

Prayer

In those moments when life feels numb and love is distant from my heart, Lord Jesus, come gently with a word, a touch, a sense of Your presence, and place the seed of renewal in my heart. Then, with every day that passes, may I increasingly know the transforming power You have placed within me. So may I rejoice in Your graciousness and care, Lord Jesus Christ; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Finance

The world of finance covers every aspect of life; this week we will pray for the world of finance and its impact on people. Pray for the management of money in your church.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the blessing of Christian fellowship
- Pray for the success of political talks in Zimbabwe
- Pray about the current difficulties in the world economy

Meditation

Where is the mind of a servant of God?

Dwelling on the Word and searching for truth;
Observing the world and working at what is right.

Where is the heart of a servant of God?

Fighting for justice, and for the poor of the land;
Following the Spirit's lead in the conquest of sin.

Where is the spirit of a servant of God?

Yearning for holiness and the things of God;
Searching for the truth and the life of Christ.

Where is the soul of a servant of God?

Committed wholly to the Lord and the doing of His will;
Longing for the day when He will come again.

Where is the body of a servant of God?

Doing what Christ requires, with thought and care,
Putting the Gospel into practice, for all to see.

Bible Study - 1 Timothy 5:9-16

⁹ Let a widow be placed on the list if she is over sixty years old and has been married only once; ¹⁰ she must be well known for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped those in distress, and devoted herself to all kinds of good deeds. ¹¹ But do not include the younger widows; for if their passions draw them away from Christ they want to marry, ¹² and so they come under judgement for having set aside their first faith. ¹³ Furthermore, some learn to be idle, wandering from house to house; and they are not just idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they should not say. ¹⁴ So I suggest that younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the enemy no reason to

slander us ¹⁵ For some have already turned aside after Satan. ¹⁶ If any believer has widows, let her assist them. The church should not be burdened so that it can assist those who are real widows.

Review

As we read this passage, our hearts probably fall a little, because the whole text reads like a church report about a difficult situation and with an unpleasant conclusion. It seems as if the general support of widows by the church had become a problem and was draining church resources, meaning that it had become difficult to help those in real need. Paul identified younger widows as the source of the problem and recommended their removal from the list of those receiving financial assistance. He also identified the spiritual root of some of the problems as being sexual passions, and Paul concluded by saying that those with means should support themselves whilst the church should focus on helping those whose need was greatest!

Now, if Paul was the church officer today and brought a report of this nature to a church meeting, you can imagine the uproar! We can also imagine the potential complaints. Not only did Paul suggest changing a well established policy of the church to support widows generally, he sought to cut out a whole swathe of people from obtaining benefits who might expect to receive it (5:9)! In addition, he made comments about the passions of widows which some would find questionable (5:13,15); surely it was wrong for him to suggest that all widows under sixty were driven by sexual desire and the need to marry (5:11)? Why bring up the pastoral problem of widows abandoning their faith (5:12)? Finally, what an insult to draw Satan into the situation and accuse some of being in league with evil (5:14,15), and then identify only those he had earlier categorised (the over 60's) as 'real widows' who should receive benefit! In addition, we can imagine one final complaint; why does the report attack women and not men! Who was Paul to say such things!

This is a parody of this passage of course, but it highlights the issues and helps us understand what was happening to make Paul write in this way. It is at least possible that some received Paul's letter rather like this when it was first made public! Paul wrote the letter to Timothy, of course, but it did not remain private for long. It is on the earliest lists of Paul's letters as recommended for public reading, and because scripture is not optional for us, we cannot simply dismiss it because of its contrary nature!

We must now consider the real options facing Paul. He faced an awkward situation, but Paul's mindset was that the church should always honour Christ by helping those in real need, not helping those who were in truth able to look after themselves. If we now unpick everything Paul says in this passage, then his general advice to Timothy about how to look after widows and counsel them boils down to three options. Firstly, dependant older widows with no family means of support (see 5:4,8) should be on the 'list' of those receiving what we may presume to be financial support (5:9); and Paul added the requirement that church support required evidence of faith through 'good deeds' appropriate to a woman who had been saved (5:10). Secondly, Paul had already given his strong advice that all widows should dedicate themselves to a life of service, intercession and prayer (5:5) and he carried this idea over into what he says here. Thirdly, in this passage, despite complaining at the behaviour of some who appeared to damage the integrity of the church through irreverent socialising (5:13), Paul turned his feelings around to give some positive advice to younger widows. He accepted that it was best for most younger widows to marry again and take up a family life with all its responsibilities (5:14).

It is good to see that Paul was quite capable of being this flexible in his advice to women. The only 'fixed' item on his personal agenda was his opposition to Satan's infiltration of the church (5:15). In some setting we do not know about, Paul had clearly come across

widows who received the benefits of the church but who had abandoned the faith after the loss of their husbands. He did not comment on individual circumstances, but he was right to question whether those who lost faith, in whatever circumstances, should enjoy the privileges of fellowship (5:12). It was typical of Satan to take a tragedy such as widowhood and make it worse by leading the afflicted astray, but it was Paul's constant aim to uphold the good of the whole body of Christ, and commend the highest standards of godliness.

The more you read the passage, the more you realise that in the face of a big problem, Paul was careful to both speak the truth about the wrongdoing of those who should have known better, but also to present a solution. He operated the same principle used centuries later by Wesley who said to his ministers and preachers 'go not to those who need you, but to those who need you most'. Paul therefore suggested that the widows most in need were the ones with no options; the elderly who had no support or hope of any other life. They should receive the unqualified support of the church.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether Paul shows any bias against women in this passage, and if so, what and how?
2. Should any group of people receive charitable financial help within the fellowship of the church today?
3. What problems do widows have today and how should the church help them?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The discussion of the treatment of widows here in 1 Timothy is a little difficult for us to relate to because although widowhood is something many women continue to experience, the social stigmas and problems associated with it today are different. Because of this, the way that the church helps widows now must surely be different. However, it is challenging to read about the way the early church sought to address the problems of real poverty in its midst; there is real poverty around us in the world now, so how should we handle it?

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Draw alongside those in your church fellowship who are widows, and give them some time. Let them tell you what it has been like to lose a husband and what this has done to their faith. Listen to them and pray for them.*
- *If there are those in your church who are genuinely poor, try to talk with them appropriately and without condescension about what it is like to be in need within a fellowship of people who do not all have the same problem. Pray for them.*

Final Prayer

When it is right, Heavenly Father, give us the space to be quiet and peaceful; and in that place, heal our bodies, revive our spirits and restore our souls. We trust in Your guidance to minister to us when we most need it, so that we may serve You faithfully for all our lives.
AMEN