

The Church and Widows

Scripture: 1 Timothy 5

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Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, 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. (5:9–10)

In the early church there were groups of widows who served in some officially recognized capacity. The requirements for being **put on the list**, reminiscent of those for church leaders given in chapter 3, make that evident. This godly group of women had a spiritual and practical ministry directly to the women and children of the church. They also ministered indirectly to the men by virtue of their influence on the women. They fulfilled Paul's injunction in Titus 2:3–5 that

older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips, nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored.

Their duties surely included helping with the baptism of women, visiting the sick, visiting prisoners, teaching and discipling younger women, helping younger women rear and nurture their children, and providing hospitality for visitors and strangers. They may have also assisted in placing orphans into proper Christian homes. That was a very important ministry in the Roman world, since orphaned or abandoned children wound up as slaves, and often as prostitutes or gladiators. With their own husbands gone and their children grown, those widows had the time to pursue such essential ministries.

That such a group of widows existed in the early church is known from extra-biblical sources. In the late first and early second centuries, Ignatius and Polycarp wrote of such an order. Tertullian, who lived in the latter part of the second and early part of the third centuries, also mentioned it. The third-century document known as the *Didascalia*, and the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* also refer to an order of widows.

There is no evidence that all the widows **on the list** were supported by the church. Some no doubt were, while others had resources of their own. The issue of support stops at verse 8, and Paul moves to a new topic in verse 9. **The list** Paul refers to was not, as some have argued, the list of those widows eligible for support. Rather, it was the list of those eligible for ministry. In verses 9–10 Paul gives the requirements for being **on the list**.

First, a widow had to be **not less than sixty years old**. That requirement offers further proof that the list of widows was not a list of those eligible to receive support. Paul had just stated in verses 3–8 that the church is to support all its widows who are without other means of support. No age requirement was given there.

Sixty was the age in that culture for people to retire from their activities to a life of contemplation. It was at that age that men and women should become priests and priestesses, according to Plato (William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 109). It was acknowledged that sexual passion began to wane at age sixty. Thus, the age requirement ensures that those widows would not be driven by desire. An older woman would have the time, maturity, character, reputation, and compassion to serve the Lord and the church. Unlike a younger woman, she would not be tempted to abandon her commitment to the Lord and remarry.

Second, a widow must have **been the wife of one man**. The Greek text literally reads “a one-man woman,” a construction parallel to that of 3:2 and 12. That does not exclude women who have been married more than once. Paul himself commands younger widows to remarry (v. 14; cf.. 1 Cor. 7:39), so that cannot be his intent here. A “oneman woman” is a woman who was totally devoted to her husband. It speaks of purity in action and attitude, as in the case of the overseer in 3:2, who is to be a “one-woman man”; it does not refer to marital status. Such a woman lived in complete fidelity to her husband in a chaste, pure, unspotted marriage relationship. A widow who did not measure up to this standard would not be a proper role model for the younger women to emulate.

Third, a widow had to have **a reputation for good works**. Her excellent character was to be common knowledge. Like the elders (3:2) and deacons (3:10), she had to be above reproach. Her good works would attest to the kind of woman she was. They would manifest outwardly the quality of her spiritual character.

Paul goes on to further define the nature of **a reputation for good works**. The five qualities he lists show the type of **good works** required of any woman. All women should seek to be of such spiritual

virtue as to be **put on the list** to serve the church should they become widows.

First, **she** must be one who **has brought up children**. *Teknotropheo* (**brought up children**) appears only here in the New Testament. It means to nourish children. This quality views the godly widow as a Christian mother, rearing children in a godly home to follow the Lord. To do so is a woman's greatest privilege and responsibility (cf.. 2:15).

Paul does not here depreciate women who were unable to have children, or who had the gift of singleness. Such fulfill different roles in the life of the family of God. Since having children was the norm, however, he gives this as a general principle. A woman with no natural children of her own could manifest this quality by rearing orphans. Only a woman with such experience could instruct younger women on how to rear godly children (cf.. Titus 2:3–5).

Second, **she** must be one who **has shown hospitality to strangers**. Like the elders, she must be devoted to hospitality (cf.. 3:2). Her home must be open to strangers, as well as friends and relatives. She must show sacrificial devotion to the needs of people she does not know. There were no motels or hotels in the ancient world, and inns were often filthy and dangerous. Christians away from home depended on the hospitality of other believers. Paul commended Phoebe as a “helper of many, and of myself as well” (Rom. 16:2). No doubt one of the ways she helped others was by opening her home to those in need of shelter and food.

This offers further evidence that the list Paul speaks of was not one of destitute widows in need of support. Such women would hardly have been able to open their homes to provide for others.

Third, **she** must be one who **has washed the saints' feet**. That menial task was the duty of slaves. Since the roads were either dusty or muddy, guests entering a house had their feet washed. Paul does not necessarily mean that she actually did that herself each time. The menial task of washing the feet spoke metaphorically of humility (cf.. John 13:5–17). The requirement, then, stresses that a widow have a humble, servant's heart. She gives her life in lowly service to those in need and never seeks to exalt herself.

Fourth, **she** must be one who **has assisted those in distress**. **Those in distress** is from *thlibo*, and could be translated “those under pressure.” She devotes her life to helping those under any sort of pressure, whether physical, mental, or emotional. *Eparkeo* (**has assisted**) appears only here and in verse 16. In the latter verse, it clearly refers to financial assistance. A godly widow also assists others with her financial resources.

Fifth, **she** must be one who **has devoted herself to every good work**. *Epakoloutheo* (**has devoted herself to**) is a strong verb. It describes the widow who has energetically and diligently given herself to the pursuit of good deeds (cf.. Acts 9:36).

Because all those qualities describe the character of a widow qualified to serve the church, they must also be recognized as the standards for every Christian woman to follow in her life. Should the day come when she is considered for service in the church, she will then be qualified. In the meantime, she will gain a reputation as a woman of excellence (cf.. Prov. 31:10–31).

The qualities Paul gives illustrate God's design for women. They are a woman's highest priorities. By following them, she can make a profound impact on the world. That truth is illustrated in a story told by the Scottish preacher Ian MacClaren of a woman in his church.

As they were talking, she began to wipe her eyes with the corner of her apron, so Dr. MacClaren said, "What's disturbing you?"

"Oh," she said, "Sometimes I feel I have done so little and when I think about it it makes my heart heavy, because really I've done so little for Jesus."

"When I was a wee girl the Lord spoke to my heart and I surrendered to Him. And I wanted to live for Him, oh so much. But I feel I haven't done anything."

"What have you done with your life?" he asked.

"Oh nothing," she said, "just nothing. I've washed dishes, cooked three meals a day, taken care of my children, mopped the floor, mended the clothes, you know, everything a mother does, that's all I've done."

MacClaren sat back in his chair and asked, "Where are your boys?"

"Oh, she spoke, "You know I named them all for the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You know them all and you know where Mark is. You ordained him. He went to China. He's learned the language and now he is able to minister to the people in the name of the Lord."

“Where’s Luke?” MacClaren said.

“You know well enough where he is because you sent him out and I had a letter from him the other day. He is in Africa and says a revival has broken out at his mission station.”

“And Matthew?” he queried.

“He’s with his brother in China and they are working together. And John, who’s nineteen, came to me last night to say God has laid Africa on his heart. He said, ‘I’m going to Africa, but don’t worry about it, Mother, because the Lord has shown me that I am to stay with you until you go home to glory, and then I’ll go. Until then I have to take care of you.’”

MacClaren looked at that elderly saint and said, “Your life has been wasted, you say?”

“Yes, it has been wasted.”

“You have been cooking and mopping and washing—but I would like to see the reward when you are called home!”

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