

Letters From My Father
Week 14
1 Timothy 5:9-16
“Charity and Common Sense”

Introduction

Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God — who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly — and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord, being double-minded and unstable in all his ways.
James 1:5-8

One of the hardest parts of being a pastor/elder is overseeing the administration of church finances. There are so many worthy ministries to choose from when deciding where to spend the money that has been placed into the church treasury. But there is usually a limited amount of resources available to fund the many ministries that we are already involved in. Many times I have desperately longed to start up a new work, only to find that there are no available funds to see it accomplished. It can be frustrating.

When deciding on which ministries to financially support and which to put on hold, there are two important factors that come into play: *Prayer and Discernment*. An effective leader in the church must have a firm grasp upon each of these things, if he is to be successful in ministry. Prayer is the most important of the two. For if God desires a work to be done, then He will personally see to it that everything necessary (including financing) will be granted. And oftentimes this requires a leap of faith. Our LORD is gracious and generous. However, He also wants us to learn to trust in Him. Therefore, sometimes He leads us into places that do not make sense on paper! One thing I have learned in this life: If you have never been in a place where if God doesn't come through for you, then your toast, then you've never really walked in faith!

However, there are also times when I feel that we, as a church, should do something, and God's plan, or God's timing, is not in agreement with me. This is where discernment comes in. For not everything that I feel is a good idea is God's plan. And it is important to know what to do in those particular circumstances. Well, thankfully, we have God's Word to guide us, and as James says, when we lack wisdom, we should pray in faith that God will grant us the ability to make wise decisions. I cannot tell you how many foolish mistakes I have made by “shooting from the hip” (using my own instincts), instead of prayerfully seeking God's counsel in matters relating to the church. In fact, these are lessons that I am still learning. We would all do well to remember:

There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way of death.

Proverbs 14:12

When Paul wrote to Timothy in Ephesus, he stressed to him the importance of using discernment in order to make decisions in regard to church finances. In particular, he counseled the young pastor in the ways of church benevolence. While it is the responsibility of the church to care for those members who cannot care for themselves, it is also incumbent upon the leaders of the church to be wise in the distribution of funds. Not everyone, who is in need of funds, is to be supported by the church. There is a limited amount of resources, and therefore, wisdom is needed in order to do the most good and have an effective ministry.

For instance, in Paul's day, widows were especially vulnerable, for there were not many ample opportunities available for women in those days to work outside of the home. Therefore, it was vital that the church take an active role in providing assistance to these who were helpless among them. In fact, the ministry of protecting widows was the very reason that the office of deacon was instituted within the church (**Acts 6:1-7**). However, not every widow was without means. So, wisdom was needed in order to determine when and where such assistance would be given. Sometimes charity is a good thing. Other times it is counterproductive. And most importantly, as the old saying goes; charity should begin at home. So we must discern; *When Helping Helps, When Helping Hurts, and Where Helping Begins*.

When Helping Helps (vs. 9-10)

No widow is to be enrolled on the list for support unless she is at least sixty years old, has been the wife of one husband, and is well known for good works — that is, if she has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to every good work **1 Timothy 5:9-10**

Over the years, many have accused Paul of being anti-woman, but a careful reading of this passage will tell you that he most certainly was not. Paul commanded that women be cared for and respected. And when a woman was left utterly helpless by situations beyond her control, Paul commanded that the body of Christ care for her as one would his own mother (**vs. 2**). Where people tend to have a problem with Paul's teaching (which is *Biblical* teaching) is his insistence that the roles of men and women are to be completely different in accordance with God's plan of creation. As I have pointed out previously, men and women are made different and are, by their very nature intended to have different functions. It does not matter whether the secular humanist, nor the feminist, believe men and women are not the same. They are not, end of story.

In Paul's day, when a woman lost her husband; whether by death, abandonment, or divorce, she had very few options. There was not a great deal of opportunity for women to work outside of the home. Therefore, many of these women in that society ended up becoming slaves or prostitutes in order to survive. In fact, some *Bible* scholars believe that it was prostitution that Paul was referring to when he spoke of some women leaving the church to live in sinful pursuits (**vs. 6, 15**).

But there were many widows in the church, who were godly. And when they found themselves in such desperate straits, rather than turn themselves over to the world, they committed themselves to the care of Almighty God and trusted in Him to be their provider. In short, they walked by faith and not by sight. When they were given the option of succumbing to conventional worldly wisdom or to trust in Christ, they chose the latter. It was these women, whom Paul insisted be taken in by the church and looked after, for the rest of their days.

These godly widows were required, it seemed, to make a vow of service unto The LORD. They were to leave behind any notion of remarriage and be fully committed to serving in the house of God, and as such, they were to be provided for by the church. The qualifications of these women were very similar to that of elders and deacons. They were to be living examples of spiritual maturity.

Paul insisted that the women to be enrolled for this women's ministry were to be sixty years old or beyond. For in those days, anyone over sixty was considered elderly, and their desire for sexual pleasure should be in decline. Therefore, they would not be as tempted to go back on their pledge to serve the church for the rest of their natural lives. They were considered to be beyond such temptations that would entice younger women to fall away from their pledge of faith.

The widows who committed themselves to the church were to have been "*the wife of one husband*" (*one man women in the Greek*), which was not so much pertaining to marital status, for it was not a sin for a widow to remarry. But it is a reference rather to their purity and faithfulness. Meaning that they had been true to their spouse, while he lived. In short, no adulteress could be placed on the list of widows.

These women were also required to have a reputation for good works. Such as nurturing and caring for children (whether her own or others), for it was the responsibility of these widows to teach the younger women how to behave as godly wives and mothers (***Titus 2:3-5***). What a valuable ministry this must have been in the church! Imagine having these mature women on staff, ever at there ready, to give spiritual guidance to young mothers and wives!

The widows on the list were also to be hospitable, the Greek means that they were willing to take in strangers, who might be visiting the area. In those days, inns were very dangerous places and visiting Christians from other cities would have been subject to violence and persecution in the city. So these women were ever willing and able to take in strangers and give them food and shelter.

They were also known for their willingness to serve in menial ways. The washing of saints feet was not a ritual as some churches have made it, but rather, this was a practical matter. The streets were dirty, and most people wore sandals. Therefore, when they entered the homes there was usually a pitcher of water provided to wash the dirt of their feet. This was a task that was considered the work of a slave, but these godly women were willing to perform even the most menial tasks in order to serve. Just as Christ washed the feet of His own disciples, these women were willing to humble themselves in order

to serve. They were devoted to easing the burdens of those who were afflicted, and everything about these mature Christian women displayed the love of Christ in all things. These are the types of widows that were gladly cared for by the church, for what they gave back far exceeded what they had been given!

When Helping Hurts (vs. 11-15)

But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when they are drawn away from Christ by desire, they want to marry and will therefore receive condemnation because they have renounced their original pledge. At the same time, they also learn to be idle, going from house to house; they are not only idle, but are also gossips and busybodies, saying things they shouldn't say. Therefore, I want younger women to marry, have children, manage their households, and give the adversary no opportunity to accuse us. For some have already turned away to follow Satan.

1 Timothy 5:11-15

Most people who are familiar with our family know that we have done a great deal of mission work in Guatemala. The people there are, for the most part, extremely poor. There are some wealthy people who live in the cities, but by and large the people that we encounter live well below the poverty line. Because there is so much need, people are often tempted to offer support. Through a great deal of trial and error seasoned missionaries have learned that sometimes a person's desire to offer help actually has the opposite effect.

Case in point, on one particular mission to a very impoverished community, the team was instructed not to give the people there any money directly, but rather, to allow those who run the mission teams to distribute goods and services to the poor. One particular lady was convinced that she knew more than everyone else and decided to give a man five hundred American dollars to assist his family. She had seen the horrible conditions in which the young family lived, and she truly wanted to assist them.

The problem was, when she gave the man that amount of money, he was convinced that he was now a very wealthy man, and he subsequently left his wife and children behind and was never heard from again. So obviously, this woman had made this poor family's situation far worse even though she had done so from a sincere desire to help. Her heart was in the right place, but unfortunately, her head was not. And as a result, she had done irreparable harm to the family. For sometimes, helping hurts.

The Apostle Paul was no stranger to this concept. And from his wealth of experience, he instructed Timothy not to bring young widows into the church to serve full time in the same way that he was instructed to do for the older widows. The reason being, these younger widows would be far better off by remarrying, rather than devoting themselves to a lifetime of celibacy serving as widows of the church.

A hasty decision made in the heat of the moment often does not hold up to the rigorous demands of every day life. Paul knew that if these younger women were to offer themselves up to the church in a moment of desperation, they would one day come to regret it, when their physical desires and passions overwhelmed their desire to serve Christ. Hence, it would be better in the long run for them to remarry. This did not mean that the church was not to offer them *any* support or encouragement, but rather, they were not to be enrolled as permanent wards and servers within the body.

To make a vow before God is no small undertaking. And God expects us to honor our commitments (I wish everyone who makes a vow of marriage could comprehend this). God doesn't take it lightly, when we make a promise and later fail to keep it. How many people have made such vows when under duress, promising The LORD that if He will simply rescue them from their current predicament, that they will "faithfully serve Him for the rest of their days?" I assure you, it has happened many times over. But listen to what God says in regards to making a vow before Him.

Just as dreams accompany much labor, so also a fool's voice comes with many words. When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because He does not delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow. Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth bring guilt upon you, and do not say in the presence of the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry with your words and destroy the work of you hands?

Ecclesiastes 5:3-6

Paul was fully aware that if younger widows in their time of distress made a vow to serve The LORD in full-time ministry, that sooner or later, there would come a desire to follow after their natural urges to marry and have children. Consequently, he instructed Timothy not to enroll them on the list and invite shame upon them from the congregation, as well as The LORD'S displeasure, when they turned away from their pledges.

He was also concerned that such women would turn from service into busy-bodies and gossips, because they were not themselves spiritually mature. Gossip destroys fellowship within the church. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard so-called "prayer requests" that were merely hateful rumors being spread around to the detriment of others.

And while we are on the subject, why do people feel the need to overshare, when asking for prayer? God knows your heart. He knows your need. Truth be told, most other people do not need to have all the particulars in order to be able to pray with you. Sometimes it is better to give out less information, as opposed to more. That is all that I am trying to say. Too many times gossip is spread through so-called "prayer requests". And when this happens, the help you are offering actually does more harm than good. There is nothing wrong with simply saying; "Please pray for me. God knows my need." And just leave it at that.

When you pray, don't babble like the Gentiles, since they imagine they'll be heard for their many words. Don't be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask Him. Matthew 6:7-8

So don't be a busy-body. Be a prayer warrior, and keep the details of other peoples faults and failings to yourself. Remember, we are the family of God, and as such, we must do everything we can to *not* damage the reputations of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes what we consider to be helping actually hurts.

Paul went on to mention that some of the younger widows in the church had already left the fellowship to follow after Satan. This is more than likely a reference to some turning prostitution as a means of making a living. Such practices were very common in Ephesus. Could it be possible that the reason some of these women chose this path was because they had been harmed by the loose tongues of others within the body? We may never know. But here is what the Scripture says about controlling the tongue.

If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, his religion is useless and he deceives himself. James 1:26

Where Helping Begins (vs. 16)

If any believing woman has widows in her family, let her help them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it can help widows in genuine need. 1 Timothy 5:11

There is an old proverb that bears repeating: "*Charity begins at home.*" Paul, once more, reminded Timothy that if any widow who has living relatives with the means to provide for them, then the family should do so. It is not right for the church to bear such a burden, when there are family members who are required to demonstrate their godliness (*Eusebia vs. 4*) by providing for their own.

This wicked of this world may not care enough about the family to burden themselves with its care, but the child of God has no such option. We are required by Christ to provide for our families. In fact, if one is not able to love his own family, then how can he possibly serve within the church? Jesus said that the world would know His disciples by the love that they have for one another (*John 13:35*). If you belong to Christ, you will not leave your loved ones out in the cold.

So there you have it. The church is to take care of those who are truly in need, to encourage those who can to provide for themselves, and to teach that charity begins at home. We are called to be examples of these things to the world. Once again, the wisdom of *1 Timothy* shines in order to lead the way. These pastoral letters offer us godly wisdom, so that we may conduct ourselves according to God's plan. Let us take to heart the wisdom that The Spirit offers.

And let the people of God all say... **TRUTH!!!**