

“Rules for Helping”
1 Timothy 5:3-16
October 18, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

In our passage this morning, Paul lists some rules for the church in Ephesus to follow as they sought to help the widows in their midst. Widows, orphans and foreigners are the three big categories throughout the Bible for the needy whom God’s people are called to care for in a special way. In the culture of the Bible, these were the three biggest reasons for poverty. The death of husbands and parents, as well as a forced move from one’s homeland due to famine or some other cause, were the common reasons people fell into poverty. The reasons for poverty may change, but the reality of poverty, together with its devastating effects, doesn’t change.

The Bible repeatedly calls God’s people to help the needy. This is no subtle theme that can only be found once or twice in the Bible. It is found repeatedly in every part of the Bible from the first book to the last. We are to help the needy simply because God is a Helper to the helpless, and God’s people are to be like the God they worship.

We are going to use Paul’s direction about helping widows to instruct us about more than widows as we apply these verses to the whole area of helping the needy. It is very easy to make people feel guilty about a lack of attention to this area. It’s not my purpose to help you escape such guilt if God’s Spirit wants to convict you in this area. But nor is it my purpose to seek to manipulate you into some guilt-motivated action. One of the glories of the gospel is that we are delivered from the burdensome weight of the law and freed up to obey out of a new heart of delight. So we want to look at this command to help the needy, and we want to trust God as we do so to transform our hearts to love his law. Let’s consider this matter along the three lines Paul develops it.

I. Helping Poor Widows – v. 3

The church’s basic obligation is to honor the widows. When we think of needy people, widows are not usually the first category that comes to mind, but they were the major category of the needy in Bible days. But all was not lost. God said that he would take up the case of widows. In Psalm 68:5, God gives himself the title **“protector of widows.”** Deuteronomy 10:18 is even stronger, saying that God **“executes justice for the... widow.”** In other words, if someone sees a widow as an easy target for some scam, God will take up her cause and see that her oppressor gets what’s coming to him. To oppress a widow is to attack God. Exodus 22:22-24 makes this more explicit: **“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will**

surely hear their cry and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”

Since God is this way, his people are called to partner with him in caring for widows. Landowners were commanded to be deliberately inefficient in their harvesting, leaving part of the harvest so the widows could gather it. Jesus, too, was kind to widows, restoring to life the only son of the widow of Nain. This was an act not just aimed at bringing comfort to her upon the restoration of her son, but also to bring financial aid to her through the care her son would be able to provide for her.

So the church in Paul’s day knew from the Old Testament and the example of Jesus that they were supposed to care for widows. They were attempting to do so, but were finding that it was easier said than done. Several problems had occurred. First, some of the children of the widows realized that if the church were taking care of their mothers, such a fact relieved them of this duty and left them with more money for themselves. As a result, the church began to be looked down upon by the unbelievers in Ephesus, where the duty to care for one’s parents was taken very seriously by the society as a whole. The second problem that developed is that some of the widows who were helped financially used their new-found freedom in a way that was spiritually harmful to themselves and to the church. Paul describes it like this: **“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”** (v. 13). It was likely, too, that it was these very widows who were using their free time, of which they had an abundance because of the church’s generosity, to further the false teaching that was afflicting this church.

Why does Paul use the word *honor* to describe the church’s duty to the needy widows? He clearly means to include their financial support as part of this honor. We know that because of the second use of that word in this chapter, down in verse 17 where the church is told to give double honor to the elders who rule well, and we know it refers to financial support because of the Old Testament verse next quoted. But if Paul only meant to direct the church to give adequate financial support to its widows, why not say it like that? Because honor includes more than financial support. It is possible, and all too common, to give financial support in a way that doesn’t respect and honor people, but makes them feel ashamed instead. In a book I’ve been reading recently, the authors quote from a 3-volume work that, among other things, asked poor people what it felt like to be poor. Here’s one response. “For a poor person everything is terrible—illness, humiliation, shame. We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us. We are like garbage that everyone wants to get rid of” (in *When Helping Hurts*, p. 52). Most of us have never been in a situation where we were forced to receive help from another person. The closest I came to it was a time when I broke both wrists and had casts put on my arms that locked them in a position that wouldn’t allow me to get my hands anywhere near my head, or any other part of my body for that matter. Like a baby, I was dependent upon others to feed me. To be in a dependent state is very difficult, even if the cause of one’s poverty and dependence, as in the case of widows, has nothing to do with

any mistake or shortcoming in one's own life. How can we give to the needy in a way that shows them honor? The answer is what Paul covers next, as he talks about the mutuality of helping. What I mean by mutuality is that whenever we seek to help the needy, it is always a two-way street, not a one-way street. Help goes in both directions, from the one providing financial help, but also back to that person from the one who is needy. Let's unpack that a little more now.

II. Helping the Helpers – v. 4-8

Paul didn't want the church supporting widows if there were children or grandchildren who should have been doing so. Part of the reason was certainly the fact that the church only had limited resources available for this and would not be able to help every widow. But that's not the reason Paul gives. In verses 4-8 he addresses the needs not of the widow or the church, but of the giver. The child or grandchild of the widow, the one who has a God-given obligation to help, needs to **"learn to show godliness"** (v. 4). As we saw two weeks ago, godliness refers to a God-centered life instead of a self-centered life. The widow's children are given a gift through the need of their widowed mother. The gift is that of a God-given opportunity to loosen the grip self-centeredness has upon their soul. As help is given to the widowed mother, the child finds the unexpected blessing of a growth in godliness.

Think of it like this. There is more than one kind of poverty, as well as more than one kind of wealth. The poor widow has an obvious material poverty. But she also has a spiritual wealth, which Paul describes in verse 5. **"She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day."** Her children, on the other hand, have sufficient material wealth to be able to help her, but have some spiritual poverty. In his goodness, God has arranged things so that the two can help one another out. The widow's material poverty can be helped by her children's material resources, and the children's spiritual poverty can thus be addressed as they learn godliness through providing this help. Everyone is enriched in the process.

Verse 8 explains another gift the poor provide to us. **"But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."** Those who are materially poor serve as a mirror to us, showing us the true condition of our souls. Remember that Paul is not teaching here that our care for the poor merits our acceptance by God. He is saying rather that our care for the poor reveals a great deal about the true condition of our hearts. Why would that be? Because our response to the poor reveals our attitude toward weakness. The person who fails to help the widow reveals a despising of weakness, while the one who helps reveals a compassion toward weakness that springs out of the realization that he too is weak. Just as the widow is all alone and has no hope of providing for herself except in God's help, so are all of us in our true spiritual condition. To

harden our hearts against the poor demonstrates that we have never understood our root spiritual poverty, which is a necessary part of genuine faith.

God has designed a wonderful mutuality in the way we help the needy. The materially poor are helped by the materially provisioned, and as they do so, the materially provisioned see their spiritual lives enriched and helped. Think of it like this. The process of children helping their widowed mothers and grandmothers leads to a realization of the poverty both parties have, and gratitude to God as the need is met. Helping the needy should cause us to say, "I'm not okay; and you're not okay; but Jesus can fix us both." He can fix both my spiritual poverty and your material poverty.

Brian Fikkert, co-author of *When Helping Hurts*, describes a time when he visited one of Africa's largest slums, the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. Foul smells and desperate need greeted him there. Listen to his description.

I had a hard time keeping my balance as I continually slipped on oozy brown substances that I hoped were mud but feared were something else... Then to my amazement, right there among the dung, I heard the sound of a familiar hymn... As we turned the corner, my eyes landed on the shack from which the music bellowed. Every Sunday, thirty slum dwellers crammed into this ten-by-twenty foot "sanctuary" to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church was made out of cardboard boxes that had been opened up and stapled to studs. It wasn't pretty, but it was a church, a church made up of some of the poorest people on earth.

When we arrived at the church, I was immediately asked to preach the sermon. As a good Presbyterian, I quickly jotted down some notes about the sovereignty of God and was looking forward to teaching this congregation the historic doctrines of the Reformation. But before the sermon began, the service included a time of sharing and prayer. I listened as some of the poorest people on the planet cried out to God: "Jehovah Jireh, please heal my son, as he is going blind." "Merciful Lord, please protect me when I go home today, for my husband always beats me." "Sovereign King, please provide my children with enough food today, as they are hungry."

As I listened to these people praying to be able to live another day..., I realized that I do not really trust in God's sovereignty on a daily basis, as I have sufficient buffers in place to shield me from most economic shocks... I realized that these people had a far deeper intimacy with God than I probably will ever have in my entire life (pp. 68-69).

III. Helping without Hurting – v. 9-16

The third section of our passage, verses 9-16, deals with a list the church had established of widows, including Paul's instructions about those who should and should not be enrolled on this list. It seems from the qualifications he makes for the widows to be enrolled, that this is a list of widows who had pledged themselves to work for the church, ministering to the sick and helping others in return for the church's financial support. In other words, the widows were expected to work in return for the support they received. Paul is careful to list the

qualifications of those who should be put on this list. Paul's concern seems to be guarding against unwittingly hurting people in the attempt to help them. The church wanted to help its widows, but Paul recognized that in doing so they could unintentionally hurt them. That would happen if the church's gifts to the widows allowed the widows too much idle time, resulting in the possibility that they might **"learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not"** (v. 13).

In the book *When Helping Hurts*, the authors refer to a church that decided to reach out to the residents of a local housing project that was afflicted by high rates of unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and teenage pregnancy. They came up with the idea of going door to door, singing Christmas carols and delivering gift-wrapped toys to the children. It seemed at first to be a great success as they observed the smiles of delight on the faces of the children. The church members went home feeling that they had made a real difference. But after a few years of doing this, the common problem of compassion fatigue set in, and it became more difficult to recruit volunteers for this effort. When the pastor asked his members why they had lost enthusiasm for the project, many of them replied that it was because they never saw any men in the houses when they dropped off the gifts. From their perspective, it was just women having more babies and collecting ever larger welfare checks. The feeling was growing that the housing project residents didn't deserve their gifts. In reality, what was happening was that men were present when the gifts were given, but their inability to provide gifts to their own children made them hide inside the house or find a way to leave the house when they heard the Christmas Carols being sung each year. The gifts of the church added to their shame, which resulted in an additional loss of confidence. In trying to help, the church only succeeded in hurting the group most able to help with the long-term alleviation of poverty, the husbands and fathers in the housing project.

The way to help without hurting is to do what Paul does here—to help the whole person, not just the material need of the person. He wants to help the children learn godliness as they help their parents. He wants the widows who receive help to be given the dignity of useful work, and he wants the young widows to avoid the trap of the wrong kind of help that will encourage a self-indulgent life.

CONCLUSION:

Let's close by remembering that we are all needy. As we attempt to relieve the needy, the conviction should grow in our heart that "I'm not okay; you're not okay; but Jesus can fix us both." He is the one we need.