**Honour and care for real widows** 15/9/24 dkm

Read: Isaiah 58, 1Timothy 5:1-16

Text: 1Timothy 5:3-16

Psalms: 146, 68:1-6, 10:12-18, 72old

Some years ago, I saw a person sitting in a car parked a couple of houses down the road. As I walked past, the person got out and asked if I knew the lady living in the house opposite. She was from a government department and suspected the woman was not living alone. I assumed she was claiming a single mothers or maybe a widow’s pension. Do you know anyone claiming a pension they are not entitled to? Pensions given through the NDIS have ballooned both in number and in amount. Some people readily ‘misrepresent’ their situation in order to get government money.

In the time of the apostle Paul there was no government help, even for people in genuine need. It was the church that gave help to the poor and needy, to widows and the fatherless, and it seems some in the church were ready to take advantage of this church program. The neglect of some widows in the daily distribution caused friction in the Jerusalem church, so much so that the apostles had to appoint seven deacons to this ministry (Acts 6). The church at Ephesus, it seems, faced a similar challenge. However, churches today, at least from my experience, do not spend a lot of time or money on ministry to widows because of state pensions. Besides, it is the families responsibility to care for widows and elderly parents according to the Bible (5:4,8,16).

Shall we then just pass over this passage about widows in the church? We can broaden the focus beyond widows to others in need, like those with a disability, those unemployed, deserted mothers or refuges, but again there is government help available- some churches assist in getting this government help. But the principles laid down by the apostle are themselves enlightening and instructive. Not only churches but politicians in charge of social welfare would do well to listen when it comes to defining who is in genuine need, and how they should be helped. Society was very different back in the first century, but Paul’s principles are still applicable. It is interesting that he sets the age at sixty for a widow to be ‘taken into the number’ because not long ago this was the age at which a woman could get the aged pension.

Although we have looked at verses 3-8 previously, we will touch on them again as we consider this whole section about widows. It is a long section in a short letter, a section that opens and closes with the words, ‘Who are really/truly widows’ (5:3,16). Scholars are divided on how we divide this passage, if we are to divide it all. Many say the reference to ‘the number’ or ‘the list’ in verse 9 changes the focus to widows who minister in the church; one commentator refers an ‘order of widows’ who seem to have been ‘women elders’. But there is no reference whatsoever to any ministry being given to older widows; this did not happen until the second century. The ministry of elders and deacons has already been outlined.

Reference to these widows caring for children, lodging strangers, and relieving the afflicted are all in the past tense; these are things the widow must be known for in order to be put on the list, not things she is required to do in the future. Hendriksen points to Tertullian, writing around 204AD and referring to a body of widows who assisted with ‘counsel and comfort’; he then thinks this is what Paul is talking about in verse 9! Making the cut-off age sixty is not easy to explain, but there is no indication that the apostle has a body of ministering widows in mind. Paul is simply giving Timothy further indicators or qualifications to be met by those who are ‘really widows’ and in need of church support. Younger widows, it seems, were not always living godly lives. Our subheadings are: ‘Truly in need’, ‘Trust and prayer’, ‘Take into the number’ and, ‘Temptation’.

**1.Truly in need**

The first criteria for the church to consider when assessing a widow in need is that of support from the immediate family or relatives. If the widow has children or grandchildren, it is their duty to care for elderly parents, especially a widowed mother or grandmother. A woman was dependent on her husband in those days. Her work was bringing up children and managing the home (5:14), so if her husband died or was killed, she faced the prosect of poverty. Some women, like Lydia, were involved in business (Acts 16:14), but this was more the exception than the rule. It was the duty of the family to make sure a widow did not end up destitute.

The church stepped in to help when there was no family to do so, when the widow was left alone (5:5). Moreover, as a member of the church, she must be trusting God and be faithful in prayer (5:5). Paul warns against supporting widows ‘living for pleasure’, saying that such a woman is dead, spiritually dead, even ‘while she lives’ (5:6). Late in this passage we will see that he is thinking especially of younger widows.

Paul may have been unmarried, but he knew the creation ordinance for a man to leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and to have children unto the Lord (Gen 2:24). If a man or woman was called to be single, well and good, but most people want to be married, and this is acceptable to the Lord. What is not acceptable to the Lord is sex outside of marriage or getting married to an unbeliever.

When the state steps in to support widows, churches and families often step back from their responsibility. But the state cannot give the love and affection that the family and the church should still be giving to the widow. Moreover, the state does not assess the need in the way Paul commands for the church. Too often, support from the state replaces the support demanded from family and from the church. If state support is granted it should be seen as supplementary, not a replacement for family or church help.

**2. Turned sixty and exemplary life**

We come to the specification that a widow must be over sixty years old before she is ‘taken into the number’ (5:9). It is interesting that our forebears set the age of sixty when they introduced the age pension for women in 1910. I do not know if my grandmother got a pension, but I do know my father was responsible for supporting her. I know because I took my grandmother a bottle of fresh milk from the farm every day before school! Sixty years of age may have been quite elderly in the first century, as it is in some countries today. We are living much longer today, mainly because of better nutrition and health care. The difficulty with sixty is that widows under this age were encouraged to marry, ‘bear children and manage the house’ (5:14); this was Paul’s desire for younger widows.

It was only when there was no family to support a widow that the church was to consider supporting her. Church funds would have been limited, but if the widow was left alone, and thus truly a widow, she was to be further assessed on her age, and faithfulness to the Lord and her family. She must be a prayerful person who trusts in the Lord (5:4). As a member of the church this was to be expected. It was also to be expected that she was ‘the wife of one man’ (5:9). This cannot mean that she had only been married once because Paul urges young widows to remarry (5:14). It means she must be a ‘one-man woman’ just as an elder and deacon must be a ‘one-woman man’ (3:2,12).

A widow who is over sixty and without family, and has been a faithful wife and mother, was eligible to be put on the list of widows to be helped by the church in Ephesus. Paul refers to other aspects of her life, aspects that point to her having been faithful and trusting in the Lord. In taking on what would be a big responsibility, the church was to exercise ‘due diligence’ as we would say. They would see if she had been a good mother, had been hospitable, had washed the feet of the saints’ and had helped those in trouble. Having children is no excuse for not being hospitable; often it is women with large families who are the most hospitable. In those days, visitors were not put up in hotels but welcomed into Christian homes. Washing the feet of these visitors was necessary after walking on dirty roads in sandals.

This faithful mother would go out of her way to help anyone who was sick or in need. In talking to our daughter last week, she said she was going to visit an elderly lady who could no longer get along to church. As we have opportunity, we are do good to all, ‘especially those of the household of faith’ (Eph 6:10). We do not have to be an elder or deacon or a ‘deaconess’ before giving help to others in the church.

**3.Temptation**

Younger widows, as in those under sixty, were not to be put on the list of church-supported widows. The apostle goes into some detail about younger widows and why they should not be put on the list- five verses in fact! Maybe there had been trouble at Ephesus with young widows in the church (5:15), and hence this command given to Timothy; he certainly seems to be speaking from experience. Paul knew that younger widows might be tempted in two ways.

Firstly, young widows still have the desire to be married. Paul says that it is good to remain unmarried, like him, but acknowledges a passion or a burning to be married (1Cor 7:8,9). This being the case, he counsels or ‘desires’ younger widows to remarry (5:14). If they are still able, let them have children and manage their house well. Otherwise, sensual desires could overcome her commitment to Christ and lead to her compromising her faith in Christ, and indeed to her shipwrecking her faith (1:19). This may refer to her marrying an unbeliever, or worse. In India widows often turn to begging, or young widows to prostitution; they got no help from the government or their Hindu religion.

The temptation to marry anyone, even an unbeliever, not only comes to young widows but more urgently to them. Paul writes, ‘A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord’ (1Cor 7:39 NIV). Marriage to an unbeliever usually leads to the believer compromising or departing from the faith (5:12). Of course, ‘living with’ an unbeliever, or with any man outside of marriage, is sinful and brings reproach upon the whole church. The adversary, be it the devil or an agent of the devil, is quick to expose and condemn any such impropriety in the church (5:14).

Secondly, younger widows are tempted to be gossips and busybodies (5:13). Without a husband to look after, they have more free time to ‘wander from house to house’ collecting and distributing gossip (5:13). They may also wander in search of companionship. Such behaviour will soon land them in trouble with the congregation and with the Lord.

For these reasons, the apostle counsels younger widows to remarry and bear children if possible. Raising children and managing the house with a husband as head, not to mention showing hospitality and helping people in need, is pleasing to the Lord and gives less opportunity for Satan to cause the widow to sin, and the church to be brought into disrepute. Apparently, Satan had already tempted some widows in Ephesus, and they had fallen into his trap, most likely by marrying an unbeliever (5:15).

The apostle’s commands and advice to Timothy regarding widows in the church comes full circle with the command for women in the church, even widows, to look after widows in their own family so that the church is not burdened (5:16). There were many widows without such family help for the church to put on the list. The church shared God’s concern for widows and the fatherless and took seriously the words of James: ‘Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this; to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (Ja 1:27).