness that is not only unmanly and irresponsible but often deeply ugly in its selfish disdain. You will not,

cannot have gentlemanly behavior if it is not instilled in the young and if it is not learned to be expressed in small ways before the opportunity comes to express it in great ways.

Timothy is told here that his conduct with older women and younger women must be appropriate to the specific relationships in view. He's supposed to have a pretty good idea of how to treat different kinds of women specifically, himself, a young man. One talks to and treats his mother differently than he does his sister; and his sister differently than an unmarried woman his own age. I have long been fascinated by the history of John Chrysostom, the great preacher of 4th century Constantinople, and Olympias, the wealthy widow I mentioned earlier, who refused remarriage after her first husband died, became a deaconess, and founded a convent which happened to sit right next to the bishop's residence in the capital.

From John's arrival in Constantinople, he and Olympias formed a deep and lasting friendship. He was the only man ever allowed to enter the convent, she saw to his laundry, prepared his meals, and each became the valued confidant of the other. But, of course, both were committed to a celibate life. In some ways it is a tragic love story. A great novelist ought to write the story, a great movie director ought to make the film, perhaps Anthony Hopkins could play Chrysostom and Meryl Streep Olympias. It is almost impossible to deny that they were in love with one another and that there was a sexual attraction to their relationship, by which I mean the attraction of a man and woman for one another. But neither could or would give way to that strong attraction. They were certainly "acutely alive to the sexual dimension" of their relationship; one has only to read the great preacher's sermons to know how well he understood that aspect of life.

So how did they manage their purity? Chrysostom's biographer, J.N.D. Kelly, explains that "they employed (and as I read these words to you, think about what behaviors might be in view), "they employed a well-organised self-discipline (including, for example, the elaborate formal courtesy by which they distanced themselves from one another) to keep [romantic and sexual attraction] at arm's length." [*Golden Mouth*, 113-114]

There it is, "elaborate formal courtesy" as a means to preserve a proper order and appropriateness in a human relationship even when there were powerful temptations to betrayal and to disorder. We have abandoned that principle as a culture and we are reaping the whirlwind: sassy and rebellious kids, promiscuous young adults, grasping young people who want what they want when they want it and who are little inclined to respect the opinions of older folk who have experienced much more of life than they. These are not small losses, brothers and sisters. They reflect pride not humility, mulishness rather than a wideness of mind, selfishness rather than consideration, and a fundamental ignorance of how God made the world to work. These changes are a significant part of that revolution in manners and principles that is killing our society, making it more brutish, thoughtless, still harder for the weak and less fortunate, and has so terribly corrupted the relationships of men and women. Has the life of the American woman been

blessed by the disappearance of that honorable manhood that once required men to demonstrate in their outward behavior a special regard for women? It had always been understood that boys had to be schooled in such behavior; that it had to be formed in their youth. Was that wrong? Has American youth been rendered more wholesome and responsible by their being allowed to consider themselves the equals of those much older and experienced than themselves as they regularly are depicted to be on television sit-coms? These questions do not require an answer.

Manners such as govern our behavior toward people older than ourselves and our behavior toward the opposite sex are more than mere cultural conventions. They are the embodiment of values and of ethical norms. The reason we chew food with our mouths closed is because it is unkind to make someone else watch you masticate your food! It is arrogant and immodest to be so careless of the feelings of others. By being taught to keep your mouth closed when you eat, or to cover your mouth when you yawn, you are being taught to think about others and not just yourself. In the same way, a promiscuous society such as ours has lost its virtue in part because it lost that system of behaviors that taught young people how to express a proper relationship between men and women and how to preserve propriety and purity while still allowing for friendship, interest, and kindness.

We might think it a small thing that Paul wanted Timothy to behave himself in a manner appropriate to each relationship. But life is shaped by countless interactions between human beings. The more those interactions reflect and express the law of God and the nature of human life as God made it, the happier, holier, and more fruitful life will be. Accepted and expected outward standards of conduct help us immensely both to think and to do the right thing! *Parents, here are your marching orders.* Whether teaching your children the proper way to speak to their elders, or your boys the right way to relate to girls, what may be said and what should never be said, what should be done or not done, you are building into their sensibilities the structure of a godly and responsible and other-centered life. We are discovering that life without that structure is defenseless against the ravages of a debased culture such as ours, against the influence of media that relentlessly undermine the art of gracious living and of true masculinity and femininity, against of all the influences contributing to the coarsening of life, and against the now widespread assumption that outward behavior is less significant than good intentions, a lie the Devil has used to wreak havoc in human life for ages.

Some of us are young, some are old. Some are married and some are single. Some are financially well cared for, some are not. Some are even widows. In all of this we are just like the church in Ephesus. And like that church it is fundamentally important we must learn to manage and teach our children to manage our interactions with one another in appropriate ways to the people of God. Swirling in, under, around, and through these differences are all manner of temptations. The best way to begin to deal with them is to acknowledge the differences, recognize their importance, embrace the obligations that come with those differences and prepare our children to

meet those obligations by instilling in them those sorts of behaviors that give them strength in the face of those temptations.

Our church, like any and every Christian church, ought to be a place where the mature folk are treated with the respect and regard their age and life experience deserves; where men are particularly careful in their interactions with women; and where generosity and sound judgment are exercised at one and the same time. Highly practical stuff this, and very important.