

Russell Kelfer

**A Widow
Indeed
(Part 2)**

1227-A

Series: I Timothy

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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THE CHILDRENS' RESPONSIBILITY

The area of Christian responsibility is a difficult one to teach. At one end of the spectrum there is that legalistic extreme that says God's acceptance of you is predicated on what you do, on how you perform, on whether or not you keep the laws of the kingdom. At the other end is the school of thought that simply assumes that if you ask God to lead you, *you are no longer responsible to see that your decisions are in harmony with Scripture.*

In the middle is the balanced Christian life. The believer aware that *he, in and of himself, can do nothing* is also aware that God has outlined in the Scriptures certain choices he or she must make in order to free God to do His will through him. God in us will never act contrary to His Word. He cannot and still be God. So when we ask God to lead us and then knowingly violate Scripture, we are *dishonoring God*. We are crediting God in us with lying, with violating His own Holy Word.

That is why we are so often frustrated trying to find God's will. We violate Scriptural absolutes; move according to our feelings (calling it God's leading) or according to circumstances (calling it God's open doors) all the while violating specific commandments of God's Word that *can never change*. The grass may wither; the flowers may fade, indeed they will, but what God has said He has said. And He doesn't make exceptions to satisfy us.

That is why subjects such as this one are so important. The matter of how we feel led about caring for the elderly or for the widows in our midst is not the issue. Paul has said that God has some specific instructions for children with older parents, for the elderly themselves, and in particular for the church as a body. They are complete, but not negotiable. They are fair, but not subject to our whims. This is not legalism, but this is the will of God. Therefore, the Christian or the church who ignores these instructions is ignoring the *known will of God*.

The Apostle Paul is addressing the issue of widows. And once again the key word might be "responsibility". Paul begins by explaining that with God, there is a chain of responsibility, as well as a chain of authority in the Christian life. And where widows are concerned, the responsibility begins with the widow's

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own family. Here were Paul's instructions:

Honor widows who are really widows.

But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God.

And these things I command, that they may be blameless.

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.

If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.

(I Timothy 5:3,7,8,16 NKJV)

Whenever we read a passage like that, we need to first look for the Scriptural absolutes, then for the principles those absolutes spawn. Absolutes, you may remember, are "those *unchanging* (they do not vary), *unchangeable* (you cannot do anything to alter them) statements made by God which give man the freedom to know God's will specifically, and thus obey it implicitly. The world has it backwards. The world says if you give someone rules or give someone constraints or boundaries, you bind them. Scripture says when you give people known boundaries you set them free. The child who *knows he cannot play in the street* has the freedom:

- a) to grow mature by making his own choices as to where to play, knowing what he can and cannot do
- b) to obey or not obey without wondering whether or not he is in his parents' will.

So the commandments do not bind him; they free him. Real bondage comes from

- a) not knowing what one can or cannot do
- b) knowingly doing that which is forbidden.

Adam was free to eat of any tree in the garden but one. He did not come into bondage until he chose to eat of the one he *knew* he was not to touch. Then he came in bondage to fear, to guilt, to loneliness. So long as he did what he was allowed to do, he was free, and so are you and I. So God has defined as many absolutes in Scripture as possible, thus freeing us to know His will and do it. The problems come when we ignore those absolutes based on

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how we feel or try to reinterpret them in the light of present day society as though God did not understand our present age.

God knew all about Social Security. He knew all about how long people would be living in our generation. (It's not as long as they lived in Adam's generation.) He knew all about the church's affluence in this country. He knew all about inflation and falling real estate prices and expensive nursing homes and busy church calendars. The circumstances of our age are not a surprise to Him, *nor do they affect His absolutes*. His Word is His Word is His Word. Period.

Now let's look for the absolutes in this instance, and then for the principles those absolutes spawn:

1- Christians are responsible to assist their parents in their old age if there is a need (verse 4).

2- Those who refuse or ignore them are denying the faith (verse 8).

3- Those who refuse or ignore them are placing an undue burden on the rest of the body of Christ (verse 16).

Now to be "absolute-ly" certain how these absolutes apply, let's look more carefully at two or three key words. The first is that phrase "children or grandchildren". It is translated "children or nephews" in the original King James version. The Greek word "ekgona" means one "sprung from" or "born of". It means those who are descendants. It can be sons, daughters, grandsons or granddaughters. The word "nephews" was not an accurate application to our vocabulary. What is interesting, though, is that it is not limited to the male offspring nor even to the direct offspring alone. It is to be a *continuous* responsibility from one generation to another and succeeding generations if need be (that's grandchildren).

The second word we want to look at is that word "requite". It is also found in verse 4, and it literally means "to render in return". The New King James uses the word "repay" as does the NIV. God has a reason for this commandment and it goes beyond simply meeting a need to prevent the church's involvement. It indicates that God is demonstrating a Scriptural principle that goes all the way back to the "honoring father and mother" absolute, and that reveals the heart of God and the matter of repayment of love with love. It is the same kind of motivation that is to cause the

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believer to give his life away for God's Glory. While we cannot ever repay God or our parents for their love, our *willingness* speaks volumes.

A third word is the word translated *parents*, "progonos". The literal meaning is "ancestors" or "those who are earlier born". So though this passage is dealing with the church's responsibility to widows, the commandment involving the believer's responsibility to provide care is speaking not only of widows, but of *all parents and grandparents, and possibly of other near relatives who have no one to care for them.*

Now if you think about this, you'll agree that this is heavy duty instruction Paul is handing out. It wasn't so unusual for the Jews who were reading it, for Jewish law had stringent rules for the care of those who could not care for themselves, and particularly for the care of the elderly and the widow. But the Gentile reader may not have had such a natural preparation for this commandment. These requirements meant great sacrifice for some and not everyone was ready to accept it. To top it off, the Pharisees and other Jews had through the years begun to disregard the commandment to parental honor and justified doing so by urging people to give the money to the temple fund that they would have used to support their needy parents. Jesus rebukes them in Matthew 15, and at the same time gives the early church (and us) a pattern to go by where priorities were concerned. Let's read it paraphrased from the Living Bible:

Some Pharisees and other Jewish leaders now arrived from Jerusalem to interview Jesus.

"Why do your disciples disobey the ancient Jewish traditions?" they demanded. "For they ignore our ritual of ceremonial handwashing before they eat."

He [Jesus] replied, "And why do your traditions violate the direct commandments of God?"

For instance, God's law is 'Honor your father and mother; anyone who reviles his parents must die.'

But you say, 'Even if your parents are in need, you may give their support money to the church instead.'

And so, by your man-made rule, you nullify the direct command of God to honor and care for your parents.

You hypocrites!

(Matthew 15:1-7a TLB)

The conflict was between legalism and reality. The Jews were

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all hung up on the man-made regulations they had added to the original law, and some of their ceremonial handwashing rules were being ignored by the disciples. Jesus, of course, ignored the pettiness of their legalism and turned the tables on them. His argument was “the issue isn’t the violation of man-made rules, the issue is that the ones who are so methodically keeping those rules are violating a Scriptural absolute.”

Jesus turns to them and says, “Doesn’t the Bible clearly command you to honor your father and your mother? Doesn’t it even call for capital punishment for those who revile their parents? But you Pharisees, you hypocrites...you are encouraging men and women to let their needy parents go hungry or lonely while they give the money to the general fund they would have used on mom and dad. Your man-made rule, Jesus says, is in violation of an absolute.” Several clear principles emerge:

1- Honoring father and mother is an absolute. Jesus said so. It will never change...not in any generation.

2- Reviling or dishonoring parents is worthy of severe punishment. That’s how serious God views the issue.

3- Caring for needy parents in their old age is a direct act of obedience to the absolute “honor father and mother”. Jesus just said so.

4- If a religious ordinance or a tradition of men comes in conflict with the known absolutes of Scripture the believer must obey the Word.

5- God can’t stand hypocrisy. He is nauseated by Christians who neglect their families in the name of Christianity or overlook His commandments under the guise of being spiritual.

God’s anger in Scripture was never revealed more clearly than when God’s own were pretending to be something they weren’t in the name of God. Read Acts, chapter five to confirm that fact. Look in your concordance for the word “hypocrite” and do a study of the reaction of Jesus to that sin versus others. It will shake you into a world of reality.

So the believer who is chairman of the church board or active in Sunday School or sings in the choir or gives a huge amount to the building fund, *but neglects his elderly parents or grandparents in their time of need*, doesn’t impress God at all. In fact, God is grieved at their hypocrisy.

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So our issues up till now involve a series of instructions. The first has to do with a believer's responsibility to his or her parents as they get older and can no longer care for themselves. God sees meeting their needs as primary and the failure to do so as a contradiction to their testimony as a believer.

The second issue is this. Though God has clearly given us instructions about meeting our parents' needs, He has an even greater concern for those who are "widows indeed"... so great in fact, that He has set up a Christian welfare program, if you will, to see that they will be cared for in their old age should they not have a believing family to do so, or should that family not be willing to be obedient.

THE WIDOW'S RESPONSIBILITY

Which brings us, of course, to the second part of our study. Paul, having placed the burden of responsibility first on the widow's children, now turns to the role of the local church and gives specific instructions as to how and when they should intervene. But first he tells us *who qualifies for this program*:

Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.

But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives.

And these things command, that they may be blameless.

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.

Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work.

But refuse the younger widows; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry,

having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith.

(I Timothy 5:5-12 NKJV)

Here are the requirements for a "widow indeed".

The church was to establish a select circle of widows and expect certain things of them. The body of Christ would then

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assume certain responsibilities for them. Here is a list of those requirements:

- 1- She must be at least sixty years old.
- 2- She must be “left alone”, that is have no one to care for her.
- 3- She must have exhibited confidence in God’s ability to meet her needs.
- 4- She must be a woman of prayer.
- 5- She must be a woman of self-control.
- 6- She must be a one-man woman.
- 7- She must have developed a ministry of caring for people.
- 8- She must be a woman of hospitality.
- 9- She must be a woman of humility.
- 10- She must be a woman of generosity.

Now *it does not mean that unless a woman has met these criteria her children are not responsible*. These are two different issues. The children are responsible regardless. But should a woman reach this age and be alone, the church must look at the godliness of her life and determine whether or not she fits in this select circle of godly saints whose lives have demonstrated the Mind of Christ.

In fact, it does not even mean that the church has no responsibility unless the woman meets these guidelines. According to Acts 2:44-47, real New Testament Christianity generates a kind of agape love that necessitates the church becoming a spiritual insurance agency. Everybody lays up in store, and when one has a need, what belonged to one who had, now belongs to one who has a need. Of course, the elders were to rule and the deacons were to serve, and there was to be accountability, both to the body at large and to those who were needy. And the Old Testament passages we read in our last study would indicate that God’s heart beats *for all widows in a special way*. The issue then is not that only these widows received help, but these widows received a different kind of help and were considered spiritually responsible in a different way as well.

Apparently these women were listed on a register and were certified in a special way to receive help from the church and also to serve as patterns in the church for the younger women to look up to. Commentators vary as to the duties they performed and

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the responsibilities they shared, but most agree that this was much more than a welfare roll. It was a list of the women in the flock who no longer had a spiritual “head” of the house, but who now came under the “headship” of the body at large, and who, as such, had responsibilities of service to the church.

The interesting thing was that these qualities were not behavioral or activity-oriented things that *she could just suddenly decide to do to enter that select circle*. These were the characteristics that marked the whole of her life, both as a wife and as a widow. She was woman of discretion, of humility, of proven servitude, of obvious generosity. And unless she was, her name was not recorded on the widows’ rolls. That did not mean that her family was not responsible or that the church would not be responsible, if there was no family to care for her. It did mean, that unless she was a “widow indeed” she would not be honored in quite the same way.

THE CHURCH’S RESPONSIBILITY

The church, it seems, has a two-fold responsibility.

1- It must have made provisions to care for the widows who have needs and especially for those who are “widows indeed”. It cannot simply hope they won’t ask for help. It appears that Timothy was to see that those needs were met *whether or not the woman sought help*. In many cases, the woman would probably be either too humble to ask, or afraid to ask. These might be the neediest of all.

2- The church must create some way to honor those women who are *widows indeed*. That doesn’t mean an occasional pat on the back and an invitation to the “old folks fellowships”. It means a roll of honor that gives those women whose husbands have died and who have lived exemplary Christian lives a place of respect in the Body of Christ rivaled only perhaps by the overseers or elders.

What kind of lessons then can we learn from Paul’s exhortation for us to honor and care for “widows indeed”? I think they fall into three categories, the same three categories we used in the outline of the lesson.

WHAT WE WHO HAVE ELDERLY PARENTS CAN DO.

We can stop treating the elderly like lepers. We can stop considering them as today’s “untouchables”. Through medical

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science we have increased their numbers and lengthened their lives with little concern as to what we are to do with them or what they are to be able to do for themselves.

We can assume the responsibility for our elderly parents; and not grudgingly, but joyfully. We can get excited about the opportunity to repay them for their years of giving to us by being able to share back with them in their hour of need, not only financially, but spiritually and emotionally as well.

We can assume a special kind of responsibility and demonstrate a special kind of love to widows or widowers who are unable to care for themselves. They are to be wrapped in mantles of love by offspring who give of themselves to make them know they still have a family.

We can teach small children to respect the elderly, to learn from their experience, to overlook graciously the frailties and the eccentricities that sometimes accompany old age. They must be taught that grandma and grandpa changed your diapers and maybe theirs when they couldn't care for themselves. Now as sunset beckons, sometimes they need to be cared for, loved, and understood because they cannot do the things for themselves they once could. They cannot often remember what they once did; they cannot often see as they once did. They walk slowly when everyone else is in a hurry. They ramble on when everyone wants to watch television. So what? They cared for you in your infancy when you couldn't walk at all. When you couldn't talk at all. They are a treasure house of love waiting to be repaid in part for all the love they have poured out upon us. How dare we belittle them or overlook them.

WHAT THE CHURCHES CAN DO

The churches can take Paul's admonitions seriously. They can:

1- Search their flocks constantly for those who have needs they cannot meet themselves...the single parent, the grieving, the lonely, the terminally ill, the elderly, and especially the widow. They cannot only give money but love and respect.

2- Honor the elderly by giving them proper recognition and proper respect. They do not need to be shoved aside and left to die. They have a kind of maturity to give that transcends their inability to express themselves or to move about. Our churches

can use the elderly as examples of the godliness that walking with God produces.

3- Especially honor widows who are “widows indeed”. We can begin a roll of honor for those women who no longer have an umbrella of authority in the home, and whose lives have stood the test of time.

4- We can use these passages and others to teach young women just what God is looking for long range in their lives. We can help them to see the virtue of living their lives through the years faithfully, consistently, graciously...with or without recognition.

WHAT THE WOMEN OF THE CHURCH CAN DO.

Finally, the women of the church, particularly those who are turning the corner of their youth and heading towards the years in which their lives simply become reflections of their heart attitudes in years past, can begin to take a look at what God is looking for in a woman.

He is looking for women who possess a humble spirit, a generous spirit, a spirit of hospitality, a spirit of faithfulness to their husband, and a spirit of prayer. She is to be godly in her thoughts, godly in her behavior, godly in her ministering to others. One day, perhaps, that godliness will be honored, if not on this earth, then certainly in Glory.

So the Apostle Paul has given a great deal of time and space and energy to addressing a problem that seemed to exist already in the local church; a problem Jesus had addressed in Matthew 15, the problem of elderly parents. Jesus said that the man or woman who piously pretends to be spiritual, but doesn't care for his own parents has no business exalting his spirituality. God doesn't. And Paul added that the man or woman who has elderly parents and doesn't care for them is worse than an infidel. He is advertising himself as a believer but refusing to honor one of God's most obvious absolutes.

Paul added that the church has a responsibility as well. It is to care for those who have no one else to do so, or no one else who will do so. The church is not only to provide for widows, but is to honor them, holding them in high esteem and recognizing them for the godliness in their lives.

The bottom line is that God, once again, is reiterating His

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chain of responsibility in life—first the family and then the church. The Body of Christ is accountable for its own once the family has been called upon to do their share. This is a godly pattern for counseling, for ministering, for teaching. The family is God's preordained center of life. Not just those who live under one roof, but those whose lives belong to one another forever. The church is to see that *whenever that family unit doesn't exist or doesn't function, the greater family, the family of God, must be responsible to see that love and care and finances are not left wanting.*

What a thoughtful God we have. I know we live in a complicated society. There are broken homes and multiple families and multiple in-laws. In some ways, the needs are different; but in the ways that count, the needs are the same. People need love. People need understanding. People need support. So God has ordained a plan for that to happen. And the older people get, the less they ought to have to worry about *how it will happen*. God's people ought to so take care of their own that the wondering world about us will stand in awe. And widows indeed ought never to be widows in need.

Our Father,

We thank You that Your world is so practical and that it requires our responsibility. Thank You that You made things clear in Scripture that we don't have to wonder. And yet, Father, may we become accountable for what we know and responsible for what You told us. May we realize that You in us alone can give us the grace to do the things we are called on to do, and that You in us will never violate Your word. What You have said You have said, You have said.

Grant us sensitivity, Father, to the elderly in our lives—greater sensitivity day by day. Grant us an excitement about being able to care for them and do the things for them that they did for us as children. Grant us a spirit that demonstrates the mind of Christ not the mind of the world.

To Jesus the One who so perfectly honors His father, be praise and honor and glory forever, Amen.

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