

1 Timothy

#7 - 1 TIMOTHY 5:1-6:2a



OVERVIEW – 1 TIMOTHY 5:1-6:2a

Paul concludes this middle section of his letter in which he tells Timothy how to establish and maintain order in the life of the Ephesian church (2:1-6:2a).¹ In 5:1-6:2a Paul instructs Timothy in how to honour and disciple certain ‘subgroups’ within the congregation: widows, elders and slaves. The opening verses function as a kind of headline to what follows: treat fellow members of the household of God in the way you would treat *family* (5:1-2). The theme of ‘honour’ throughout this passage is prominent in the original languages: ‘give proper *recognition* [or honour] to those widows who are really in need’ (5:3); ‘the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double *honour*’ (5:17); ‘those under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full *respect* [or honour]’ (6:1).²

Honouring widows (5:3-16)

It appears there were some widows who sought to take advantage of the welfare system introduced by the Holy Spirit through the apostles (c.f. Acts 6:1-7). Paul thus instructs Timothy to discern between those who were ‘really in need’ (5:3, 5, 16), from those who could either be cared for by their relatives (v 4), or sought to take advantage of such generosity (hence the lists of godly qualities in vv 5, 9-10). There could very well have been a cultural movement of the time in which women were encouraged to take advantage of new societal freedoms, which could have invariably influenced certain ‘younger widows’ towards ungodliness (vv 11-15). Note that these instructions are in fact less about widows *per se* and more about God’s concern that the household of God give due honour and care for elderly women in their vulnerable state (v 8).

Honouring elders (5:17-25)

Oversight and care of God’s household through the ministry of the Word is indeed a great responsibility (1 Timothy 3:1-7; c.f. 1 Peter 5:1-4). When such ‘eldership’ is carried out well it is a cause of great thanksgiving to God and a reason to honour them by ensuring they are duly *paid* and *protected* (vv 17-18).³ ‘Elders’ are to be treated fairly if someone brings ‘an accusation against’ them (v 19), echoing Jesus’ own instructions to his disciples in Matthew 18:15-20. However, if such accusations are confirmed through a process of enquiry the measures of discipline reflect the public and influential nature of this particular leadership role (v 20). Paul reinforces the seriousness, patience and impartiality required for the appointment and maintenance of such leadership (vv 21-22) and follows up with a curious personal note to Timothy (v 23), before summarising the need for discernment and public discipline of ‘elders’ (vv 24-25).

Correcting slaves (6:1-2a)

The Bible as a whole provides the most complex and nuanced account of human slavery, from Genesis to Revelation. It is therefore erroneous and too simplistic to merely say the Bible condones slavery, for in the least, central to the Old Testament redemption story is the LORD who *saved his people from ‘the land of slavery’* (Exodus 3:17; 20:2). By New Testament times it is estimated that up to 90 per cent of the Roman population were slaves or of slave origin and this station in life was diverse in race (setting it apart from 18-19th Century Western forms), occupation and living conditions.⁴ Tellingly, the Apostle Paul addressed specific individual slaves in his letters, rather than the industry in abstract (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1; c.f. 1 Peter 2:18-25).⁵ However concerned (rightly) we are about the reality of slavery – both in ancient and modern times, it is noteworthy that for a person locked into such a circumstance, the church is called to value, encourage and disciple them just as much as we would a free person (Galatians 3:28; c.f. 1 Corinthians 7:21-24; Philemon). Here, Paul relates the call for Christian slaves to not misuse their newfound freedom in Christ to disregard their masters, whether unbelieving (6:1), or believing (6:2a), for in the case of the former, they might cast a bad light on God and his gospel, and in the case of the latter, they would invariably disregard provision in such circumstances.⁶ Tellingly, our Lord depicts the Christian life as one in which his disciples have been redeemed from slavery to sin to become slaves to God (Colossians 3:24; 1 Thessalonians 1:9). This is exemplified in Paul who considered he and Timothy to literally be ‘*slaves of Christ*’ (Philippians 1:1).

¹ Robert W. Yarborough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Pillar New Testament Commentary), 256.

² Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (New International Commentary on the New Testament), 379.

³ Jensen suggests these are the two sides of the ‘double honour’ given to hard-working elders. Philip D. Jensen, *1 & 2 Timothy For You*, 114.

⁴ A. A. Rupprecht, “Slave, Slavery” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP, 1993), 881. For more see an intriguing historical fiction based on Paul’s New Testament letter to Philemon, written by John Byron, *A Week in the Life of a Slave* (IVP, 2019).

⁵ Rupprecht, “Slave, Slavery,” 882.

⁶ Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 385.

GETTING STARTED

1. What individuals do you think we do well to honour in our church community? What individuals do you think we could do more to regard and honour?

INTO THE TEXT

Read 1 Timothy 5:1-16

2. How do you think verses 1-2 govern our understanding of the verses that follow?
3. Why do you think Paul saw the need for Timothy to discern between groups of widows in their church community (i.e., those who ought to receive 'proper recognition' and those who didn't)?
4. How does Paul instruct Timothy to differentiate between these two groups of widows? NB: character and living circumstances.

Read 1 Timothy 5:17-25

5. Is the instruction to honour 'elders' based on their position or their performance? Site evidence from the passage to support your interpretation.
6. What does 'double honour' actually look like, from the verses that follow? (NB: 'For' in v 18)
7. Why should we not be 'hasty' to appoint and recognise 'elders' in our church community?

Read 1 Timothy 6:1-2a

8. Read the following verses: Exodus 3:17; 20:2; 1 Corinthians 7:21-24; 1 Peter 2:18-25. Does the Bible condone slavery?
9. How would salvation in Christ give a slave in New Testament times greater freedom and joy to serve their master within the confines of their circumstance? (Compare Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:24)

TAKEAWAY

10. Do you think we should do more to care for vulnerable, godly and servant-hearted widows in our church? How might we do so in the light of this passage?
11. What godly qualities do you see highlighted in this passage, which are particularly relevant to you in your circumstances? Share and pray for God's grace to enable you to grow in these areas.