

## 1 TIM 5:1-16—THE CHURCH AS FAMILY

**INTRO:** All of us come from a family and have a family. If we are single, most of us want a family. Most of our deepest memories and experiences involve our families. That can be for both good and bad. Because of the closeness of families, our joys are magnified, but so are our hurts, sorrows, and regrets. Little things, which might be forgotten with somebody else, can stay with us for a lifetime if done with a family member. As they say, “**Blood is thicker than water.**” That is why divorce, and estrangement within the family, are so tragic, cut so deeply, and hurt so much.

God created marriage and designed the family. The family is the fundamental unit in society—not just our society, but every culture and society in the world. So deeply is the idea of family built into human nature, that one could say that families are spiritual entities. In **Ephesians 5**, marriage is specifically described as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. This is what the Bible calls a “type” or a “shadow.” A type or shadow is a physical thing that points beyond itself to something greater. The temple in Jerusalem was a type, pointing to the true temple, namely, Jesus Christ and those connected to him by faith—the church. In fact, in the NT, approximately 11 or 12 times the church is explicitly called “the temple of God.”

In 1 Timothy 5:1-16, we see this same thing regarding the family. This passage is telling us that the church is the *true* family. The church is what our earthly families are pointing to. In fact, there is a deep interrelation between our earthly families and the church.

**O/S:** This passage is in three sections, and so we will look at them in order: **vv. 1-2** show us that the church is, indeed, a family; **vv. 3-8** reveal the interrelation between our earthly families and the church and show us the responsibility of the earthly family to the church; and **vv. 9-16** point us to the responsibility of the church to its own family members. Taken together, they are telling us that:

**PROP:** Families take care of their own.

### **vv. 1-2: [READ]**

In 3:15, Paul explicitly called the church “the household of God.” The Greek word he uses for “household” can be translated as either “house” or “household; family.” Although the church is sometimes compared to a building or temple, even when that is done it is said to be a “living” or “growing” building or temple. The context of **3:15** indicates that “household” or “family” is the correct translation. The “church” consists of living people—the living people of the living God. In short, the church is a family.

This is one of the emphases of the NT. In the OT, the emphasis is on marriage, family, and physical offspring. But in the NT, the emphasis is on the family of God. There is a shift from physical offspring to spiritual offspring. When we are born again, we become God’s spiritual offspring—we become his sons and daughters! Additionally, on 5 occasions the NT says that God has adopted us into his own family. IOW, we become his true, everlasting family. What could be better than that—to be the children of God himself?

In fact, Jesus sharply distinguished one’s earthly family from himself and our spiritual family in Christ. In **Matt 10:35-37** Jesus said **[READ]**. That is strong language. It does *not* mean that we must look down on or despise our parents, spouse, or children. It is a Hebrew idiom by which he is comparing our love for our earthly families with our love for himself. He is saying, “**Your love for anyone else, including your own earthly family—whom you do love and you should love—should be as nothing in comparison to your supreme love for me.**” And this was not just a one-time thing. He said similar things on a number of occasions in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Are any of us there? I don’t think so. But what he says is exactly correct. Why? Because he created us. He enables us to take our every breath. He and he alone redeemed us. He and he alone gives us eternal life. He will give us glorious new bodies and a glorious new earth where we will be with him and be like him forever—as a family—with no pain, no sorrow, nothing but love, joy, and fulfillment beyond our wildest imaginations.

Our love for and commitment to Christ, of necessity, reflects itself in our love for and commitment to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Joseph Hellerman wrote a book entitled *When the Church was a Family*. He studied the ancient Mediterranean world and found that allegiance to family and siblings took precedence even over a person’s relationship with one’s spouse. It is therefore no surprise to learn that the Greek word for “brother” or “sister”—*adelphos*—is found nearly 350 times in the NT alone! Jesus and the apostles take the fact that we are a new, true family in Christ very seriously.

Here in 5:1-2, Paul strongly reinforces the idea of the church as a family. He explicitly uses the language of family to describe the church. And this is showing us that our earthly families are the “type,” and the church is the true family. We know that, because our earthly families end when we die. If members of our earthly families are not believers, after they die we will never see them again. On the other hand, our spiritual family, the church, will last forever.

There are several practical implications of this. First, the terms “brother” and “sister” for people in the church must actually mean something—and that something needs to be a lived-out reality in our daily lives. If we take the words of **vv. 1-2** seriously and really look at older men and think of our own earthly father, older women as our own earthly mother, younger men as our own earthly brothers, and younger women as our own earthly sisters, the people in the church will become much more “personal” to us. We might even start treating them like beloved members of a real family—because they *are* our “real family.”

Second, by differentiating younger and older, men and women, Paul is recognizing that different types of people need to be treated in different ways. All people, regardless of age or sex, need to be shown love and respect. However, we naturally show (and should show) a certain level of respect and deference to our parents (and older people in general) that we do not typically show to our brothers and sisters (or younger people in general). We do that simply because of their age. On the other hand, we typically can be a little “freer” with our siblings (and younger people in general, especially younger men). These dynamics also apply in the church, since the church is a family.

Third, these verses are also telling us that people should not be sharply or harshly treated, even when they have done wrong, but should be exhorted and appealed to. The underlying meaning for the word translated “**sharply rebuke**” literally is “**strike at.**” Church leaders and Christians in general are not to act that way. Therefore, Paul’s use of “**appeal to**” applies to all four categories of people listed in **vv. 1-2**. The word translated “**appeal to**” is often translated as “**exhort**” or “**encourage,**” but also carries the meanings of “**request,**” “**implore,**” “**comfort,**” and even “**treat someone in an congenial, conciliatory, or friendly manner.**” When having to counsel people or correct people in the church, we must remember always to “**speak the truth in love**” as Paul tells us in **Eph 4:15**. Both sides of that equation are important: truth stated without love is not really truth; love expressed without truth is not really love.

Fourth, at the end of v. 2, Paul specifically says that younger women should be treated as sisters “in all purity.” Paul adds that important phrase because sexual temptation is always present. Sexual sin can be a great problem in the church. It can ruin one’s ministry, reputation, family, and the church itself. We all know of pastors or other church leaders who have committed fornication or adultery with someone in the church. Sexual sin is the betrayal of a trust that has been given by God.

In fact, sexual sin in the church is worse than we might think. What do I mean? What I mean is, because the church is a family—indeed, it is God’s family—sexual sin within the church amounts to *incest* in the family of God, which is an abomination to God. Probably most people in the church who commit fornication or adultery do not think of that. They should.

Fifth, we all know that there can be good families and bad families. This is Christ’s family, so it should be the *best* of families. The lifeblood of any relationship is communication—communication and contact; involvement and engagement. How involved are we with other believers in the church? For many people, the answer is “not much.” Certainly nothing like the amount and level of contact and communication we naturally have with our earthly families. For example, what would you think of an earthly family—mom, dad, and kids—that only saw each other once a week for an hour or two? It wouldn’t be much of a family. Yet our spiritual family—the church—will last forever; our earthly families will not.

In the same way, think of the involvement, help, and concern we naturally have with our earthly families. If your earthly brother or sister needs financial help or a place to stay, we naturally will provide it for them. If the kids need food or clothing, we get it for them without giving it a second thought. If our parents need medical or other assistance, we will do what we can to make sure they get it. Yet when these needs arise within our spiritual family—which, as I say, is our true family that will last forever—are we as naturally inclined to provide that same level of involvement, help, and assistance? Not so much.

We are more inclined to say, “I will pray for you.” Prayer is good. But they don’t need our prayers. They need a place to stay, or companionship, or food or clothing, or a job, or something else tangible which we may have the ability to provide. But we don’t. The apostle James talked about that when he said in **James 2 [READ Jas 2:15-17]**. Notice: he was using the language of family. He is talking to the church.

We can change things and make our spiritual family the best of families. We can cause that to happen if we get to know each other well. If we start regularly spending time with different people in the church, eating with each other, helping each other—walls and divisions will come down and we will become knit together. The implication is that many of us may need to rethink what the church is and our relationship with the church. Is the church the primary source of our identity? For many people, the answer is “no.” Yet this is why Christ created the church and created it as a family.

What we have been saying applies to the church as a corporate body, not just to individuals within the church. We need to know each other—our needs and resources—well. Do we have some process for providing assistance to people in need, or connecting those in need with those in the church who may be able to meet that need? There are many ways a church can do this. I know of one church that has a bulletin board where people can post various needs or resources they have. It could be some physical thing they are looking for or want to sell or give away, a need for a roommate, but it could be anything.

I read of one church that wanted to become more missional. The elders met individually with each member or family and asked them a series of questions, including: **What do you enjoy doing? Where do you see God at work right now? What would you like to see God do in your life over the next 6-12 months? How can we help that happen? How would you like to serve other people? How can we help facilitate that?** and **How can we pray for you?** These questions were geared toward becoming more missional and becoming more engaged with their community, but they could be adapted for anything. And by doing this the church leadership was getting to know its people better and was demonstrating that it cared about them.

Christopher Yuan, in his book *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, adds one more point that many of us may not think about too much. He says this [READ p. 137]. **IOW, families take care of their own.**

I read of a man who had been married for 60 years and loved his wife very much. Then she died. Some of his friends tried to comfort him by saying, **Don’t you look forward to the day when you will be reunited with your wife in heaven?** He responded, **“I won’t have a wife in heaven [since Jesus said, “In the age to come there will be no marriage or giving in marriage’], but I certainly am looking forward to being fully united with Christ.”** The church is Christ’s body as well as his family. **Eph 1:23** also describes the church as **“the fullness of him who fills all in all.”** Since the church is his body, his fullness, and his family, the closer and more involved we get with the church will mean the closer we will get to Christ. And that will apply both now and then forever in the new heaven and new earth.

The opposite is also true. As we get closer to Christ, we will get closer to each other. Think of relationships like a wheel: Christ is the hub, and we are all on the rim. As we move down the spokes and get closer to Christ, we will also be getting closer to each other. This should tell us something: our relationships with other people—particularly our relationships with other believers—is a reflection of our relationship with Christ. Everything in life is spiritual. The nature of our life and our relationships is revealing something about our spiritual life that we may not be aware of. Let us see what this is saying about us and make the changes in our relationships—both with Christ and others—that we need to make.

God takes his family seriously—because it is his family. We need to take it just as seriously. The church is the only organization that Jesus founded. But it is more than just an organization—it is a family. It is a family that will be together forever. He has created us as a family because he knows that we are often beaten up by the world. We face all kinds of pressures and stresses in school, in our jobs, financially, in our health, in our relationships, and in all the other circumstances of life. What Jesus wants for his church—his family—is that when we are together, we should have the feeling **“I’m home; this is my real home. I’m loved and accepted by the people who are closest to me in the whole world, and Jesus is right here with us.”**

Most of us know from our earthly families how deeply satisfying that can be, because “blood is thicker than water.” But the potential of God’s family, the church, far exceeds even the best of earthly families. The reason is because the blood that unites us is not type A, B, AB, or O. It is the blood of Christ. Let’s start working to make that a living reality this year, in this family. That leads us to:

### vv. 3-8: [READ]

In this section, Paul is talking about an important implication of the fact that the church is a family, and he is also showing us the interrelation between the church and our earthly families. The implication he is talking about is that, because families take care of their own, the church has an obligation to care for those who cannot care for themselves. However, Paul realizes that not all churches have the resources to care for all of its needy family members. Therefore, the earthly family members need to step up and help those in need where they are able to.

Paul begins by saying, “Honor widows who are widows indeed.” The ESV says **“Honor widows who are truly widows.”** The NKJV says **“Honor widows who are really widows.”** The words “truly” or “really” are the important qualifying words there; they correspond to the “widows *indeed*” of the NASB. The context clearly indicates that “honor” refers to providing *material support* of needy widows.

The word “indeed” (“truly,” “really”) shows that Paul is making a distinction between different types of widows. By definition, a widow is any woman whose husband has died. Therefore, in one sense any woman whose husband has died is a “widow indeed,” or a “true widow” or a “real widow.” However, Paul’s point here is not to define what a widow is. The point of this passage is to describe which widows the church has an obligation to materially assist.

That is shown in vv. 4-5. Those verses talk about widows who have children or grandchildren versus widows who are alone and therefore have no means of support. Paul realizes that, in his day as in ours, a church may not have the resources to assist every needy person. Also, there are some widows who do not require assistance. Paul is saying that the church is obligated to assist those widows who have no other means of support.

We need to understand that Paul’s own culture forms the basis for what he says here. In Paul’s society there were no welfare programs or other nonfamily sources of support. So family was crucial. That is why he says a widow first must go to her children or grandchildren for support, before coming to the church.

But the responsibility of children and grandchildren to support a widow was more than just a matter of mercy. When v. 4 says that children have to **“make some return to their parents,”** what it is saying is that **“children are not doing their parents a favor when they care for them—they are repaying a debt”** (Ngewa 2009: 114). v. 8 likewise points out that earthly family members have a moral obligation to **“provide for their own.”** Failure to do so makes one **“worse than an unbeliever.”** v. 16 summarizes this whole section by repeating that those having dependent widows **“must assist them”** in order that **“the church [is] not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.”**

Paul has been focusing on caring for destitute widows. But we need to understand that his focusing on widows is simply an *example* of caring for the needy. The reason he is focusing on widows is that widows were the most vulnerable and dependent people in ancient society. In that culture, most women were not able to have a formal education and could not work in paid employment. Their security was based on getting married, but that left them totally dependent on their husbands. The fact that Paul’s reference to “widows” is an *example* of the types of needy people that the church should help is seen in v. 4 which refers to **“parents,”** and in v. 8 which refers to a person providing for **“his own.”** Both those statements extend the principle of helping the needy beyond simply “widows.”

The principles Paul discusses here may be adapted and applied to other classes of needy people, such as old men; the unemployed; orphans; people with dementia, the physically disabled or mentally ill, etc. Paul is giving a more detailed description of the general principle stated in **Jas 1:27, “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”**

From this passage in 1 Timothy 5 two principles emerge. First, consider the person’s need. Is the person who is seeking assistance “truly needy,” or does the person have family or other means of support? Paul’s whole discussion here was based on the situation in his own culture. His culture was considerably different from ours. As a result, although the general principles he mentions carry over and apply to us today, the specifics may not.

For example, today women have the same education as men and most work in paid employment. Widows today have a range of opportunities unavailable to widows in Paul’s day. Government benefits, insurance, 401(k)s, Social Security, inheritance, investments, or other sources of support may be available. None of these things were available in Paul’s day. So when people seek assistance from the church today, all of these things need to be taken into consideration. But one way or another, we need to make sure that our spiritual family members are taken care of—because they are family—and families take care of their own.

Second, in assessing whether to provide material assistance to someone, vv. 5-6 suggest that one also consider the person’s attitude, character, and lifestyle. Is the person humble or arrogant? Is the person planning on continuing a lifestyle of overt sinfulness or not? Is the person trusting in God or not? Many people who come to the church seeking help will *not* be Christians and may have lived very sinful lives. If those people come to the church with an attitude of humility, the church should try to help them. By helping them, an opening is gained for telling them about Jesus Christ. People in earthly families take all of these things into consideration when a family member needs help. Paul is saying that the same things apply in our spiritual family.

He builds on this in the next section:

## vv. 9-16: [READ]

When Paul talks about putting someone on “the list,” he is probably referring to widows whom the church would support for as long as they lived. It is possible that they were enrolled in some official ministry in exchange for their being supported by the church. Many commentators believe that the “list” referred to an **“order or office of widows”** in which the enrolled widows were given ecclesiastical duties of prayer and charitable service to others in exchange for being materially cared for by the church. This is so because the requirements in **vv. 9-10** are not identical to those of **v. 5**, and the qualifications listed in **vv. 9-10** are similar to those for others in formal church ministry, such as found in **chapter 3**.

In fact, the church later on *did* form such an order of widows based on this passage, and the order of widows persisted well into the fourth century. One commentator says that **“women leaders were thought to be particularly well suited for ministries of prayer and practical service, including those in which it would not have been appropriate for men to be involved—especially counseling, visiting, catechizing or baptizing other women.”** (Blomberg 1999: 209)

Although the text does not strictly demand that interpretation, since the church historically used widows in ministry in exchange for material support, the church today should consider doing something similar. Older people have a wealth of experience and wisdom that can and should be put to use for edifying and building up the rest of the body of Christ.

The “age 60” requirement of v. 9 is not a “law” that applies universally. Again, that was based on the situation in Paul’s own culture. Sixty was the recognized age throughout the ancient world when a person was considered “old.” Sixty **“probably reflects the maximum age in antiquity up to which individuals could reasonably be expected to work and provide for themselves”** (Blomberg 1999: 209). In fact, in the first century fewer than 4% of women lived even to age 50 (Lysaught 2005: 67n.18). So women more than 60 years old were truly old in that society and would not have been expected to live many more years. Also, once a woman was sixty, there was no or very little chance that she would remarry.

By contrast, today, 60 years old is not considered particularly “old.” In fact, if you call a 60-year-old person “old,” he or she probably will be insulted. After all, as the saying goes, **“60 is the new 40.”** The “60 years old” requirement implied something far different in Paul’s culture than it does in most cultures today. Today if he were writing this, he might say **“Don’t put a widow on the list unless she is 80 or 85.”**

The fact that Paul’s suggestion about putting someone on “the list” is based on his own culture is clearly seen in his discussion of younger widows in vv. 11-15. He is talking about them getting married, since that pretty much was their only option in his culture. Today we would talk about them getting an education and a job. In essence, the church should try to help the poor and needy become self-sustaining. Most needy people would rather be self-sustaining than simply beg for handouts.

Paul’s discussion of caring for the poor and needy in this passage primarily concerned people *within* the church. However, the principles he is talking about are equally applicable to people outside of the church. He is really giving specific examples of the general principle he stated in **Gal 6:10**, **“While we have the opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”**

The church can help people become self-sustaining in various ways. You already have the Freedom Center Food Pantry. The concept of an “order of widows” is another idea. Other suggestions might be offering employment to needy persons. This will require knowing who in your congregation may have a business, needs domestic help, or otherwise can offer employment to people. We also should know what resources are available in the community. A pastor I know in central Kenya has gotten to know the owners of hotels, restaurants, and gas stations in his town. He has a good reputation in his town and has been able to place in employment a number of people needing jobs who have come to his church. We need to be aware of the resources and opportunities available to us, both within and outside the church.

The key is that the church needs to be engaged with its community. Most churches would like people from the community to come to us on Sundays. But most of us are not too intentional about going to them, engaging them, finding out their needs, and their resources. All churches have different kinds of resources: physical resources (land, buildings, equipment); financial resources (money and income); personnel resources (people and their time, talents, and contacts). The primary issue is a matter of *priorities*. What a church does with its resources reveals what it truly finds important, just as Jesus said, **“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**

Christ was engaged with his community, particularly in northern Israel—Galilee—where he was from and where his ministry began. He engaged with people, saw their needs, and did something about them. And look at the results. What about us? In showing the love of Christ to people in practical ways, we are limited only by our creativity and imagination.

**CONCL:** In today's passage, Paul has shown us that the church is a family. Families take care of their own. This includes the material as well as the spiritual. This principle extends to people beyond the family itself. In fact, as you may have seen from helping others through the Food Pantry, showing the love of Christ in practical ways to others is one way to increase the size of the family itself.

Ultimately, the issue is not just providing material assistance to those in need or growing the size of the family: the issue is relationship—relationships of love. Paul made that clear right at the beginning of this passage by talking about seeing and treating each other as fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters, by **“appealing to”** one another in love, by not **“sharply rebuking”** people, and by behaving **“in all purity.”**

When we see, feel, speak, and act like that to one another, we truly will be a loving family. It will be real, not feigned. When that happens, others will notice—and they will want to become a part of a family like that, because all people want to be loved and accepted for who they are by a family who truly cares about them. Then they—and we—will be able to have that great inner satisfaction of knowing, **“This is my family; I'm home.”**