Being Responsible

Believers should care for others, including widows and ministers.

A number of years ago, my sister purchased and restored an old house that our great-grandfather built in the 1800s. Then when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast region in 2005 and my family had to evacuate from New Orleans, my sister insisted that we come to her house and stay for as long as needed. During that stay we celebrated my granddaughter’s first birthday—in a house built by her great-great-great-grandfather!

Since that time my sister’s house has become the go-to place for family holiday celebrations and reunions. Many children have raced to and fro through the wide hallways. Scores of adults have laughed and played board games in front of the crackling fireplaces. Eventually, Mom and Dad moved into the house with my sister so that she could help care for them. Later, our father passed away in the house—the house his grandfather had built. Because of the many memories associated with my sister’s house, it has become for me a symbol of the enduring power of family.

In the Bible passages for this session, Paul instructed Timothy that all Christians, by virtue of their common faith in Jesus Christ, are a family—God’s family. As such, believers can (and should) relate to one another along family terms: younger Christians treating older believers with parental respect; all Christians lovingly supporting and helping one another as spiritual brothers and sisters; and congregations giving special care to their neediest and most vulnerable family members.

Understand the Context

1 Timothy 5:1–6:2

Beginning in 5:1, Paul turned his attention to an important element of effective Christian leadership: building good relationships within a church congregation. In 5:1-2, he counseled Timothy to use family relationships as a model for how to deal respectfully with various groups of believers.
In 5:3-16, Paul gave an extended instruction concerning the Ephesian church’s ministry to widows. The Christian movement had engaged in a care ministry to vulnerable widows from the earliest days of the church (see Acts 6:1). At the same time, such ministries required wise administration if they were to provide maximum help without becoming a source of contention or an unsustainable burden on a church’s resources. Paul directed Timothy to establish accountability by which the church supported widows who were “genuinely in need” (5:3). Adult children and grandchildren needed to provide care for their widowed parents as much as possible. Further, younger widows were not to be added to the care list; neither were widows who did not have a track record of family faithfulness and Christian service.

In 5:17-25, Paul taught that churches needed to treat their leaders with respect and fairness. Effective church elders deserved to be generously supported. Further, they were to be treated fairly when accused of wrongdoing, yet held accountable if they had sinned. The instructions concerning church leaders in general led Paul to focus again on Timothy’s situation in particular. Timothy needed to carefully avoid falling into sin. He also needed to pay attention to his health.

In 6:1-2, Paul addressed the relationship between slaves and their masters, probably because the church in Ephesus included a number of slaves who had become Christians. Christian slaves were to show respect to their masters, especially if those masters also were Christian brothers. In all their relationships, believers needed to act in ways that bring honor to God’s name.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

**RESPECT ALL** (1 Tim. 5:1-2)

**VERSE 1**

Don’t rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers,

Paul had urged Timothy to set an example of Christian leadership (4:12), paying close attention to both his conduct and teaching (4:16). What he preached (the gospel) needed to match his lifestyle and leadership. In 5:1, Paul gave Timothy guidance on relating well as a spiritual leader to various groups in the church. For example, there was a good way and a foolish way to confront and correct an older man (“an elder,” KJV). Although the Greek term rendered older man can refer to a church’s preaching-teaching elder (see 5:17), in this context it likely refers simply to an older Christian man.
How could Timothy, who apparently was a young man, best approach an elderly Christian man who needed correction? The unwise approach would be to publicly **rebuke** the man. The Greek word rendered *rebuke* appears only here in the entire New Testament. Its root meaning is “to strike at” something or someone. The term implies a harsh, severe response designed to inflict embarrassment and shame. Such an approach likely would not have any corrective result.

Paul counseled Timothy to use a better approach instead: **exhort** the older man **as a father**. The Greek word translated *exhort* can also mean “call out to,” “entreat,” “summon,” and “encourage.” The term emphasizes using the power of calm persuasion—as though dealing with one’s own father—rather than in-your-face public shame.

Similarly, Timothy would do well to relate to **younger men as brothers**. This relationship required Timothy to exercise his authority as a church leader in a context of respect and mutuality. He should not look down on these Christian brothers or reflect an attitude of arrogance toward them.

**VERSE 2**

older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters with all purity.

Paul’s admonition regarding Timothy’s relating to women in the church paralleled what was said about his relating to men. **Older women** were to be treated with the same level of respect that Timothy would give to his own mother. Similarly, he was to relate to **younger women** in the church as though they were his **sisters**. Indeed, they were his spiritual sisters in Christ.

The phrase **with all purity** indicates the special care Timothy needed to exercise in relating to young women in the church. The term rendered *purity* could describe moral propriety in general but often referred more specifically to sexual purity. As a Christian leader entrusted with great authority, Timothy needed to studiously guard against sexual temptation, avoiding even the appearance of wrongdoing. Needless to say, Paul’s demand for purity in relationships among church leaders is as vital today as it was in the first century.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Paul challenged Timothy to engage respectfully with both older and younger believers of both genders. What guidelines and processes does your church have in place to ensure respectful, redemptive spiritual correction when it is necessary?
CARE FOR WIDOWS (1 Tim. 5:3-8)

In biblical times, widows who were without other family support often suffered severe economic distress. In the Old Testament, widows were often mentioned alongside orphans as people in need of special protection from God (see Ps. 68:5). In the Mosaic law, God commanded the people of Israel never to mistreat widows, orphans, and foreigners in residence or they would face His judgment (Ex. 22:21-24). In the New Testament, the Book of James defines “pure and undefiled religion before God the Father” in terms of caring for the needs of orphans and widows (Jas. 1:27).

VERSE 3

Support widows who are genuinely in need.

In his continuing guidance for Timothy in Ephesus, Paul addressed the issue of the church’s ministry to widows. The detailed instructions he gave in 1 Timothy 5:3-16 suggest that Paul had dealt with problems related to such ministries in other settings. He gave Timothy a set of guidelines that ensured compassionate help from the church for those in genuine need but also set guardrails to keep the church from being taken advantage of or embroiled in controversy. These guidelines may have been intended to help the Ephesian church avoid trouble, or they may indicate that the church already was facing a significant problem, perhaps connected to the activities of the false teachers.

The first guideline was to provide support (“honor,” ESV; “give proper recognition to,” NIV) for widows who are genuinely in need (“widows indeed,” KJV; “truly widows,” ESV). The Greek word rendered support no doubt included the idea of proper respect but in this context also referred to material support, including money, food, clothing, shelter, or a mix of all these basic necessities. Then and now, churches have a responsibility to help provide for their members—especially Christian widows—who have no other means of support.

VERSE 4

But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them learn to practice godliness toward their own family first and to repay their parents, for this pleases God.

In a second guideline, Paul addressed the case of a Christian widow who has children or grandchildren. Presumably, the children Paul had in mind were married adults (perhaps with children of their own) or at least were old enough to work and provide for their own family, including their widowed mother.
Paul based this guideline on the principle that godliness begins at home. Indeed, the fifth Commandment directs God’s people to always honor their fathers and mothers (see Ex. 20:12). The phrase rendered practice godliness (“shew piety,” KJV; “put their religion into practice,” NIV) refers to living by godly principles as revealed in the Scriptures. This, of course, includes living by faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and following the guidance of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Paul further encouraged Christian families caring for their widowed mothers that by doing so they were repaying the ones who had invested so much in their lives. Such a strong commitment to family, Paul reminded, also pleases God. It was what God expected Christian families to do, because it embodied His commitment to care for the most vulnerable of His people.

VERSE 5
The widow who is truly in need and left all alone has put her hope in God and continues night and day in her petitions and prayers;

Here Paul described additional characteristics of a widow who is truly in need and thus worthy of the church’s support. First, she was left all alone, which was another way of saying that she had no close relatives who could provide for her. Second, she had put her hope in God. She did not despair about her situation, grow bitter against God, or resort to stealing and other improper ways of getting food, clothing, and shelter. Instead, she kept trusting that God would meet her daily needs. Third, she kept her prayer life active, continuing night and day in her petitions and prayers. Paul had previously used the terms rendered petitions and prayers in 2:1, where he urged believers to regularly pray for everyone. In a remarkable display of faith and devotion, the godly widow keeps interceding for others as much as she prays for herself.

VERSE 6
however, she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.

Paul instructed Timothy to take a different approach concerning a widow who was self-indulgent (“liveth in pleasure,” KJV; “lives for pleasure,” NIV). The Greek word rendered self-indulgent occurs in the New Testament only here and in James 5:5, where the term describes those who cheat their workers, live in luxury, and continually indulge themselves in wanton pleasures.

It is not certain whether Paul used the phrase dead even while she lives to imply that such a widow was not really a believer or that she was simply incapable of acting in anything but selfish ways. Either way, such a widow did not qualify to receive financial support from the church. She stood in stark contrast to the widow who humbly puts her trust in God.
VERSE 7

Command this also, so that they will be above reproach.

In the words command this also, it is unclear to whom Paul intended the commands to be given. Some Bible students propose that the commands are to be addressed directly to the church’s widows. In this view, the widows are being instructed to avoid the self-indulgent lifestyle so that they will not be open to blame from either the church or the community. Other commentators suggest that Paul wanted Timothy to address the church as a whole (“give the people these instructions,” NIV). In this view, the instructions pointed back to what Paul had said to the children and grandchildren in 5:4. In the first view, Paul concluded this section with instructions to widows (they) in verse 7 and a warning to the children and grandchildren of widows (“anyone”) in verse 8. In the second view, both verses 7 and 8 are directed to the families of widows.

Both views make logical sense of the text. In either case, the desired result of Timothy’s teaching was to urge believers to live above reproach. Paul’s sense of urgency in addressing the widows may indicate that some widows were part of the problem in Ephesus, at least in their being influenced by the false teachers.

Providing for the needs of the church’s vulnerable members is an essential part of what we as Christians are called to do. However, administering such support in a fair and compassionate way can have challenges (Acts 6:1). Paul’s guidelines help us maximize Christian ministry and at the same time avoid the pitfalls of confusion, division, and misuse of church resources.

VERSE 8

But if anyone does not provide for his own family, especially for his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Paul followed up on his instruction in 5:4 by emphasizing a Christian family’s moral obligation to care for one another. The Greek word translated provide literally means “think ahead, take thought of something beforehand.” Paul used the term in 2 Corinthians 8:21 to describe giving “careful thought to do what is right.” In 1 Timothy 5:8, he used the word to describe a family’s planning ahead to provide material support for elderly relatives. The phrase his own family could refer to a more general kinship group (“relatives,” ESV; NIV), while the phrase his own household likely described those who lived under the same roof—albeit a multigenerational family. In any case, Paul drew lines of responsibility in such a way that believers were challenged to think more about whom their family could assist than about whom they could exclude.
Paul leveled a strong accusation against those who failed to fulfill their family responsibilities. Those guilty of neglecting their family members had denied the faith. They were behaving worse than an unbeliever (“worse than an infidel,” KJV). While the apostle’s accusation might seem excessively severe to the ears of today’s believers, Paul was rightly concerned about the Ephesian church’s reputation in the broader community. The Christian faith demands that children honor their parents; believers who purposely avoid or neglect that obligation disobey God’s Word—by their actions (or inaction) if not by their words.

Even the pagan society of Paul’s day valued family relationships in which children respected their parents. Thus, Christians who neglected their elderly family members were not even living up to the standards of pagan society. Paul leveled a similar accusation against the church in Corinth because the believers there were smugly tolerating a situation involving “the kind of sexual immorality that is not even tolerated among the Gentiles” (1 Cor. 5:1). The moral standards for believers should far exceed those of people who neither worship the one true God nor know and obey His Word. Caring for one’s family members is a matter of obedience to Christ.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Poor, Orphan, Widow” on pages 1282–1283 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What are ways that Christian families today can plan ahead so that elderly family members are cared for? How does your church minister to vulnerable believers who have little to no means of family care?

**CARE FOR PASTORS** (1 Tim. 5:17-21)

**VERSE 17**

The elders who are good leaders are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

After dealing with issues related to the list of qualified widows and a special word to young widows (1 Tim. 5:9-16), Paul turned his attention to the relationship between the church congregation at large and its church leaders. The Greek word translated elders is the same Greek word rendered “older man” in 5:1. Here, the context makes clear that church leaders are being addressed. The relationship between the overseers (3:2) and elders is not
certain. In at least two instances, Paul used both terms to refer to the same group of leaders (Acts 20:17,28; Titus 1:5,7), a fact that suggests the terms were interchangeable. An alternate view understands elders to be a broader term that included overseers as well as other leaders such as deacons.

The Greek word translated are … leaders (“that rule,” KJV; “who direct the affairs of the church,” NIV) was used also to describe an overseer’s and a deacon’s family leadership (3:4-5,12). Paul declared that those who lead the church well are worthy of double honor. He may have been intentionally drawing a sharp contrast between faithful leaders and the false teachers, who deserved no support but rather rejection. Another view, however, is that Paul was using the phrase simply in recognition of a job well done.

The Greek root word rendered honor can refer either to giving someone respect and recognition or to a monetary value, or price, of something (see Acts 19:19). Perhaps Paul had both meanings in mind when he spoke of double honor in 1 Timothy 5:17. Another possible view—but less likely in my judgment—is that Paul, for comparison’s sake, was referring to the practice of giving one’s eldest son a double portion of the family inheritance (see Deut. 21:17). More likely is the view that Paul meant a faithful, hard-working, effective church elder deserves not only the congregation’s full respect but also their generous financial support.

Paul gave particular recognition to those who work hard at preaching and teaching. The Greek word translated preaching literally is “in the word.” Paul probably was referring to the preaching of the gospel. Just as Paul had labored and struggled because of his hope in the living God (1 Tim. 4:10), worthy church elders work hard (literally, “straining”) in the spiritual battle with false teachers. Good preachers and teachers stay true to God’s Word no matter what cultural tides may try to wash into the church.

Bible students debate whether Paul was emphasizing the preaching and teaching functions that were among the responsibilities of every elder or if he was distinguishing a subgroup of elders whose gifts were preaching and teaching. The second sense seems to fit the context better. Thus, Paul distinguished elders who led the church well from those who did not. Then within the group of elders who ruled well, he singled out for special affirmation those who were responsible for preaching and teaching.

VERSE 18

For the Scripture says: Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain, and the worker is worthy of his wages.

Paul grounded his instructions regarding the support of church leaders in the Scripture. First, Paul appealed to God’s command related to the treatment
of working animals in Deuteronomy 25:4. God had entrusted to humans the management of His created world, including the proper treatment of animal life. Thus, when using an ox to tread out grain, the farmer was not to muzzle the animal. Instead, he was to permit the ox to occasionally eat a mouthful or two of the grain as a reward.

If God gave directions in His Word about the proper treatment of animals, it was no surprise that He would decree the human worker is worthy of his wages. Deuteronomy 24:15 commands God’s people to pay poor day laborers for their work after each day; to refuse to do so was sinful and invited God’s judgment. In Luke 10:7, Jesus spoke the exact words that Paul used in 1 Timothy 5:18b; and in James 5:4, Scripture condemns wealthy landowners who refuse to pay their workers. These Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments thus undergird Paul’s instructions to Timothy and the church in Ephesus. Faithful, hard-working church leaders deserve not only sincere respect but also generous financial support.

VERSE 19

Don’t accept an accusation against an elder unless it is supported by two or three witnesses.

No effective church leader serves long without facing accusations from disgruntled people. Sometimes the accusations are minor and easily dealt with—that is, if all parties involved behave with spiritual maturity. At other times, however, serious accusations arise that must be handled with utmost care and integrity. Paul thus instructed Timothy not to accept an accusation against an elder unless the accusation was substantiated by two or three witnesses.

Paul’s immediate concern likely grew out of the activity of the false teachers and their damaging doctrine. He was not demanding special treatment for church leaders but was insisting on the kind of careful attention and fairness that God demanded of His Old Testament people in the law (see Deut. 19:15). This instruction is particularly relevant for today’s churches and church leaders. Church leaders rightly should be held accountable for improper behavior, but we as believers must be sure to be as fair and considerate with the accused as with the accuser.

VERSE 20

Publicly rebuke those who sin, so that the rest will be afraid.

The shift from accusation to punishment is abrupt. The application of punishment is based on the assumption that two or three witnesses have come forward and made a credible case regarding the guilt of the elder
involved. The Greek word translated *rebuke* means “to expose,” “to bring to light,” “to express strong disapproval,” or even “to convict.” In Jesus’ explanation of the process of church discipline in Matthew 18:15, He used this word to describe the initial encounter between a believer who felt wronged and the one who committed the offense. In that context, the idea of a rebuke could be as simple as letting the offender know what he or she had done that was hurtful. If this effort at reconciliation did not produce the desired responses (apology and request for forgiveness), then the process escalated along a series of steps that ended (in the event of no resolution) with the offender’s public condemnation by the church.

While Paul did not explicitly describe the process found in Matthew 18:15-18, that text may have been the foundation of his instruction to *publicly rebuke* any believer, including a church elder, who was indeed guilty of *sin*. The public nature of the punishment would serve as a deterrent for any others in the church (*the rest*) who might be tempted to teach false doctrine or behave improperly. Here again, Paul may have been reflecting God’s warning to Israel in the law: “Then everyone else will hear and be afraid, and they will never again do anything evil like this among you” (Deut. 19:20).

**VERSE 21**

*I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels to observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing out of favoritism.*

The Greek word rendered *solemnly charge* can also mean “warn,” “swear under oath,” or “testify.” Timothy was to bear witness to the truth as though appearing *before God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels*. Heaven’s divine court constantly watches the church’s proceedings, including its leaders and their activities, with great interest. Thus, Timothy needed to carefully *observe* (“keep,” ESV; NIV) the instructions Paul gave him in the letter and see that they were implemented in the church *without prejudice* or *favoritism*. The phrase *without prejudice* meant that decisions were not to be made before all of the facts were known that could be known. The term *favoritism* indicates that Timothy was not to take sides or show partiality to anyone or anything except to God’s Word.