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Learning to Live as the Family of God

God's Design for the Church in 1 Timothy

1 Timothy 5:1-16

Pastor Ryan Harmon

What comes to mind when you hear the word “family”? For some of us in this room, that word stirs up nothing but joy and warmth. We've only had a positive experience with family. For some of us, however, there's some hesitation with that word. It's a word that stirs up pain because of the woundedness of our own experience. No question, our experiences in life have shaped our view of family, and when we come to Christ, we bring those views and those experiences with us. But what happens in the way that change occurs, is we bring our ideas and then we encounter God's truth. We encounter God's truth in His Word, His truth about what is really true, what He really intends, what His design was for something like the family. And slowly, our view, our idea, start to be conformed to God's very ways. With a world like ours, with families that are broken, it's most likely true that when it comes to this idea of family, that's a process many of us will need to walk through, and the reason it's pertinent to our study of 1 Timothy is in 1 Timothy, over and over again, we have talked about how the church is the household of God. In other words, we are God's family. So what does it mean that we are His family? And how are we to live as the very family of God? That's what we want to talk about this morning.

So, open your Bibles with me to 1 Timothy, Chapter 5. Last week, in chapter 4, we encountered Paul's encouragement to his young protege, Timothy. He was stirring up confidence in Timothy, who had been given a difficult task to bring this church into alignment with God's design. And so Paul was charging his young protege to be confident, not to let anyone look down on him for his youth, to be diligent in his pursuit of godliness, that he might lead well. And now, as we turn to chapter 5, Paul is going to continue his instruction, but he's going to give some very specific examples of how we are to conduct ourselves in the household of God. So in chapter 5, verse 1, Paul, begins by saying:

Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers *and* the younger women as sisters, in all purity. (*NASB, 1 Timothy 5:1-2)

Do not sharply rebuke. It probably comes as a surprise to you, but the church is not a perfect place. I know that's a big shocker...news flash! We're not perfect, but we are called to be different, called to be a community that is growing together, that is increasing in our Christlikeness together. We're not perfect. We're growing. The fact that we're not perfect means there will be times where there are conflicts; there will be times where it's necessary for there to be correction. Well, Paul makes it very clear in these first two verses, that when correction is to occur, it's to occur with the idea in mind that the church is God's family. Every person in this room is included in his brief list there in those two verses: *older and younger men, older and younger women*—all of us—are a part of the family of God, and that should impact the way that we interact together. So Paul gets specific with **older man**. He says to Timothy that, as Timothy corrects an older man, he's to do so in a way that has the reverence that he would give to a father. You can imagine the challenge that

would have been for Timothy, a younger pastor, a younger leader going and talking to older men, elders in the community. For people in that culture, it would have been absolutely mandatory to give them respect, and so that would have been a tense thing. Now, Timothy wasn't to domineer; he wasn't to harshly interact with an older man. But he was supposed to approach him as he would a father, with the respect, the love, the affection that should occur between a father and a son.

Now that principle then follows for every member of the community he's to interact with. He's to interact with *younger men like brothers, older women as mothers, younger women, just as if they were sisters*. And when Paul gets to the younger women, he qualifies that interaction. He says that Timothy is to interact with younger women **in all purity**. Now we know that Timothy was a younger man himself. Bryan, last week, said probably in his 30s. And we don't know whether Timothy was married or not, but we do know that in his interaction with younger women, women, let's say who would be of marrying age, it was be absolutely imperative that Timothy interact with them in a way that was above reproach, interact with them with love and with gentleness, respect and dignity, treat them essentially as a sister, because that's actually what they are. We in the church, we are the family of God. We're not just like a family. We don't just resemble a family. We are the family of God. As you look to your right and you look to your left, people in front of you, the people behind you, if they are in Christ, they aren't just like brothers and sisters. They are brothers and sisters.

So as we continue, we're going to look at some specific examples, but it is worthy to stop for a moment and ask ourselves, “How should that truth that is much more than just a theological truth, much more than a merely academic truth—it's a very profound reality of what we are together—how should that shape the way that we interact together?” As you leave this building and you interact with a fellow brother or sister in Christ, how should the reality of who they are—a fellow member of the very family of God—how should that impact you? How should that change the way you think about them, the reverence and the dignity that you offer to them? Maybe most importantly, how should that impact the way that we disagree together? How a family disagrees will tell you a lot about that family. How should this truth impact the way that we disagree with one another? All of it is supposed to occur within a context of love, a love that marks God's intent for families. All of us most likely need some reforming of our thinking on this, because most of our families were broken in some way. We live in a sinful world, so it's good for us to go back and remember, “What did God intend for families? What was his design?” God's design for the family was that a family would demonstrate what God is like, that parents and their interactions with their children would demonstrate the very character of God, and kids would learn that this is what God is like by the healthy interactions with their parents.

That context of a family was to be a context of care and support and provision, as an extension I think we can say, the same things about the church family. The family of God is to be a context where our interactions—how we are together—demonstrates what God is like. We're to be a community that cares for one another, that loves one another, that demonstrates to one another, “This is what God is like. This is what His grace looks like, lived out.” We're to be a community that cares for one another, that supports one another. That's absolutely imperative! It's so important in our world, because we all know that in a world like ours, there will be times when the bottom will drop out in life. And in those moments, God's intent, His design for the family, is that the family can rally around another member, to care for, to support, to help them step back into

flourishing. It's God's intent for the family, and it's important to remember, because there will be times when the bottom will drop out. It is going to happen. And as Paul continues, he is going to bring into focus a group of women for whom that has happened within this congregation. He's going to turn his attention to widows. Verse 3:

Honor widows who are widows indeed;

So now, obviously, he has a very specific group of people in mind: widows, women who had lost their husbands. And he says the church, God's family, is to honor them, and by honor he means care for them and support them, even offer financial support for them. So, the church is to honor widows, to support widows, but not just any widows. He qualifies them. He says, **widows indeed**. Some of your translations might say those who are *truly widows*, *real widows*. So, the question is, "Who exactly is he talking about?" Verse 4:

...but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.

So by way of contrast, we learn a little bit about who these **widows indeed** are, that Paul is talking about. A widow indeed—a true widow—was someone that was absolutely alone in the world, with no family, no children, no grandchildren, no earthly family to rally around her in her moment of desperate need, and to support her after her husband has died. To be completely alone in the world is to be absolutely vulnerable. Even today, that is a very vulnerable position to be in, but in the first century, it made a woman incredibly vulnerable. We know from different histories that a number of widows, and what they would fall into just because of their inability to provide for themselves, they would become homeless, and in time, they would die of starvation. This was quite common, and so Paul is saying, "Support widows who are **widows indeed**, people who are in this desperate situation." But there are widows who are walking through this moment of grief, that are not absolutely vulnerable. They aren't alone in the world. They have children; they have grandchildren; they have a family—a support system—that can step in and provide support for them. And so God's design is that's precisely what the family would do. So Paul is calling those families to support widows in their family, people who are vulnerable, and provide for them, support them. He says that by doing this, they should make some return, which is just to say that throughout a child's life, a parent sacrifices, supports, cares, nourishes children as they are growing up and, later in life, when a parent is in a desperate situation, they need to be cared for. They need to be supported; they need to be loved. Well, it's appropriate. It's honoring to God for children to step in and do that for parents who are in that situation. So a widow's family—let's call them her earthly family—is called to care for her. That's the first principle, and it helps us understand a little bit about who these **widows indeed** were. But as Paul continues, it's going to become a little more clear who he's talking about. Verse 5:

Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, (There is that qualifier, who has been left alone.) has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. (Vs. 5-6)

So, again, a widow is someone alone, vulnerable, no family in the world—a **widow indeed**—and those widows apparently fell into two general categories that Paul outlines. The first is the widow who has no one else, but in that solitude, has clung to God, has placed her confidence in God, is completely dependent upon God, has given her life to entreaties and prayers, a life of service... laboring in prayer. In contrast, there's a different group of widows who have given themselves over to **wanton pleasure**, essentially trying to satisfy her life on her own terms. That phrase **wanton pleasure**—we don't say that word very often anymore—but it just means reckless pleasure, pleasure on the world's terms, pleasure that might seem to have life in it, but actually it is quite lifeless. It is dead; it will lead nowhere; it cannot ultimately satisfy. So, contrasted with that approach, is the true widow, the widow that has placed her confidence in God, given herself to God, placed her hope in God. When she has nothing, she has nothing in the world, but she has God, and she's given herself to a life of service and prayer. And Paul says, “These women were to be cared for; they were to be supported as members of God's family.”

As Paul continues, he makes a plea to Timothy to uphold these things, and, ultimately, one of his motivations is that the way that the church cares for one another in this circumstance and in circumstances like these with these widows, will demonstrate to the world what God is like. There's an evangelistic component to the care that we offer one another. So in verse 7 he says:

Prescribe (...which is to say, preach or teach, encourage) **these things as well, so that they** (...that is, the church) **may be above reproach.**

The outside world will look on and they will find no fault, nothing to accuse the church of. The sake of the gospel is a primary concern for Paul. So, they will be **above reproach.**

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (Vs. 8)

Paul has a way with words—quite strong—but I think as we look at the context and just consider this, we understand his passion on this point. I'm confident that if everyone would go home today, and you'd go over to your neighbor's house and you would say to your neighbor, “Hey, do you think it's good? Is it virtuous? Is it honorable that I care for my aging parents or I care for my mother who is a widow or my father who is a widower? Do you think that's a good thing?” Even if our neighbors are not believers, I believe 99.9% of them would say, “Absolutely! That is honorable; that is good. You should do that.” And Paul's point is that since that is true, since the world generally affirms this is a good thing, then how much more, those of us who have been given extravagant grace by God...how much more should we be quick to care for those who are in our family...how much more should we be quick to give away, to sacrifice for the sake of helping another person flourish? God has done that for us and so, empowered by His very Spirit, we should be quick to be extravagant in our care for others. God's design for the family is that it demonstrate what God is like, that it create an environment of flourishing, where someone can really step into being who God has called them to be. So Paul, here in this passage, is playing with this dynamic of the earthly family and the spiritual family, and that's a reality for each one of us in this room.

I have an earthly family. I'm the father of Sam and Jacob and Lucia, the husband of Janee, and I have responsibilities within that realm, responsibilities given to me by God. He has a purpose, a

design for my very family. But I also have my church family—the family of God—brothers and sisters...each person who is in Christ...people to whom I am profoundly related, because we are all found under the same Father. We've all been adopted into the same family by the very Spirit of God, through Jesus Christ and through His blood. And in this family, I have responsibilities as well. There's a responsibility within this family to do all I can to encourage the flourishing of every member, and that should impact the way that I interact, the way that I love and care for you, each one of you, my brothers and sisters in Christ. But of course, as we talk about this, as we consider this, the details do get a little murky; they're difficult to figure out. If the church is supposed to support, offer financial aid to a certain set of widows, it almost feels as though we need to hire an accountant. We need to figure out how to organize all this. And that actually is precisely what Paul turns to next. This is something that has to be taken care of and actually be officially overseen. So he's going to continue with vivid detail. But we need to remember who these **widows indeed** are. We already said they're someone who is alone in the world, with no family. They're someone who's given themselves to God, is dependent upon Him. And now he continues by painting a picture of the character, the overall tone of her life in verse 9:

A widow is to be put on the list (There's that official roster, a roll call.) **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.** (Vs. 9-10)

In the same way that Paul gave a list of qualifications for elders and deacons—and when we walked through those texts we said we don't believe we're supposed to approach these at a checklist—I think the same interpretation of how we approach this text applies here. I think this is a general picture. This is a composite picture of the life that this widow, this woman, is leading. It's been a life that's been passionately committed to Jesus Christ, been faithful to her husband. That's what it means when it says **the wife of one man**. She's been a one-man woman, just as an elder is called to be a one-woman man, committed to Jesus, serving the church, washing the feet of the saints, doing necessary service within the family of God. That's been what has marked her very life.

Paul also clarifies that she's **not less than sixty years old**, which means that it's very unlikely that she would ever remarry, because she's not of an age where that would be a possibility. We know that in this time, the average lifespan was about fifty years old. So, if someone made it to sixty, they were quite rare in the world. And so that was a qualification. They must be at an age where they won't have the opportunity, most likely, to remarry. These women, they were a gift to the church. They had been faithful, faithfully serving, faithfully laboring in prayer, faithfully washing the feet of the saints, pursuing Jesus with all of their energy. And because of that, the church was to rally around them, support them, care for them. No question, that in the ancient world, this would have been absolutely, completely abnormal. The outside world would have looked on at this class of people, these widows, who, in their mind, didn't have much value in the world, and they would have wondered, “Why did the church care for them like they did?” Of course, that would have led them to possibly ask questions, and eventually, the answer is, “Because God is good, and He has shaped His family in such a way that we care for one another extravagantly, just to mark us.”

When I was in college, a speaker came through, and I remember he said something like this. It's not an exact quote, but he said: If you want to know if the church is going to endure, the church is going to do well, three things will tell me whether it will. Number one: "Do the generations not split apart? Do they seek unity amidst their diversity in age and generation?" Number two: "Does one generation learn and seek to serve the other?" And the third marker is: "Are the elderly honored? Do they care for the elderly among them?" I've had the privilege to travel throughout the world in my role as global outreach pastor, and I will just tell you that I don't think we do this very well in America. When I go to Asia, I'm astounded the way they care for and respect and honor their elders, people who aren't even family members that the children refer to as auntie or uncle, because they have affection for them. They honor them; they respect them; they're part of the family. If there's any place that should be true, it should be true in the church, a place that honors those who have walked the long walk of obedience, with decades of obedience to Jesus Christ.

One of the great joys in this church, of serving in this very church, is the fact that it's multi-generational. I'm so thankful for that. We say often that we want to be a church that honors every generation, but we are passionate about pursuing the next generation. I think everyone understands what we mean when we say that. It's critically important that the younger generation, the next generation, be grounded in Christ, and that we come around them to support them and build them up. We want to do that, but please, please, don't ever let that lead you to think that we don't value every generation, that we don't honor the generations that have come before. I am so grateful for you. If you have been in this church for years, it is such a joy to be able to serve you. I'm so thankful for you and we as a church, we need you. We need your prayers. We need your stories of faithfulness. We need your stories of the way God has shown up. We need your testimony about what it looks like to walk with God...the long obedience in the same direction, pursuing surrender to Christ over the long haul. We need that. We are better for it. We want to honor you. We are thankful for you.

As Paul continues, clearly what's in his mind is these widows, these women who were so vulnerable. We're always trying to figure out how exactly does that apply to us? Who are the vulnerable among us that we need to care for in this way? But one question that comes up clearly, is that as he talks about these faithful women who are advanced in age, who are completely reliant upon God, it seems as though there is also a group of women who are less than 60 years old. And so when Paul says it's women who are not less than 60 years old, the question is, "What about those who are less than 60 years old?" And that's where he turns in verse 11:

But refuse to put younger widows on the list for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. (Vs. 11-15)

So in verse 11, the beginning of it sounds quite severe: "**refuse the younger widows.**" I read one commentator that said that that sentence is just four words in Greek, and it's not severe in its tone, but it is blunt. His suggested translation was this: "Younger widows, forget about it...forget about

it! Don't include them in the list.” And as Paul goes on, he gives pragmatic and pastoral reasons why they should not be included in this official list of people, of widows, that the church is to support. He starts by just acknowledging the reality that it is quite likely that younger widows will have other opportunities to get married. Maybe they hastily committed to this life of solitude, this life that marked these older widows...this life of solitude and focused prayer and service to God and to the church. But then a suitor came along, a man who asked for her hand in marriage. And we know that at this time, there were more men in the world than women. And so it's quite likely that if a widow was of a remarrying age, it was quite likely an offer would come. So Paul was very concerned that she not hastily make a commitment to a life of focused, dedicated service to God, and then go back on that commitment when a new offer comes down the aisle. So that's his first concern.

The second is that I think we need to acknowledge the lives that these older widows had been called to—lives of dedicated, focused service to God, a life of prayer—is not a vacation. It's a rigorous life. Prayer is a work of labor to come before the Lord and bring requests to Him on behalf of the family, on behalf of the body of Christ. That's a heavy and intensive labor. And these women had committed that they were going to be solely focused on serving God, by serving His church and lifting up prayers. And I think we could say that if all of us today committed to say we are going to have a half hour of dedicated, focused prayer, I think all of us would agree, distractions are going to come pretty quickly. It's going to become easy to start to lose focus. So Paul just wanted to ensure that these women knew what they were committing to.

So I was thinking about this. It took me back to my days in grad school, and I would sit in this library. I was 25 years old. I'd sit in this library, and I was reading this dry theology. As I was thinking about it, I thought of it about like a dry piece of turkey, right? It just takes all the moisture out of your mouth. It's just this dry stuff. I'd be reading it, but then I'd be looking outside, out the windows, and I'd see my peers out there just having a great time. The sun and the warmth had come at Wheaton, and they're just having a wonderful time. And here I am reading this boring stuff. The temptation was, I just wanted to get out there and go join in the fun. But I'm older now. I'm 46. I'm 21 years older than I was then, and my children remind me all the time that I am quite boring, (*laughter*) and that actually sounds wonderful. Give me the quiet library. Give me the dry book. I can focus. When I look outside and see the nonsense outside, I think, “What are they even doing? Give me this!” That tends to happen with age.

And Paul is concerned that perhaps these widows who are younger would somehow think that's a more noble pursuit, and they'd commit to something they weren't ready to commit to. Ultimately, what's in view is that each set of widows is called to pursue God in the ways that He has called them. It's redundant, but that's what it's all about. They are called to follow Him, to serve Him in ways that are appropriate to their lifestyle, to their circumstance, and also to be obedient to Him. Now, if He called them to that solitary life, they need to pursue it, But it wasn't a more noble pursuit. There is great nobility in remarriage, in building a home, building a family. That is a noble pursuit as well. And so each person, each set of widows, and all of us today, are all called to learn and seek God and say, “How do you want me to build my life in such a way that it would honor you?” That's the bottom line. Now both sets of widows also faced temptations. The older widows had the temptation of pursuing a life merely of pleasure rather than a focused, diligent service to God. The younger widows had the temptation to fill their life with the learning that is the world's

learning. We talked in 1 Timothy 2 about how women were called to learn, learn the ways of God. But here Paul is clearly saying there will also be a temptation to learn the ways of the world, to fill your mind with things that ultimately don't matter, and that essentially is to follow Satan, to start to put his priorities as the main thing in your life. Both sets of widows were called to faithfulness, a faithful pursuit of God. And each one of us—members of the family of God—God has called us to meaningful work in the world, building a life that honors Him. For some of us, that will mean building a home, building a family. For others that will mean faithful, dedicated service and never marrying. That will be part of what God calls us to. In both cases, the call ultimately is to pursue Jesus Christ, to pursue holiness, to honor Him with the circumstances we find ourselves in, to honor Him and point a world that needs Jesus, to the goodness of a life dedicated to Him. So now, as we come to verse 16, Paul summarizes his counsel, but he also gives one more reason that it's imperative that the church family show some discretion in the widows that it should support. Verse 16:

If any woman who is a believer has *dependent* widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.

The family, the earthly family, is called to care for its own and one motivation for that here, as Paul closes this section, is so that the church can be freed up to care for those that have no family. There are those who are desperately alone in the world, and the church is to be freed up to shower support and care for those individuals that have no one else...no family in the world. Therefore, the church family is going to surround them and support them. There's no question that, as a church, we are called to be a community of abundant care. The care that we offer one another, the care that we offer the world, is to be a marquee element of who we are. We talk about becoming more like Jesus, and Jesus cared about the lost. He sought after the lost. He cared about His own. Of course a very practical question, as we seek to be a community of care is, "Where do we begin?" I think an important truth is that we begin right here. We begin where God has placed us, in our families and in our church family. We don't stop here, but our care, our support, our encouragement, our love for one another, starts here and then, by extension, goes out and impacts the broader world. We can't care for everyone, but we can care for those right in our midst, the people that God has given us to care about. Our care starts here and it extends out from here. Now, of course, there are official ways that we are called to do this. As a church in Ephesus, they had a list. We don't have a list, but we do have ministries that officially offer this kind of care.

A number of you are probably familiar that we at this church have something called a benevolence fund. It's a fund dedicated to helping those in desperate need. In 2024, \$100,000 from that fund was dispersed out to those in significant need, people who are alone, people who don't have a family to rally around them, widows, single moms, people in desperate situations. It's a joy to be able to do that. We also have something called a car-care ministry. A number of you are probably familiar with that. In 2024, 15 cars were given away, the vast majority going to single moms, people in desperate need, just needing some help. We want to help them flourish. We want to rally around them and demonstrate God's love and care for them. As a church, we want to continue to be creative, to find ways to do that, to officially care for those in desperate need.

But it's important that we remember as a church, as a church family, we can't relegate the way that we care for one another to the official ministries of the church, because what we can do together

is care for one another. Our care for our brothers and sisters in Christ far outpaces what we can officially do as a church. If we take up this call to not only believe that we are the family of God but live daily as if we're the family of God, we will cultivate a community that is extravagant in its generous love towards one another. If you read the history books, what becomes quite evident every time, is that one of the things that stood out in the first two to three centuries about the early church, is that the outside world could not believe the way they cared for the widow and the way they cared for the orphan, those who were helpless in the world, those who could not help themselves. The church rallied around those people, brought them in. They met Christ. They became part of the family of God. And in those churches they became the very family for these people, helping them flourish and become all that God called them to be...demonstrating the very love of God to them. The demonstration of grace to people in need was a method of evangelism in the early church, and so we, Church, we are the family of God. We aren't just like the family of God. We are the family of God, brothers and sisters following the same Father who offered the same grace. So let us live that way. Let us take up this call to learn to live as the family of God and to cultivate among us an environment of belonging, an environment of hope, an environment of care, and an environment of love that demonstrates to the world that needs Jesus, exactly what He is like. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we do come to You and we are astounded that You have brought us into Your family by the blood of the cross, and that through faith, we've been given the right to become children of God. It's astounding, Lord, and my request is that You will help that not just be an academic thought, but that each one of us would feel it deep down in our bones, that we would know it and that it would transform the way we live; it would transform the way we interact with one another. Lord, let us be a community that demonstrates to the world that needs to know how good You are and how extravagant Your graces. We pray these things in Your name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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