

1 Timothy 5:1 – 6:2

Introduction

Now Paul deals with Timothy's relationships to people of different ages in the Church, and the social problems he faced, like dealing with widows and slaves. This chapter is full of sound advice about responsibilities for every day situations which arise in everybody's home and work.

Dealing with old and young men, and old and young women

(a) Old men. **Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father** (1 Timothy 5:1). Occasionally, in his capacity as a leader, Timothy would have to reprimand an older man. Paul's advice was not to do it sharply but to appeal to him as he would his father. It is always difficult to reprimand someone in a Christian or church context. And it is especially difficult to do it with graciousness if you are worked up about someone's failure. Harder still is to reprimand someone older than yourself. Yet if the leader is to be faithful, it has to be done. To shirk from the responsibility may be a mistake, and cause injury to the person concerned. Many would have been saved from shipwreck and sorrow if only a warning had been given in time.

The key is to speak out when it is necessary, but to do so without anger or bitterness. If a leader speaks out of anger or bitterness, the result will be hurt and pain, or else resentment, fear and resistance. The great missionary teacher, Florence Allshorn, when she was principal of a woman's college, used to rebuke her students, if the need arose, with her arm around them, showing that the rebuke was not from cruel intent, but because she was under the compulsion of love.

(b) Young men. **Treat younger men as brothers.** The advice here is simply to be brotherly, and not superior, to our contemporaries and juniors.

(c) Old women. **Treat older women as mothers** (1 Timothy 5:2). In other words, older women were to be treated with the esteem, affection and help which the maternal relationship should evoke. Respect for the aged is underlined. One of the tragedies of life is that youth find age a nuisance. Young people sometimes find themselves at loggerheads with those who have lived long, have experienced more, and have much wisdom to impart. Rather, there ought to be an attitude of cooperation, mutual strengthening and enthusing, of benefit and profitable to both young and old. The fact is that often old people are more adaptable to the young than the young are adaptable to the elderly.

(d) Young women. **Treat younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.** There needs to be much care in relationships between people of the opposite sex within churches. This advice is never out of date. Sadly there have been too many instances of Christian work ruined because of indiscretion or five minutes folly.

Dealing with widows within the church

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need (1 Timothy 5:3). Paul tells Timothy to recognise those widows who are absolutely destitute (or possibly wives of the polygamist who have now been dismissed since becoming Christians). Provision was to be made for these needy ones. Under Jewish law, at the time of marriage, a man ought to make provision for his wife in the event of his death. Also the first Christian Church office-bearers, according to Acts 6, had a duty of caring fairly and justly for widows. But this did not have to be done if these widows still had children or grandchildren alive who could support them. The relatives had a duty to care for their elderly parents or grandparents within their homes, in return for all that their parents had done for them in earlier years. The church did not have to be involved in the care until the children had done all they could.

Sadly in society today, some families do not feel this responsibility to take on the care of elderly parents, even out of gratitude. The Dutch proverb has much truth: "It is often easier for a poor father to provide for ten children than for ten rich children to provide for one poor father." Paul was quite clear about the duty of children to their elderly parents: **If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever** (1 Timothy 5:8).

By precept and personal example, this is a constant theme in the Scriptures. **"I am Joseph! Is my father still living?"** (Genesis 45:3). **Honour your father and your mother** (Exodus 20:12). **He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow** (Deuteronomy 10:18). **A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation** (Psalm 68:5). **For Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'** But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: **'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition** (Mark 7:10-13). And the Lord's provision for His own mother, even while He hung on the Cross: **to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home** (John 19:27).

The widow and the fatherless are under God's special care and protection. He blesses those who help and honour them. He rebukes and punishes those who injure them. His people are to plead for the widow. Christ condemned those who robbed widow's houses and for pretence made long prayers. He commended the widow who gave two mites. He had compassion of the widow of Nain who had lost her only son. **Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress** (James 1:27).

The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help (1 Timothy 5:5). Such widows will be cared for by God, and are to be honoured and cared for by those in the church, including material support.

Then Paul leaves the subject of supporting widows in general, and goes on to speak of widows who are placed on a list – an official register of elderly widows. Evidently in the early church such a list existed, and those on it were recruited for special service within the church. They were to be devoted to that special ministry. They had a vital role and part to play within the church. There is evidence of these lists of widows in the writings of Tertullian, around 204AD. Their task was to give counsel to younger women, to comfort, pray and fast, visit the sick, prepare women for baptism and communion, and give guidance to other widows and orphans.

Still in many churches today, older women in good health, with their own children left home, are able to put their great experience and knowledge of the Lord into tremendous ministry.

The qualifications Paul gives of those on the list point in the direction of the kind of work to be done by them and the kind of character they ought to possess. **No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she ... has been faithful to her husband** (she must have set an example of purity and fidelity), **is well known for her good deeds** (a good reputation is vital because nothing discredits a church like unworthy office-bearers), **such as bringing up children** (having brought up her own children in the Christian way).

Children in those days were sometimes considered to be a misfortune. When a child was born it was laid at its father's feet. If the father lifted it up, it was to be acknowledged and brought up within the family. If he turned away, the child was to be thrown out like rubbish, maybe left in a field or at the roadside. Often such children were collected by unscrupulous people to bring them up for evil purposes. Christians often received such children and gave them a Christian home.

Continuing with the qualifications of the widows on the list: **she must be well known for showing hospitality** (the inns in Paul's day were dirty and immoral, so open Christian homes were a blessing), **washing the feet of the saints** (i.e. willing to do humble tasks), **helping those in trouble** (persecution was rife, and to help those in prison was risky but worthwhile), **and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds**. These were the qualifications for those enrolled as widows, but really we have here a description of normal Christian life.

Timothy is warned not to enter younger widows on this list. They might later find the opportunity and desire to remarry, and their vow to Christ would be broken – so better not to have made that vow in the first place and tied themselves to Christian duties. It would be better for them to remarry and engage in the greatest task of all – rearing children and making a home. The danger was that if they felt they must remain a widow, and not remarry, they might become idle gossipers (1 Timothy 5:11-15).

The problem of slavery

Among the members of Timothy's church there would be both Christian slaves and Christian slave-masters. Paul gives advice to Timothy on how they should be instructed to behave. Within the church, there was to be no distinction between slave and free. However, **All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be**

slandered (1 Timothy 6:1). Slaves had to be reminded to respect and obey their masters. This was one way of honouring God's name. A Christian slave must not get the reputation for being insolent, disobedient or inefficient, because that would discredit the Gospel.

If a Christian slave had a Christian master (1 Timothy 6:2), he must not take advantage of that by becoming slack in his duties or familiar with his master. After all, they both belonged to Christ and were in the same church. The Christian master was not likely to punish them because they were fellow Christians. But the very fact that the master was a Christian meant he had to be honoured all the more by being served well. Spiritual equality did not efface civil distinctions.

This is advice which is never out of date. Work well because you are a Christian worker. Indeed, you ought to be a better workman than the rest, because all work is done in the spirit of it being done unto the Lord, not as an awful chore. Never take advantage of a Christian employer, or expect special leniency and considerations. Serve him even better because he is a Christian.

Regrettably often our service to the church is more casual and less conscientious than to our employers. Our punctuality and attendance is well below what our employers would expect; our respect for church property less than our respect for our own homes. This is so ironic, and another example of how we take advantage of fellow Christians.

Conclusion

This advice is timeless. In church relationships today, there still ought to be respect for the elderly, and an attitude of brotherly love rather than superiority towards our peers and juniors. Relationships between the sexes need, more than ever, to be carefully watched. Church members should look after their own relatives if possible. There will always be those among us who are in need, and the church's duty is always to help them. Older women have a special role still today, and can pay valuable service within the church. All have to be good workmen, especially when our employers are Christians.