

Honouring the Godly and Helpless

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Let's begin with a question that on the face of it is a simple question, and it's this. Who should we help?

Who should we help? Perhaps you're thinking the real question is, well, who shouldn't we help? Surely it's a good thing to help everyone. And that is a wonderful place to start tonight.

We read earlier on in our service from Deuteronomy how God wrote into his law for his people living in the land that they were to provide indiscriminately for all those who lived in the land, whether they were foreigners, widows, orphans, whoever, that they were gladly to help them by forgoing the full benefit of their harvest so that whoever could come and eat what was left of the grain, olives, or fruits, and be fed and be satisfied and survive.

The truth that kind of underlies that open-handed generosity, as we heard, is, says the Lord, because he had redeemed his people out of slavery.

It was out of his grace towards them that their generosity was to flow to his people. As Paul puts it in the New Testament, freely you have received, freely give.

[1 : 2 8] We've sung also, haven't we, from Psalm 68, where God says he is a God who specially protects and provides for those who are helpless under his care, those without families, and therefore, at that time, helpless to provide for themselves, and vulnerable to being preyed on by the wicked.

And so it's vital, as we start, that we recognize that our God, revealed in Scripture, has special concern for the helpless in his kingdom. And he insists that we, as his people, who've received his grace, share in that generous care.

But here's the big question, and it's the question that's at the heart of our passage tonight. What does that actually mean? What does that actually mean?

We should help everyone is one of those things that in churches is really easy to say. But the simplicity of saying that can disguise the difficulty of really helping.

Once we get under the skin of this question, it quickly becomes clear that there is no simple answer. Now, perhaps you're thinking straight off, that's just an excuse.

[2 : 4 6] You're overcomplicating something that is very simple. But let me illustrate this problem. Firstly, we can help anyone, but we can't help everyone.

We can't help everyone. Churches are not governments, big global charities that run huge aid budgets for all sorts of reasons. Even those sort of programs can't, for instance, make poverty history.

Realistically, we have to ask, who can we help? But then that creates another problem, doesn't it? Because if we can't help everyone, well, then are we doomed, therefore, to fail in our God-given responsibility if we really should help everyone?

And so, well, should we help everyone? That is to ask, do we have an equal responsibility before God to help every person who crosses our path or who lives on the planet?

Or does God rather prioritize our responsibilities to care? Those we should help in certain ways as our God-given duty?

[4 : 03] And those who we can help in various ways, but which isn't binding on us as Christians to do. We also know for a fact that sometimes helping hurts.

There's a really good book by that title written for the church, actually, if you are interested in this question, When Helping Hurts. And the basic point is that sometimes, even with the best intentions, when we try to help people who have real needs, we can do so in ways that actually make it worse and end up hurting the very people that we have set out to help, which I hope we can agree is definitely not good.

So I hope already you see asking this question is not a cop-out, that these are real questions that we need to grapple with if we take seriously God's character and his desire for us as a church to serve those in real need.

So back to our question, who should we help and how should we help them? I found this surprisingly one of the hardest sermons so far in this series to prepare.

And I'm going to say from the start, we're not going to answer the question completely this evening, but Paul gives us a good place to start. He writes to Timothy that the church has a God-given responsibility to honor the godly and helpless.

[5 : 32] And that honor or care should cover their spiritual and material well-being. Now, those things will go together in our passage, but just to help us understand, we're going to break it into two parts and then try and bring it back together at the end.

So firstly, then, let's see the requirement for godliness and spiritual honoring. Now, the context here, obviously, is Paul giving instructions about how the church is to support widows.

Next time, we're going to see Paul's instruction how the church is to support elders. And that's an important thing to notice, because this section is flowing out of chapter 5, verses 1 and 2, where Paul tells Timothy to relate to the church as a family.

So this section is really unpacking the idea that in the church family, all the men are to be treated as fathers and all the women as mothers.

So this is not a section of just random instructions. It's rooted in what the church is, which is the family of God. And once again, we'll notice, if we've been following this series, that Paul's dealing with men and women in the church family.

[6 : 48] Like, this issue just doesn't go away in this letter. And we know why by now, don't we? Because this is one big way that this church he's writing to has gone so wrong in the way that they are treating men and women.

And we'll come back to that context in a bit, because it's so important for understanding what Paul is going to say, especially about the younger widows. But straight off, on the surface of the text, we can see straight away there's two kinds of widows that Paul has in mind.

See that in verses 5 and 6? 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.

But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. So there are godly widows and ungodly widows, says Paul.

And as obvious as that sounds, I wonder whether we really recognize that distinction. Have we taken this in? It's often said, another one of those simple things to say, God has a heart for the poor.

[8 : 02] And as I said at the start, God's concern, his special concern for the helpless under his care is really striking. But Paul's reminding us that simply being poor in and of itself, simply being a widow in this case, doesn't put someone in a special category before God.

Of course, God cares for everyone. He gives and sustains all life all the time. But poverty is not a spiritual shortcut to God.

A poorer person who does not love Christ is no closer to God than a rich person who does not love Christ. Jesus says of the two, it's easier for the poor person to love him.

But as it stands, if neither do you love him, then neither are under God's special care and protection. And that's true of any one of us tonight.

That we have no special claim on God at all. If our trust is not in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot trust in poverty or riches, in our past or our present, in who we are, in what we do or have done or haven't done to come to God.

[9 : 26] We simply trust in Christ alone as we come to him and claim his promises. And that's simply what Paul's saying here of the widows, that simply being a widow in itself is not a sign of her belonging to God.

No, it's the hearts of these widows that says it all. One widow puts her hope in God and cries out to him day and night. This is the widow in Jesus' parable, remember, who does not leave the judge alone until he gives her justice.

And the point of that parable, remember, is that Jesus is commending that persistent widow, her persistence to his followers, whoever we are. He told this parable to show them that they were always to pray and never to lose heart.

So this is true faith that God recognizes and honors. By contrast, the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.

That's really shocking to hear, isn't it? We might wonder whether Paul might not be a little bit more sensitive. But his point is, her being a widow doesn't guarantee her godliness.

[10 : 43] In fact, whoever we are, we live for our own pleasure rather than depending upon God. Then we are, as Paul says, walking corpses, dead while we live.

It is ungodliness, not being right with God. So godliness or ungodliness, belief or unbelief. It's a contrast that covers everyone.

And we can find that really hard because it really does cover everyone. From first to last, from richest to poorest. And so now the question, which of these widows should the church honor?

That's the language Paul uses in verse 1. Give proper recognition to you or literally honor those widows who are really in need. Our instinct at this point is to say, well, the church should help whoever is in need.

But what does Paul say? See verses 9 and 10. Which widow is he describing? No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over 60, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, a list of good deeds, devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

[12 : 01] This is the godly widow, isn't it? Whose hope is in God and whose faith in him shows in the way that she lives. Now because, I need to say, because of this standard of faithfulness, of godliness Paul lays out, some commentators see this list of widows as being not a list for those who need help, but a list rather of those who are called to help.

So some would say perhaps these are widows who are being paid by the church to serve in these certain ways. And it's really tempting to see it like that. Because it gets us out of saying that only some widows qualified for the church's kind of committed long-term support program.

Now I'm personally not convinced that this is a list of widows who were called to serve. Partly because there's nothing in the text that says that. While there's lots that's being said about caring for widows.

So it feels a little bit like talking past the text. To say that these were not widows in need of help, but rather who were to help. It also seems a little bit bizarre, to me anyway, for Paul to have said he wants all women to clothe themselves with good works, chapter 2.

But then only permit older widowed women getting paid for doing that. Why then is it a list of widows and not a list of women if they are being supported for their service?

[13 : 35] In fact, if you take this to its logical conclusion, what you end up with is nuns. So it makes more sense of the text, I think, to say that this is a list of widows who do qualify for the church's support.

And clearly it is only godly widows who qualify. As with the other kind of character profiles that Paul's given us in this letter, this isn't, I think, to be taken as a tick list.

As if someone who doesn't meet these exact criteria could not get support. Rather, it's a general character profile of a woman who lives with her hope in God.

And so the point is surely that the church has a God-given responsibility and duty specifically to honor and care for professing Christians in our body.

Faithful members of our church who are in real need. Now that's not to say, let's be really clear, that's not to say that the church can't help those outside our body who are in need in various ways we can.

[14 : 48] In fact, as Rob prayed about those who may be suffering over the winter, there is an initiative between some local churches to see if we can help with that. But Paul doesn't tell us we should.

Rather, he's saying we should. We have a duty to care for those in need whose hope is in God. And therefore, who are under God's special care and protection and provision.

As Paul puts it in Galatians 6.10, And therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Did you see that priority that he places on the church family? That was true even in the Old Testament law that we read. It was foreigners, widows, and orphans.

But where did they need to be to claim that provision? Well, they needed to be in God's land.

[15 : 48] Belong to the covenant community. So we as a church should honor Christians in the church who are humanly last and in need as God himself does.

And that honor in this case is referring specifically to long-term committed practical care or financial support. That particular type of help and provision.

Part of the reason we don't have that same duty towards those who are outside of the church is because this honor is tied up with the spiritual good of those whom we support.

Paul's really clear that this support is not to be given at the expense of these women's spiritual health. This is why, for instance, Paul doesn't want the younger widows to be honored in this way.

Did you see that in verse 11? It says, as for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. Why? Verse 13. They get into the habit of being idle, going to house to house.

[16 : 53] Not only that, they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to. Having lots of time and nothing to do is not good for them spiritually, he says.

So this is where helping hurts. When putting these particular women on a list to receive long-term financial support might actually put a stumbling block in the way of their walk with Christ.

Now, to put this back into its context, I promised we'd do that, as we should. Having these young widows free during the day would have played straight into the hands of the false teachers in Ephesus.

Remember them? Remember, the false teachers are teaching, aren't they, forbidding marriage? And they are putting women into positions of leadership to help preach and spread their controversial speculations.

That's what's going on in this church. And so it would have suited them quite nicely, wouldn't it, to have several young widows being bankrolled by the church with lots of time on their hands and nothing better to do than spread those speculations.

[18 : 05] And so that's why Paul here is saying, stop putting them on that list. Because the church has ended up funding these women's sinful lifestyle and anti-gospel teaching.

See, it is not actually for their good or their eternal good to be on this list. It is for the benefit, rather, of the false shepherds in the church.

So Paul doesn't want them to be bought off by the church or to resign themselves to a life without personal responsibility. Instead, he wants them encouraged back into a godly pattern of living.

He wants them to have responsibility, to thrive as godly women. And in the first century, for a young single woman, that meant getting remarried and having a family, verse 14.

Now, again, perhaps we feel it's unkind for Paul to kind of withdraw this support and to tell them to find it elsewhere. But we need to see that it is not kind for the church to continue that support at the expense of these women's souls.

[19 : 17] And for having been put on this list, verse 15, some have, in fact, already turned away to follow Satan. And with that, Satan has been given opportunity to slander the church.

How can the church, he says, be the pillar and foundation of the truth when you are funding lies and sinful living? So who should, should we help as a church?

Well, firstly, the church should honor, should honor faithful members of our church family who are in need by giving committed, practical or financial support when and only when that does not conflict with their spiritual well-being in Christ.

And that goes together with the second condition of helplessness and our responsibility to material honoring. Because the other really obvious condition for the church's long-term support is helplessness, verse 3.

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. Now, what does really in need mean? Well, firstly, it's right on the surface of the text.

[20 : 28] It means not having any family. Because, verse 4, if a widow has grandchildren or grandchildren, these should learn, first of all, to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family.

And so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. So the church as an institution is not to be the first responder to every need, even in the church, says Paul.

In fact, he's saying, don't step on the toes of grown-up children if they are able to care and provide for their elderly grandparents or parents themselves.

Don't deprive them of the opportunity to make some small return to care for those who cared for them as they were growing up.

So that is a God-given responsibility, isn't it? We as individual Christians have towards our parents to honor our father and mother in these ways.

[21 : 30] It's one of the ways he says we put our religion into practice. Echoes what James says in chapter 1. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

And so the church is not to deprive Christians of that role. But rather where it is relevant to encourage them to take up that responsibility towards their parents, to be a caregiver and a provider where that is appropriate.

And as I thought about this in the week, my mind turned to those of you who I know do this. Who do you care for your parents, who are elderly, who even perhaps live far away, visiting, providing for them, giving lifts, showing hospitality.

And I gave thanks for you and I prayed for you in that because it is a precious thing. Paul says it is pleasing to God. Such a sign of true godliness, such a gift of God to those whom you care for in the ways that you do.

So again, this is not Paul being unkind by saying to the church not to step in straight away. It's rather a kindness to families, to children who have the precious responsibility of caring for those in their final years, who cared for them in their early years.

[23 : 03] And so if we were to kind of draw a diagram of this, we'd find that we have kind of concentric circles of care. Those who are closest to the person in need should be the first to care.

As an idea sometimes called moral proximity. I've put some slides on the screen to maybe help us visualize it a wee bit. Moral proximity, two authors define it like this.

The closer the need, the greater the moral obligation to help. Moral proximity refers to how connected we are to someone. It's the first ring, circle if you like, moral proximity is the immediate family, the household.

The next ring out is the wider family. See that as their inverse. Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for those in their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Okay, so even unbelievers get this, says Paul. Okay, they care for their families. They provide for them. Not to do so is actually to break the norms of our own society, let alone the call of God to love like Christ.

[24 : 15] The next ring out, though, are Christian brothers and sisters. We see that in verse 16, where he says, If any woman who's a believer has widows in her care, she should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

And so this is speaking about individuals in the church that freely take it upon themselves to care for those who are in need. And again, I know that there are several of you who do that, and I am thankful for you, gave thanks for you, prayed for you in that, because it is such a great witness to the church and to the wider world to see the family of God, brothers and sisters, caring for one another in great need.

But those, Paul says, who are really in need, notice, are those who don't have any immediate or wider family or a close Christian friend to help them.

And that is where the next ring out comes in, the church as an institution. Do you see the difference here? The way this is sometimes put is the difference between the church as organism, the church body and its members functioning together, and the church as organization, represented by its elders and deacons.

So this is what Paul means by widows who are really in need practically or materially, those without anyone in their lives to help them in this way.

[25 : 54] And that is when this list of widows comes into play. The church steps in to provide long-term material help. So notice how specific Paul is being here.

He is not saying to us as Christians, don't ever help those who are in need who don't meet these conditions. He's not saying don't care for people. He's not forbidding, for example, Christian friends from cooking meals for these young widows or offering to help with the shopping, things like that.

But he is saying church funds are to be kept for those who are genuinely completely helpless. Which, again, might sound unkind to us, but is, brothers and sisters, a good thing?

Because he doesn't want the opportunity for Christians to personally and lovingly and generously care being taken over by a spreadsheet that is operated by the church.

To be clear, while that is needed, the church should generously and gladly provide that really committed support and long-term financial help when it is needed. But in Christian families and in the church family, that should be a last resort, he says.

[27 : 15] Because where it's not needed and the church steps in, it can suffocate the Christ-like love that should exist between parents and children, brothers and sisters in the Lord.

And also, in some cases, it can diminish the dignity of those in need by relieving them of personal responsibility. Okay, this is his point in verse 11 onwards.

The young widows don't put them on such a list, for when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. So, verse 14, I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes.

See, where there was still an opportunity for these younger women to remarry, Paul doesn't want them to be conflicted between the support that they're receiving from the church and their desire to be married again and in the thick of life.

The context back then, of course, was a world in which it was extremely hard, if not impossible, for a young single woman to be financially independent.

[28 : 22] So, her gainful employment in that society would have been what Paul describes here, work in the home. Now, that's not the world that we live in, thankfully.

Today, women, men can all work and support themselves financially. But the point Paul's making more broadly is not to try to wean someone off the dignity of having responsibility.

You're not letting people resign themselves to financial dependence upon the church where that is not necessary. There is dignity in managing a home, in raising children, in working in the labor market, in studying and learning.

And Paul does not want the church to take away that dignity by pledging unnecessary long-term financial support, where it's not truly needed.

And again, that is not saying that we can't offer support, for example, if someone were to go through a period of unemployment, or a period of illness, or short-term dependence.

[29 : 34] But putting someone on a list for long-term support can have harmful consequences, even if we're trying our best to help. And so it is in that gap where there really is no one else to turn to personally or in the family, that the church is called to gladly honor the godly and helpless by providing for their needs.

In a world that was without the welfare state, which of course didn't exist when Paul was writing, that was an incredible thing. The idea that outside of your own work or your own family, that you would have a church family who would step in in your hour of need to provide for you, to sustain you financially, it's an incredible thing.

The only reason it perhaps doesn't sound so radical to us today is because that principle has been embedded so deeply in our society and in the world around us.

So coming back then to our question, who should the church help and how should we help them? I hope we can see that biblically that is not a simple, straightforward question.

It is complicated, but for good reason. For each of us as individual Christians too, it's not simply a case of saying, yes or no, I will or won't help.

[31 : 02] But God gives us priorities in who we should help. He expects us to love our families well. He expects us to love our church families well.

And then he gives us opportunity to help others as we can, out of the generosity of our hearts touched by his grace. But if I can put it this way, God does not expect us as Christians to take on the weight of the world.

We can't possibly do that. And we do God a disservice when we say that he is asking or demanding the impossible of us. But I want to finish briefly by bringing this back together to think about who the godly and helpless might be in the church today and how we as a church might practically honor and help these people.

In Paul's context, of course, it was widows. And of course, it may well be that there are widows or widowers in the church today who we can help like this.

There's a thought about this. There's a thought some churches operate, don't they, care homes or sheltered accommodation for this reason. Because they are true to this call to grant dignity and Christian care for those in their old age who don't have others in their lives to provide it.

[32 : 31] And short of that, of course, we should, should provide practical and financial support where that is relevant. But thinking more broadly about who this could be, the godly and helpless in our day, these conditions could apply, I think, in some cases, for example, to single parents in the church for whom working at one job does not bring in sufficient income to run a household, who don't have that wider family support.

These conditions could also apply, couldn't they, to those who suffer from chronic illness or disability or pain in the church that make it impossible to work.

And when that support can't be given by family and Christian friends. In some cases, it could be Christians who have moved from poorer parts of the world and come in great need, whose families and friends are left far behind them, and who throw themselves on the church for support.

Again, we're not limited, are we, in who we can help. And as I said, speaking about the deacons, this is a standing item on the agenda. We want to help with all kinds of needs in our congregation.

We want you to come to tell us your needs. All I'm saying is perhaps these people, these are people, who we should consider helping in a committed, deliberate, and long-term way, financially, practically, materially, considering this call to the church to honor the godly and helpless among us.

[34 : 12] I'm sure there are other situations, other ways that the church could help, other groups of people perhaps we think of. Maybe this is something that we can speak about over coffee. Maybe you have other ideas that you'd like to share with me.

Maybe, because if there's nothing else we take away from this sermon, let it be this. This is something we should give thought to as a church. Is it not?

As we see God's heart for those who are under his care, his protection and provision, who are helpless, his call for us to share in that care deliberately.

And so let us praise him for his care. And let us pray for his wisdom as we consider how we ought to care for those in our church.

Let's pray together. Gracious Father, we thank you and we praise you that you are the God of your people who are helpless and downcast.

[35 : 20] That the outcast, those who are destitute. Father, we're so aware that as we pray to you this evening, there are many brothers and sisters we have around the world who are in great need and crying out to you, their God, for help.

Father, we pray that you might provide for their needs. Father, we thank you that you call your people to generosity and to sacrificial care.

And Father, we pray that you grant us wisdom as we understand the call of your word, how we should help, whom we have a duty to help, and who we can help, and who we might help as you give us opportunity.

Father, we thank you that you care for families. Father, we thank you that in the word we have just read that you show such care for mothers and fathers, for children, for grandparents.

We thank you that you work and provide, Lord, through families to care for those in need. Father, we thank you for the families of our church. Father, we pray for those among us who are in need.

[36 : 35] Father, we thank you for those who pour themselves out to care for the needs of others. Father, we pray that you would grant us grace and generosity of heart, that together as a church family, we might serve one another with love, and that you would help us as a body and as a local congregation of your people to organize ourselves rightly under your word.

For this we pray and ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.