

# Ordered Love

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Littlebourne - 30th March 2025 - 1 Timothy 5:1-16

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Last week's passage consisted of instructions addressed more particularly to Timothy, as leader of the church in Ephesus. We saw the importance of keeping to the truth, and concluded with the charge to keep a close watch on himself and his teaching, that he may bring salvation to himself and his hearers.

The first two verses of this next chapter are sometimes bundled up with that previous section - as instructions primarily to Timothy. Some translations alternatively put a heading at the start of chapter 5, and bundle this in with the instructions to the whole church. Either way, it's good advice.

## v1-2

*Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, 2 older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.*

The principle here is to not rebuke harshly, but to be encouraging. Now, rebuke is taken for granted in this letter - the first instruction that Paul has given Timothy (chapter 1v3) is to 'command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer'. These 'certain men' are those that Timothy must rebuke in some fashion.

But there's different ways to rebuke someone. Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:

*“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

So there's a pattern here of escalation - rebuke should start privately and encouragingly.

Paul writes elsewhere (Galatians 6:1):

*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.*

Proverbs (15v1) tells us:

*A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

The way we approach each other about problems and sin should be characterised by gentleness and love. Paul tells Timothy to encourage, to build up rather than just tear down.

Paul says to treat the older man as a father, the older woman as a mother, the younger men and women as brothers and sisters. We are to treat each other as family. You likely wouldn't throw someone out of your family for a minor error, nor treat them as harshly as you would a stranger for even a major transgression.

If you are going to rebuke someone in the church, gently of course, you need to treat them like family, as worthy of respect and honour when you do so. But family relationships go both ways, so likewise when being rebuked, treat those that point out your sin or error as family too.

## **v3-8**

*3 Honor widows who are truly widows. 4 But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. 5 She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, 6 but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. 7 Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. 8 But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

Now from verse 3, it seems that we move into instructions to the broader church more definitively. There are three groups in which it seems that problems had arisen in Ephesus, that Paul addresses - the widows, the elders and the slaves. Today, we look just at this first, and longest, section about widows.

A more literal translation of verse 3 (than in the NIV1984 pew bibles, quoted above is ESV) would read 'honour widows who are truly widows'. The context of this honouring, from what we read about further on, is honour by caring for them, and this care is specifically for those that are real widows, that is, who have no one else to care for them (v5). It's for those also that are living a life as described by verse 5, and not by verse 6. Where verse 6 says 'self-indulgence' or 'living for pleasure' is also translated as 'living luxuriously', thus in little need.

Provision and protection for widows, and beyond them, those that have nobody to look out for them, is a theme that we find in the Old and New Testaments - in the law of Moses, we read (Deuteronomy 24:19-21):

*“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. 20 When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. 21 When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.*

In Acts 6, the initial complaint that leads to the appointment of the seven, who we infer are the first deacons, is that widows are being neglected. Acts 6:1:

*Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.*

This leads the twelve to summon everyone and sort this out.

James writes (James 1:27):

*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.*

The principle here is that the church is to look out for those that have no one else to look out for them - the widows and the orphaned. We're a family, and that's what family should do.

But of course, as much as we the church are a family, we all also have natural families, who bear responsibility for taking care of each other. Paul says that those widows who have a family, who have children or grandchildren, should be helped by them. Such a family should learn godliness by doing this.

But Paul goes beyond that and issues a very hard statement in verse 8:

*But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

If we have no regard to our own family, even our own household, how can we say we have faith? Faith without works is dead - and these are works in the most basic sense. Jesus gives us another hard saying (Matthew 5:46-48):

*46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Nature itself teaches us these duties - even the unbelievers of the world do the same, and so to neglect one's own family is a grave issue. In the Greco-Roman world of Ephesus, family would have been the prime source of welfare for those in need, and the expectation was that family would take care of their own, because nobody else would. This was a good cultural expectation of the time, so to fail in this was serious.

## **v9-10**

*9 Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 10 and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.*

Now we see there is some formal list of widows for some purpose, presumably something that was either common in the early church (maybe like we see in Acts 6) or specific to Ephesus, and that there's some qualifications for being put on such a list.

There's some debate about what exactly being on said list entailed - we see qualifications, that are about more than just need - they cover character and godliness too.

In the second and third centuries, we have writings that describe an 'order of widows', that may have been a development of what is described here. Such an order was more like what we would think of as nuns - those devoted to a life of prayer and service, and given support and a place to live, a community to be a part of.

But the text overall, I think, leads us to look at this list as one for support and care, provision to help people who had nothing, but that were deserving of aid.

You might notice a phrase that mirrors the one we found in the qualifications for overseers and deacons - wife of one husband, or literally, a one man woman. It's the same sort of qualification of faithfulness. Similarly, we can see the qualification to have a good reputation, of good works, and to have brought up children well. Just as we saw in chapter 3, godliness begins at home, starts in the ordinary things of life like marriage and childrearing.

All in all, the qualification is a life well lived, a record of godly living up to old age.

## v11-16

*11 But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry 12 and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. 13 Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. 14 So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. 15 For some have already strayed after Satan. 16 If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.*

But those that are not of old age, and back then it would have been a lower proportion reaching the age of 60 than it is today, don't enroll them on the list. This might seem harsh.

Some have taken from verse 11 an indication that widows took a vow of chastity or pledged to not remarry, and thus abandoned such a vow when they were led astray by desire, but I don't think that's what it's getting at. I think Paul is saying that people are led astray by desires and end up marrying wrongly, marrying unbelievers and leaving the church. Paul says in verse 14 that he would have them marry, just in the right way.

Verse 13 tells us that there were likely those that, possibly because they were alone, were going about gossiping, and being busybodies. This may refer to the false teaching that was happening in Ephesus, that Paul is concerned with, and it's these women that spreading it about. He says that some have already strayed after Satan (v15), so it looks like this is in view.

Verse 14 Paul sets out a positive view of what they should be doing - marriage, child bearing and household management. The word here translated 'manage their homes', is interesting - it's οἰκοδεσποτέω (oikodespoteo). Oikos is a house or household or family and despoteo, meaning manage, rule, lord over is where we get the English word 'despot' from.

When we read about marry, bear children and manage the house, we can have our modern culture blinders on and think it says marry, bear children, barefoot in the kitchen. But the call is to really manage the house and to rule over it. Paul isn't saying these young women should embrace domesticity to become household slave, he's saying that they should find purpose and a worthy role, a respectable position of authority in the house and to do it well. We shouldn't disparage such an important role - the woman's role in the home is a vital one.

Lastly, verses 16 and 17, Paul reiterates that families should look after their own, that widows are to be cared for firstly by their relatives. He says that the church should thus be freed up to support those that don't have a family to help them.

## **Ordered love**

Our society today typically bristles at the idea of deserving and undeserving poor. We live in a culture that says it values equality, that is sceptical of hierarchies. We have the attitude often that we should help everyone, that we should be egalitarian about our charity in some sense. Now that impulse is actually a fruit of Christianity.

Jesus tells us (Matthew 5:44):

*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*

There is certainly a type of love that should extend to all, as difficult of a task as that is. But we cannot provide for all people, we have limited resources and ability, if we try to take the place of God and save everyone, we won't succeed.

So scripture also teaches us that we should love some above others, and in different ways, and our own experience and reality bears this out.

When we make marriage vows, we make clear that we are taking one person above all others on earth to love most closely, and in a way that we do not love any other. Having just had a child the very idea that I might love other people's children as much as I love Charlotte, seems ridiculous. Loving family above strangers is called for by today's text - parents to children, and children to parents.

Descending further down the hierarchy, we have a scripture like Galatians 6:10:

*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

Other things equal, we owe more love to our fellow Christians than we do to the rest of the world. Love of some sort for all, but especially for those near to us, in this case near by union with Christ. Today's passage agrees - the widows who are faithful Christians are prioritised for the limited resources available.

We could continue with other aspects, like love for those of our own nation, or for our own coworkers, for example. For everyone, there is a hierarchy of what and who they respect, who they love, who they will give their time to or sacrifice for. It's impossible to avoid a hierarchy of loves, we have to love some more than others, otherwise our love is not really love, and we should take scripture as a guide as to who we should love more.

## **Disordered familial love**

Whilst there's application to the church as a whole from these verses, I want to focus today on family - and in particular, that of provision and care for the family.

One way we see things go wrong today would be the children that abandon their elderly parents to the care home, never visiting, concerned more with the receipt of the inheritance than much else. This is a real phenomenon. Proverbs 23:22 says:

*Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.*

The fifth of the Ten Commandments is to honour your parents. Ephesians 6:1-4 says:

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

Children should honour their parents, not just at a young age, and likewise, parents should care for their children, not provoking them.

There's a stereotype of a type of parents of Baby Boomer age, that kick out the children at 18, under the guise of independence and making their own way, then enjoy a long retirement of cruises, followed by a will that leaves everything to the donkey sanctuary. This is a caricature, but it's again a real phenomenon that happens today.

But Proverbs 13:22 says:

*A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children*

Money and possessions are one obvious application of this, but more than that, it includes attitudes and skills and traditions that we pass on and that shape the generations after us.

And Proverbs 17:6:

*Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their fathers.*

If we raise our children well, and leave them better off, it's to our glory - they reflect us.



Another way is to put other good things in the wrong place - it's good to give to charity, but not at the expense of providing for your own family. It's good to work, and good to use work to provide for a family, but when work takes an outsized place in your life, to the detriment rather than benefit of your family, that's sinful.

Our obligations to each other as family are strong, and scripture commands that the generations look after each other. But as with all these things - principles rather than perfection. We're all prone to these errors, and we know that some families are dysfunctional in a way that precludes some assistance to each other. But in principle, we should all seek the good of those closest to us. Are we striving to meet the principle, even if we fail to meet it perfectly? Are we thinking about how we can honour our mothers and fathers, or how we as parents can bring up children in a way that honours them and leaves them with more than we had?

## **Ordo Amoris**

This whole concept of a hierarchy of love is something called the 'ordo amoris' - the order of love, which was articulated by Augustine of Hippo (not the Augustine that came to Canterbury, the other one from the fourth century).

In Augustine's view, the whole 'ordo' really flows from the top down - it's who goes in the top position of the hierarchy is the key to the whole thing. Augustine says that if we get the top slot right, the rest follows.

Augustine says (City of God, Book XV, Chapter 22 paraphrase):

*For the true order of love is this, that God be loved above all things, and then our neighbor for God's sake... But if we love ourselves more than God, or our neighbor more than God, we are perverting the order of love, and this is the root of all sin.*

It's the first and greatest commandment - to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. All other loves, rightly ordered, flow from that love.

1 John 4:19-21:

*We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

We will love others, if we love God, and we love God, because He first loved us. All rightly ordered love flows from the love of God. Everything good in this world originates in Him.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude then, we're called in this passage to provide for our own families, to care for and support those in need closest to us. Those that have no family, nobody to support them, the church should step up and help instead. In our day, with a welfare state, the role of the church is much diminished in this area, but nevertheless, we the church have a scriptural responsibility. For those without a natural family, church becomes family.

And all this is only possible, when we know the love of Christ - without His love, we will be loving in a disordered way, we will not be loving rightly. So we must seek to love Him rightly first, and the rest follows.