

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, speak to us above the noise of our world. Speak clearly, so we do not mistake Your voice, as we have done so often in the past. Speak with wisdom, so we can hear, learn, and do what You have said. Speak directly to our hearts so we may know for sure that the voice we hear is Yours. Speak to us, Lord Jesus, make Yourself known, and inspire us by Your love. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: SCHOOLS

1. For yourself

Praise the Lord for all His blessings; do not hold back. Praise Him until you have no more breath, and praise Him still ...

2. For your friends and family

Lift those you love to the Lord and give thanks to God for the way they have blessed you and contributed to your life

3. For the church and its work

In prayer, ask the Lord to show you His plans for the young people of your church. Wait on Him, and then share these things with others ...

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray that your country will meet its obligations to educate the young, and pray for those who drop out of the system because of social problems. Pray in earnest, and listen to what the Lord says to you while you pray.

Meditation

What seems so glorious in this life can never lead heavenward;
So let the Spirit lead you to where He can give you new life.

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

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

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

Forsake success, it traps you into thinking that you have achieved;
So, accept that losing marks the place 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 begins!

Bible Study

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.

Review

We are so used to reading the inspiring spiritual advice of Paul in his letters, that when he has to speak plainly about an issue such as widows in the church, it can come as something of a shock. Much of the advice in Paul's letters is of a challenging but general nature and we are left to apply this to our own circumstances, but here the advice is specific and strikingly direct. After the first two verses about speaking to people appropriately, Paul gives strict advice to Timothy about widows and their families, and we may well ask why Paul says this. It seems obvious to us that within a family, people should take care of any woman who is widowed, but his writing suggests that there is more for us to understand. Paul recognised the important contribution of widows who gave themselves to the devotional life (5:5), but why did he speak so strongly about 'those who live in self indulgence' (5:6)? Part of the reasons for this are explained in tomorrow's passage, but it appears that the generosity of the Christian community (see Acts 6:1) was being taken for granted by some, otherwise Paul would not have had to emphasise the need for families to fulfil their duties.

Initially, the first two verses of this chapter are wise words for a church leader seeking to build up the body of Christ. Paul advises Timothy to address people within the fellowship appropriately, treating them as they would treat members of an extended family. This is worthwhile advice because the art of 'address' has largely been lost, indeed it is commonly regarded as a virtue today for people to say what they think regardless of the age or standing of those to whom they speak, at least in a general social setting. This scripture suggests that it is better to cultivate a polite courtesy appropriate to people's age and experience. This is not to say that we should refrain from speaking out, but that we should give thought to how we address people, particularly older or younger. It is too easy to alienate the people we wish to speak to, even today

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 I have quoted is helpful to our text today 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 in their own day would have faced, with their children, deprivation of the severest kind because they had lost the 'man' in the family. He would have been the 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 extended families, leaving the church with further financial burdens. It was right for Paul to emphasise the duty of all to the widest range of family members, so that the church was not expected to spend its resources on those who could be adequately provided for. However, life in those days was no less complicated than today, and records from those days indicate that financial arrangements could become complex when a man died and his widow remarried. It was a common problem.

Paul knew that many widows threw themselves on the care of the church and devoted their lives to the Lord through doing good deeds (5:5,10). It was one way of dealing with the problem, and other church people who kept the church's financial 'pot' topped up would not challenge the idea of supporting such dedication. However, if widows already supported significantly by the church were using the liberties and generosity of the church to try and better themselves in society by 'marrying up', then you can see that some would soon complain that the church's help might in some cases be questionable! The church should not be expected to do the duty of the family.

Given all this, we can see the wisdom of Paul's advice to Timothy. Few situations exist today which are the same as this, but it is an example of the early church's attempts to deal in a godly and equitably manner with an awkward problem. The guidance Paul gives never moves far from the general advice to all Christians to focus on a life of prayer and dedication to the Lord. In addition, Paul appeals for people to take responsibility

for widows within their families wherever possible, but he maintains the church's social obligation to give financial help to those most in need. It is an example of godliness in action.

Discipleship

Questions for groups

1. In what ways might we learn to speak better to each other, and include those who feel excluded?
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?

Discipleship challenges

- *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.*
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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
