

1-2 Timothy – 1 Timothy 4:12-5:16

Review

Last time, we looked at Paul's Gospel reiteration to Timothy we find at the end of 1 Timothy 3. We considered the great mystery of the Gospel we discover when we ponder it deeply. In particular we looked at the significance of the Greek word *πιστεύω* *pisteuō* translated as "believed on" that Paul uses in this passage. Then we looked at Paul's warning that some would depart from the faith to follow the leading of deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons along with the tragedy that the liars who spread these lies have their consciences seared so that they are no longer able to discern the Truth from the lies. We briefly listed some of those false doctrines – the teachings of the Judaizers and the philosophy of Gnosticism. Finally, we looked at Paul's admonition for Timothy to train himself in godliness within the framework of Jesus' Parable of the Talents.

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Let's continue now in our study of the text of 1 Timothy. Paul begins with personal instructions for Timothy's own devotion and conduct.

¹²Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. ¹³Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. ¹⁴Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. ¹⁶Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save [σῶζω *sōzō*] ***both yourself and your hearers.*** 1 Timothy 4:12-16 (ESV)

Recall that Timothy had joined Paul and Silas when they passed through Lystra – Timothy's hometown – on Paul's second missionary journey. Paul and Silas had been sent on that journey by the church leaders in Jerusalem to deliver their letter responding to questions about the teachings of the Judaizers from the churches in Asia Minor (Acts 15 & 16). Later during that journey, Timothy accompanied Paul during the establishment of the churches in Greece (Acts 17-18:17), then returned to Asia Minor laboring together with Paul in Ephesus for two years until the riot led by the artisans of temple of Artemis in the city drove them out. The company then returned to Greece (Acts 18:18-Acts 19). Therefore, the Ephesian believers were familiar with Timothy, but largely regarded him only as Paul's protégé and envoy, not as a church leader in his own right. Sometime during the latter part of his first house arrest in Rome, Paul sent Timothy back to Ephesus with the intention of joining him later. Paul wrote this first pastoral letter to Timothy from Rome shortly afterward.

Although Timothy was by then about ten years older than when he first came to Ephesus, Paul knew that he would likely face resistance and disrespect from the Ephesians when he returned without Paul. Paul therefore wrote these words of encouragement for Timothy's self-image and direction for his conduct until Paul was able to rejoin him. Acts is silent about whether or not Paul and Timothy ever saw each other again after Timothy left Rome for Ephesus in about 62 AD.

Presumably, the prophetic event Paul describes in verse 14 occurred during Paul's brief visit to Jerusalem between his second and third missionary journeys sometime around 53 AD (Acts 18:18-22), but it could also possibly have been immediately upon their return to Jerusalem following Paul's third missionary journey some four years later just before his arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21). No doubt,

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the Spiritual gift Timothy received with the laying on of the council's hands was the gift of leadership he would need when he returned to take over the church in Ephesus. Therefore, Paul mentions it here.

Before we move on, we need to try to figure out what Paul means in verse 16 by saying that Timothy will **save** [σῶζω sōzō] **both yourself and your hearers** by following these instructions. We've looked before at the Greek word σῶζω sōzō translated as "save" in this verse. Recall that it doesn't necessarily mean receiving eternal salvation in Christ. The word can also mean rescue from physical earthly dangers. Clearly Paul would never preach some sort of works-based salvation despite how the English translation here in verse 16 might seem to indicate it. After all, in his letter to the Ephesian church Paul had reminded them that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)

ASIDE – It was this passage in Ephesians which first led the Catholic monk Martin Luther to reject the ideas of works-based atonement rituals and absolution taught by the Catholic church and set him on the path toward the Protestant Reformation.

Precisely what dangers Paul thought Timothy would face out of which he would need to save himself and his hearers is unclear. Perhaps Paul was remembering and reminding Timothy about the riot at Ephesus that had threatened both their lives some 10 years before, and foresaw that there might be further resistance in Ephesus to Timothy's gospel preaching that might put him and his congregation into danger. In fact, church tradition holds that Timothy was indeed beaten to death by pagan worshipers in Ephesus some thirty years after this letter was written.

¹Do not rebuke an older man [πρεσβύτερος presbyteros] but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, ²older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity. 1 Timothy 5:1-2 (ESV)

Let's face it. We older men can be a handful for a young pastor. We have a well-deserved reputation for curmudgeonliness and stubbornness. We can well imagine that when Timothy arrived back in Ephesus with new ideas for the operation of the church, he must have received stubborn resistance from his older brothers who were set in their opinions and ways. Timothy probably heard daily from one of more of them saying something like, "We've always done things this way, and I can see no reason to change now."

Of course, that sort of thing continues today in churches around the world, which is one of the reasons that many churches are aging themselves out of existence while younger people increasingly view church fellowships as unattractive and irrelevant to their daily lives. This is tragic because many of the large, appealing, "relevant" churches in the world today are also infused with false teaching that leads people away from the true Gospel and into the doctrines of demons that Paul warned Timothy about in the previous chapter.

The problem is compounded, because older men often have the most monetary assets to either donate to the work of the church or to stubbornly withhold if we don't get our way. New pastors face an uphill battle in their efforts to draw their churches out of complacency and ineffectiveness due to the intransigence of older men.

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Nevertheless, older men have much to offer a church by virtue of their experience and knowledge as well as their financial assets. Thus, Paul urges Timothy to patiently encourage the older men at Ephesus, knowing that older men could play a vital role in the work of the kingdom still to be done. Of course, the same concept still applies today in churches around the globe. Paul also calls Timothy to encourage not only the older men in this regard, but everyone in the fellowship. To be effective in proclaiming the Gospel within our communities, church fellowships must be unified and active. Thus, Paul also encouraged the church at Philippi...

...let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, Philippians 1:27b (ESV)

NOTE – The Greek word translated in the ESV as “*an older man*” here in 1 Timothy 5:1 is **πρεσβύτερος presbyteros**. Some English translations like the KJV render this word as “elder,” but it is distinct from the word **ἐπισκοπή episkopē** translated as “overseer” in 1 Timothy 3:1. The fact that many churches refer to their leading “overseers” as “elders” has sometimes caused confusion. Here in 1 Timothy 5:1 **πρεσβύτερος presbyteros** refers to older men in general, not just to those appointed as overseers. Nevertheless, **πρεσβύτερος presbyteros** may also refer to those who are in leadership (e.g., 1 Timothy 5:17&19) leading to even more potential confusion.

Reading through the next scripture passage, I can't help but wonder whether Paul was bi-polar. At the very least, he sometimes showed himself as somewhat passive-aggressive. He goes from the gentle pastoral words of 1 Timothy 5:1-2 to some of the harshest words he ever wrote in verses 3-16. I can't think of anywhere Paul's writing is more blunt and harsh except maybe his expressed wish to the Galatians that those who were advising them they must be circumcised to be saved would just go out and emasculate **themselves** (Galatians 5:12)!

Still, we know and trust that God's Spirit Himself was guiding Paul in these writings, so there must be some good lesson we can learn from these harsh passages. Let us therefore consider this one slowly and carefully.

NOTE – Before we proceed, a quick look over 1 Timothy 5:3-16 tells us that Paul is writing exclusively about (female) widows. It seems to me that many of these same principles apply just as well to widowed men. Nevertheless, in our discussions, we will keep ourselves focused as Paul does on women who are widows, and not mention again explicitly the applicability to widowed men.

3Honor widows who are truly widows. 4But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. 5She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, 6but she who is self-indulgent [σπαταλάω spatalaō] is dead even while she lives. 7Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. 8But 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. 1 Timothy 5:3-8 (ESV)

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This is fair enough. In most human cultures, this is the way things have always been. Most families around the world for most of history remained together in the same community their entire lives. Therefore, children were able to attend personally to the needs of their aging parents who usually lived within a short distance and often in the same dwelling as the children. But in the modern mobile world, this sort of care for one another within families has become quite difficult. Many of us live hundreds or even thousands of miles from our parents, so tending to their needs has become problematic. Therefore, we have created a whole industry to care for the aged – paying total strangers to provide for the needs of parents as a poor substitute for the care once provided by the children who still lived close by.

Some widows have neither parents, children, nor siblings to care for them after the deaths of their spouses. These are those whom the Church must take under its wing and care for. Paul does warn Timothy that some widows will unfairly take advantage of this grace believing that they are somehow entitled to the Church's support. Indeed, the same could be said of how some widows take advantage of their own families. Paul says here that these are really "walking dead." Wow! I wish Paul wouldn't mince his words like this and tell us how he *really* feels!

Paul uses the word **σπαταλώ** *spatalaō* to refer to these widows who are "getting over" on their families and/or church fellowships. The ESV translates this word as *self-indulgent*. It means to live luxuriously, lead a voluptuous life, (give one's self to pleasure). Clearly, if a widow possesses the means to care for her own needs, she should not expect either her family or the Church to provide her support over and above what she really needs to sustain her.

ASIDE – In this whole discussion about supporting widows, we tend to focus on families' and churches' provision for widows' *physical* needs. But *everyone* also has the need for fellowship and companionship – especially those who are left alone by the death of a spouse. Most critically, we all have the need for communion with God Himself. Obviously, both families and church fellowships must strive to minister to the spiritual and social needs of *all* our members as much as our time, energy, and resources allow. It's the *human* thing to do!

9Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 10and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. 1 Timothy 5:9-10 (ESV)

My father was fond of saying, "They've taken the personal out of personnel." What he meant by that is that the "bean counters" had put in place rules governing how people were to be managed, but those rules were incapable of properly caring for the people and situations that didn't quite fit into the framework of the rules.

Paul speaks here about the Church providing support only for those widows who *do* neatly fit into a specific age group and perfectly fulfill a specific history of good works. Sorry, Paul (and Holy Spirit). Life is way messier than that. Consider for example a hypothetical woman whose husband "put her away" with a certificate of divorcement at a young age, who then remarried but was childless, and whose second husband died when she was 59 years old leaving her destitute. Suppose furthermore that this woman had not been active in the church during her youth and hadn't even come to know

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the LORD Jesus as her savior until late in life shortly before her husband died. Finally, what if this hypothetical woman never had any brothers or sisters, and her parents had long since also died.

Clearly such a person meets none of the criteria Paul lists here for “enrollment” as a ward of the Church. Should the Church turn her away when she comes to us as a sister in Christ with legitimate needs? Surely not! What if she met all the other criteria Paul lists but hasn’t yet turned 60? Should the Church let her starve until her 60th birthday comes around? That would be unthinkable.

How then should we consider these instructions from Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:9-10? Perhaps we could rationalize them away, saying they were meant only for Timothy and the ancient church at Ephesus – not applicable to the Church in general today. That is surely the approach many have taken to some of the harsh instructions found in Paul’s pastoral epistles – particularly those we might personally disagree with like Paul’s admonition against ordination of women as overseers. But such an approach would be not only disingenuous, but outright cowardly!

No. We need to try to get past the words themselves and try to discern God’s intent when He inspired Paul to write them down. In doing so, it will help if we ponder the nature of our God, and His general directions for us.

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Psalm 86:15 (ESV)

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8 (ESV)

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Matthew 10:16 (ESV)

If Church leaders prayerfully keep these general principles from God’s Word in mind rather than trying to make every applicant for help fit into some pre-determined category, we will do what is pleasing to our God. We will act as proper stewards of the blessings God has bestowed upon us for ministry within our communities. If we get “ripped off” now and again, then so be it. At least we won’t have turned away someone in genuine need, and our consciences will be clear because we offered help in God’s Spirit of love. We need to always err on the side of grace, and if that grace turns out to be misplaced, then we need to pick up the pieces and press forward. In this way, we can reinforce our hope to one day hear our Master say to us...

...‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ Matthew 25:21b (ESV)

¹¹But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry ¹²and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. ¹³Besides that, 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. ¹⁴So I would have

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younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. ¹⁵For some have already strayed after Satan. 1 Timothy 5:11-15 (ESV)

Wow! Who knew that all young widows were like this? Well, here we have yet another instance of taking the “personal” out of “personnel.” Obviously, not all young widows are idlers, gossips, and busybodies. Nor will they all be drawn away from their faith by their passions to re-marry. Certainly, it must be admitted that some young widows will exhibit some or all of these undesirable behaviors, but certainly not all young widows will.

Undeniably, church leaders like Timothy have a sacred duty to be shepherds of the flocks God has placed in their care, and to be diligent stewards of the resources God has entrusted to them. To accomplish that, we must prayerfully seek discernment to decide which applicants for church assistance have legitimate needs that can’t be fulfilled any other way while seeking out other opportunities for applicants that have them available. But to do that properly, each case must be carefully considered on its own merits rather than applying a broad brush to all cases as Paul seems to advocate here in this passage.

One other thing that occurs to me as I read Paul’s little diatribe here is that since young childless widows who had no parental home to which they could return were also not allowed by Paul to assume teaching or leadership roles in the church, it wasn’t very surprising that some of them in Paul’s experience had fallen away from their faith and become idlers, gossips, and busybodies!

Perhaps Timothy might have done better in shepherding his flock at Ephesus by giving such young widows active roles in the church as **διάκονος *diakonos*** or teaching the children, through which they might earn a modest living rather than simply refusing to enroll them for church assistance and sending them on their way. After all, as the adage goes, “Idle hands are the Devil’s playground.” Paul himself seems to agree with that idea right here in this passage.

But here again, any church leader must always exercise cautious, prayerful, unhurried discernment in assigning active roles to the folks in their congregations and providing aid to those in need. There must never be a cookie cutter approach to such decisions like the ones Paul seems to advocate in this passage. Nor should these decisions ever be made in haste (as Paul will warn Timothy later in this letter).

Furthermore, a church pastor must humbly seek godly counsel from his appointed church overseers and deacons in making these decisions. Trying to guide the ship alone has caused many a pastor to bring their churches into peril, and to burn themselves out in sheer exhaustion. Pastoring a church is hard and continual spiritual labor as might be apparent from the very fact that God inspired Paul to write these things to Timothy. To effectively pastor a church requires a team effort, and a commitment from the flock to support and encourage their pastor.

¹⁶If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows. 1 Timothy 5:16 (ESV)

Paul’s conclusion here seems like a no-brainer. Notice that Paul makes no mention of how close those we support in our extended families must be. Believers all have a sacred duty to care for and nurture

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our family members no matter how distant in blood. We also have a duty given by our LORD Jesus Himself to disciple our families in Gospel teaching, and not only our families but the entire world until He returns to gather us to Himself.

Looking Ahead

Next time, God willing, we will continue our study of Paul's first pastoral epistle to Timothy with a look at more of Paul's practical instructions to Timothy about his leadership of the church in Ephesus.