

Prayer

Forgive us for every minute of this day when we have failed to live according to Your ways, O Lord; and by Your grace, remind us when we fall short of the best standards of Christian discipleship. May we live for You and die to self, and in so doing gain the prize of eternal life. All praise and thanks to You, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour; You have shown us the Way: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray for the elderly and those who have incapacity, who find this time of year (north or south) difficult

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Your home church** *Pray for all the different activities pursued by your church. Pray that God will use them for good*
- *Pray for the work of the finance ministers of your governments*
- *Give thanks for fair-trade products giving producers fair pay*

Meditation

What seems so glorious now will never lead you heavenward;
So let the Spirit lead you to where He will give you life.

Forsake wealth, it pledges much, but consumes the weaker soul;
Accept such poverty as leaves you free to find salvation!

Forsake status, it saps the human heart of honesty and warmth;
Accept the lowest role so God can shape you as He will!

Forsake power, it tempts the strong to trust in strength and force;
Accept your weaknesses, and trust in His empowering love.

Forsake success, it traps you into thinking that you have achieved;
Accept that losing often marks the spot where new things start.

And if you did not think that God had come to turn the world around,
You may just find that when He does, true life can really begin!

Bible passage – 1 Timothy 5:1-8

¹ Do not rebuke one who is your senior, but appeal to him as to a father. Treat younger men as brothers, ² older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with completely pure intentions. ³ Honour widows, those who really are widows, ⁴ for if a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn to put their faith into practice in their own family and make repayments to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight. ⁵ However the real widow who is left alone has placed her hope in God, and continues in requests and prayers night and day; ⁶ but the one who lives for self indulgence is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Give these instructions, so that they may remain above reproach; ⁸ and whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Bible Study

Review

We are so used to reading general inspiring spiritual within Paul's letters, that when he has to speak plainly about an issue, it can come as something of a shock. After the first two verses in our passage about speaking to people appropriately, Paul continues by giving strict advice to Timothy about widows, and we must ask why Paul does this. It seems obvious to us that people should take care of themselves within families, but Paul suggests a deeper problem, which we must investigate.

To begin with, Paul speaks to Timothy, advising him to speak to people with due respect. Remember that just previously, Paul had spoken to him about how to bear himself as a younger leader amongst older men. Now, in a time when the younger man would usually defer to the older, Paul's advice to Timothy was that he should stand his ground as a leader of the church. Because this might create problems, Paul suggested that Timothy should speak to the older man by appealing '*to him as to a father*' (5:1), standing firm and treating the other with respect. Then, in order to deal with any potential misunderstanding that might develop concerning the intentions of women towards an eligible leader of the church, Paul suggested treating '*older women as mothers and younger women as sisters*'. It was and is sound advice.

The background to the situations with widows is a little more difficult to explain. Soon after the church was founded on the day of Pentecost, it grew rapidly and exercised an amazing policy of mutual help whereby people's wealth was pooled and the need of all was met (Acts 2:43,44, 4:32), as directed by helpers chosen for the task (Acts 6:1-6). The passage in Acts is helpful because it tells us that there were disputes from the earliest times about the fairness of this aid for poor widows. If we read 1 Corinthians 7 alongside this passage in Acts, then we gain the following picture of widows in the church.

Firstly, the generosity of the church meant that it attracted many widows who because they had lost the 'man' in the family would have faced, together with their children, deprivation of the severest kind. The man was the sole source of income and standing within society; and there was no charity or 'welfare' to help widows. For many, the route out of this terrible state was to marry again, at almost any price; and this led to the potential for unseemly behaviour, especially if widows were accused of seducing married men. In extreme poverty, it is easy to see how difficult circumstances arose. Then, if a widow sought and gained a new husband, it could well be that other relatives suffered with the breakup of the associated extended families, leaving the church with further financial burdens.

Now the situation faced by many churches was this. Church members were asked to pool significant sums of money in order to enable the church to function with a degree of equality, though records show that the total sharing envisaged in Acts did not last long. However, many widows threw themselves on the care of the church because they had no-where else to go, and the burden on the church became considerable. Indeed, some churches found it hard to deal with all their responsibilities because of the extensive problem of dealing with widows. So Paul felt it necessary to advise Timothy in this way. He commended the '*real widow*' (5:5) who '*placed her hope in God*' and was an example of Christian devotion. However, he asked Timothy to challenge the children of widows to accept the responsibility of supporting their parents so that they did not become a burden on the whole church (5:5).

This type of advice from Paul is important. It shows that the early church was trying to deal reasonably with the true cost of supporting the poor, and it also shows that it did not wholly work on a principle of 'tithing' as some assume. We do not know exactly how much early Christians gave to the church, though in one place, Paul strongly suggest that it was appropriate to give everything beyond what was required for normal living (whatever that was – see 1 Cor 16:2)! Here, he appealed to individuals to take responsibility for their own families, and it is a principle that stands for us today.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage of Scripture teach us about how we might speak to each other today?
2. If the widows were the poorest of church people in the early church, who are the poorest today? Students? Single parents? The unemployed?
3. Why is it not possible for the church to pool resources and use its wealth to provide for all? Is this vision truly Christian, or is it communist, as some suggest?

Topics covered by this text

- *Social care in the early church*
- *Speaking to each other appropriately*

- *Sexual innuendo in the church concerning leaders*

Personal comments by author

This passage does not immediately inspire many who read the letter to Timothy, but it does give some straightforward and useable advice. Firstly, none of us should shirk the responsibilities we have for our families, and secondly, it is worthwhile working consciously at how we speak to each other in different circumstances. Sometimes it is only when we take simple advice such as this, that we are then in a position to take in the deeper truths of faith we long to hear.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you are in a meeting at church, watch and observe the way in which people speak to each other, and assess who feels included and excluded by the meeting. If you observe problems, try to do something about them.*
- *Fast and pray for the genuinely poor in the world today, and pray that the church will be involved in every possible way with relief of poverty however it is expressed.*

Final Prayer

Speak to us, dear Jesus, in the storms of life and in the calm of rest; and lead us through the trials we experience by the comfort, power, love and strength of the Holy Spirit. May we hear Your word of encouragement crystal clear, and may we follow the Spirit's leading step by step, to prove our faith to all and take the eternal prize of life! AMEN
