

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Timothy 5:1-6:2 "Christian Community"

Of all the metaphors the New Testament uses for the Church – the Body with Christ as Head; the People of God, the Temple of the Holy Spirit – the one that I think resonates most for us today is the Church as a *family*. We are related by our common faith in Jesus Christ; we are adopted children of God our Father, and Jesus is our brother. Jesus himself said, on an occasion when his biological family came to see him: "Who are my mother and brothers?... Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

1) Mutual Respect

So Paul calls on the metaphor of family - or perhaps even better, *household*, because in the 1st century it included servants and slaves - to instruct Timothy how he should relate to the members of the church in Ephesus, where he is a leading overseer and Paul's emissary.

Treat older men as though they were your father – do not be harsh to them, but encourage them. As a young leader, you have a special challenge in showing respect to your elders, and "the elders" of the church – even when they need to be rebuked because some of them have become part of the "false teachers" and are causing trouble in the church. So correct them, but not harshly, as you might approach your father

(who in the 1st century commanded much more respect in the household than he does today).

Treat the young men in the church as you would your own brother, the older women as though they were your mother, and the younger women as your sister (tho' Paul shows his grasp of reality when he adds "with absolute purity" – treat a woman as your sister, with chastity!). This is of course how all people in the church should treat one another – as family, with mutual respect for their ages and differences.

It will not do for us to say that some of the worst behavior now goes on in families; we don't need that brought into the church! So the family metaphor is not a license for those who rule their households by yelling or nagging or anger to bring that behavior into the family of the church! Rather the church is called to act as a *model community* in which people respect one another, and are committed to one another at a very deep level, as in a family.

2) Look After The Needy

Secondly, Paul says Timothy should teach people to care for the needs in their own families. The particular case here is the plight of widows. In a world where women received little education, had few rights or

opportunities, and were often considered a husband's property, to be widowed was to be potentially left destitute. The primary caregivers for women in such need, says Paul, should be their own families – their children and grandchildren. In the Christian community – in the family of the church – we “look after Grandma.” To fail in that is a practical demonstration of unbelief.

But care by the family is not always possible – some widows have no children, some children are sick or already dead themselves. Then the church family must care for the needy widows. There were in fact so many of them that by the end of the 1st century, churches had “lists of supported widows.” The church can't help everyone, so it is permissible to discern who are the truly needy: those who have no families to support them, and those who are older (age 60 was then the accepted mark of “being old”). And because the “listed widows” were assigned jobs in the church – to care for orphans, visitors, the sick – they should also have shown an aptitude for this kind of service during their earlier married years.

Younger widows, in Paul's view, are a different category. Although it was considered virtuous *not* to remarry after bereavement or divorce, Paul is generally more lenient about remarriage, recognizing that younger women have sexual desires that should be satisfied in marriage. He seems to think that everyone would be better off unmarried, as he was, but he knew (as Jesus has taught) that only a few people have the gift of celibacy! The culture among young widows in Ephesus was clearly problematic – idle gossips had become easy victims of the false teachers, with some “falling away to follow Satan.” Better they should remarry and have more children!

What might all this mean to us? Care for Grandma, to be sure. How that is done today

is of course vastly different from the 1st century. She does not have to live in the same house, or in a “granny apartment,” although if that is physically and financially and emotionally possible, that's wonderful. But some elderly women need 24/7 care, and in a culture where their daughters work full-time and their grandchildren are constantly busy away from home, having Grandma live in may not be possible.

Thank God our nation has in the past 60 years developed Social Security retirement and disability programs, Medicaid and Medicare; the costs shared by all us through taxes. That has transformed what for centuries was widespread poverty among the elderly. Add the greater likelihood that Grandma herself may have worked all her life and have a pension, and there are now many more options on how to look after Grandma – just as well in an era when there are more of them than ever in proportion to their children and grandchildren. But whatever the physical and financial arrangements, a Christian family is supposed to show their faith by “taking care of Grandma” in her need.

And the church is called to help. That might be by running “seniors' programs,” it might be by offering to drive Grandma to church, it might mean finding volunteers to sit with Grandma while her children and grandchildren do other needed things. We need to think a lot more creatively about how the church will minister to the rapidly growing number of seniors, mostly widows, in our culture in the next 30 years.

Who else might fit into the category that “the widows” did in the 1st century? The name that comes to mind is “single mothers.” With a high number of marriages breaking up, the number of single mothers caring for children is growing too. Just look around your own neighborhood, among your children's

friends, their schools, the church. And that's not even counting the functionally single mothers, whose husbands are never around or don't care! And of course we now have a growing number of single fathers as well. How can we serve their needs? The church ought to be in the front line of thinking and acting on these issues – and we ought to be conspicuous by the way we care for the people who are part of our own “church family.”

3) *Care for your Elders*

Paul is concerned about more than the widows in Ephesus – he also wants the *elders* of the church to be cared for. This is not because they are unsupported or destitute like the older widows, but because some deserve honor and financial support, and some deserve censure.

The elders who run the churches, and who preach and teach, were almost certainly “part-time” - they still had other “secular jobs” outside the church community. But the principle that they should be cared for by the believers was an ancient one that Jesus had endorsed; and Paul says they should receive “double honor” – probably meaning respect and money, not simply “twice the money.”

But some of the leaders in Ephesus had become “false teachers.” They should be disciplined, but with care. No accusations should be accepted without 2 or 3 corroborating witnesses – no gossiping and private murmurings about the leaders! Leaders guilty of false teaching should be publicly rebuked – probably before all the elders, not before the church as a whole, as it was the elders who were to be warned by their example. New or replacement elders should be selected with care – some people's sins “go before them” and are obvious, some less so!

Timothy too must take care of himself. His illnesses are to be treated with a little wine (widely used for medicinal purposes), and the often tainted water avoided. (There is, I am sure you know, no command in the New Testament for abstinence from alcohol, but there are plenty of prohibitions of drunkenness! - thus *a little* wine for Timothy!).

What about us? Take care of your leaders; they are an essential part of your church family. That means your Sunday School teachers, your Youth Leaders, your Deacons and Trustees, your Men's and Women's group leaders, your Staff – and of course your Pastor! (Let me add parenthetically that you have taken wonderful care of this Pastor and his family – financially, emotionally, and spiritually. Bless you and thank you!).

How can you, how can we, care for our leaders? Support them, thank them, offer to help them. Do not criticize them behind their backs. Do not make their jobs more difficult by setting up conflicts between “family time” and “church time”! We are a *church family*! And you can spend “quality time” together as a biological family while taking part in church family activities. Care for our leaders, and they will be better able to care for you, and your children and grandchildren.

Note too that Paul encourages servants/slaves not to “short-change” their masters because their masters happen to be Christian brothers! It's no way to contribute to the Christian family by saying: “Well, I'm volunteering my time, so it's up to me if I miss a meeting or a week or a month – they should be grateful for anything I do...” We would not do that to our employer, and there is no reason to do it in the service of Jesus Christ and his church family!

4) *Christian Community*

So like it or not, we are a family. In some ways a church family is very like a biological family – you don't usually get to choose whether you're a part of it, and you remain a part of it even when you don't have much to do with it! I know that as Americans we value "choice" highly, and like to think that we are as free to "choose our church" as we are to choose our grocery store. But it's really not the same; it is an act of God's grace that we ever find ourselves in a particular Christian community, often by what we think of as "accident." But however we got here, we are now bound together by the same kind of ties of love and commitment that bind all families together.

In a family, we each have our irreplaceable part to play, and if we don't, we hinder the flourishing of everyone in the family. As a family, we share common experiences, and develop common values. We learn from one another what things in life are important, and what are less so. We develop character, and virtues, as we live and work together in what we understand at a very deep level is a communal exercise. The family is where we learn about relationships, about responsibilities, about roles.

So let us remember we are the *family of Jesus Christ*, where people care for one another, especially in times of great need; where rebuke and correction are sometimes called for; where no member of the family can wander off into the night and not be missed or have someone go out after them and bring them back to safety. Families look out for one another! This church family has been well-known in this community for that, and I pray that will be so more and more.

Let us pray...