

Policy on Charity

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In James 1:27, the apostle writes, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." In these several sessions, we are not going to say anything about orphans, but we are going to say a lot about widows. However, I have a broader purpose, and that is, in relation to the biblical verses that we will talk about, and in the context of discussing how the church ought to help widows in need, we will be also considering some general principles regarding church policy on charity. We will have no time to be exhaustive, but I hope that as individuals and as church leaders, you will take what I say and further investigate the subject from Scripture.

James does not give us the details as to how we must take care of the widows – he just says that we are to do it. For more instructions, we will have to turn to something that Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5. We will read verses 3-16:

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to. So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.

If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

This is a large passage, and we are not going to cover every verse. Instead, we will focus our attention on verses 3-8, and will structure our discussion around that passage. I read all the way through verse 16 because there are some issues of interpretation that I would like to address first.

If you have a pen or pencil, I would like you to put a small mark after verse 8 and before verse 9, and then I would like you to mark off verse 16 from the rest. If you are reading from a version like the NIV, then that is already done for you. In the NIV, verses 3-8 form a paragraph, verses 9-15 form two paragraphs, and verse 16 stands by itself as a separate paragraph.

In verses 3-8, Paul offers some general but clear-cut instructions on how the church is to treat widows in need, and then he mentions "the list of widows" in verse 9. Some writers think that from verse 9 Paul begins a discussion about a separate group of widows, a group that is different from those he mentions in verses 3-8. According to them, in verses 3-8 Paul is talking about widows in need, but in verses 9-15, he is talking about a special order of widows, widows who are dedicated to the service of the church.

However, so far I remain unconvinced by the arguments that try to establish such a sharp transition between verses 3-8 and verses 9-15. Instead, it seems most natural to understand verses 9-15 as a continuation of verses 3-8, further limiting the number of those qualified for the church's support. That is, in verses 3-8, Paul talks about the general principles governing how a church must treat widows. But in verses 9-15, he enumerates some specific qualifications for those who are eligible to obtain the church's financial aid.

I will not mention all the arguments with which some writers try to assert that Paul begins to talk about another group of widows starting from verse 9, but I will just mention several examples of these arguments and why they can be immediately dismissed. The first example comes from verse 9, where Paul says, "No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty." Some commentators argue that if in verse 9 Paul is still talking about those widows who are eligible for the church's support, then it would be too harsh to require a widow to be over sixty before she becomes eligible for such assistance. Then, on the assumption that this is too harsh, and on the further assumption that Paul would not be so harsh, the argument then concludes that Paul must be talking about another group of widows beginning from verse 9.

The argument begs the question, assuming the very premise that must be proved. Why do these writers think that it would be too harsh for the church to withhold support from those under sixty? Where does this assumption come from, and what is its justification? Then, if this requirement is harsh, why do they think that Paul would never be so harsh? Rather, if in verse 9 Paul is indeed continuing with what he started in verse 3, then this

requirement is not too harsh, or if you insist that it is a harsh requirement, then this shows that Paul would indeed be so harsh.

Then, there is the argument that Paul has already finished talking about the widows who are in need of financial support by the end of verse 8, and so to say that in verse 9 Paul continues to talk about the characteristics of those who are eligible for the church's assistance would be to say that he brings up the same topic again right after he has just finished discussing it.

But this argument also begs the question. Rather, if verse 9 continues what Paul started in verse 3, then it means that he has *not* finished discussing the topic at the end of verse 8. It begs the question to say that verse 9 begins a new topic because verse 8 has ended the previous topic, and therefore verse 9 must be the beginning of a new topic. No, rather, if verse 9 does not begin a new topic, then verse 8 is not the end of what Paul started in verse 3.

One should consult the commentaries for additional details and arguments, but I am mentioning these examples precisely because many commentaries assert their position on this passage with these fallacious arguments. We should consider the arguments offered and make sure that they are sound before accepting the position proposed. As there is no clear and sharp transition between verse 8 and verse 9, it is more natural to assume that verse 9 does not begin a new topic, or a discussion about a separate group of widows. Instead, verse 9 continues with what Paul started in verse 3.

This position is reinforced by verse 16, which says, "If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need."

One commentator has just finished explaining why he thinks that verse 9 begins a new topic, that is, a discussion about a group or an order of widows different from those mentioned in verses 3-8. But then when he comes to verse 16, he has to say that Paul suddenly returns to the previous topic, about widows in need, or those mentioned in verses 3-8. But as there is no clear transition between verse 8 and verse 9, and as there is no clear transition between verse 15 and verse 16, it is much more natural to read verse 3 all the way through verse 16, as if Paul is talking about the same group of widows, only that from verses 9-15, Paul is giving specific instructions concerning which widows that the church should regard as eligible for support.

Now if one wants to argue that Paul is indeed talking about different group of widows, or an overlapping but clearly distinguishable group of widows, then he may still do so. However, he will have to offer better arguments than those typically proposed, that do not so obviously beg the question. One must not use a standard of judgment that does not come from the text itself, or for that matter, that does not come from anywhere in Scripture, and on that basis assert that Paul *cannot* mean something, and therefore he *does not* mean something. Well, if he *does* mean something, then he *can* mean it.

So arguments of this kind do nothing other than to impose one's standard of judgment upon Scripture, and then on that basis determine what certain passages can mean or cannot mean. Rather than an interpretation of Scripture, in which one carefully draws out the meaning of the text, this is a subversion of Scripture, and imposes one's non-biblical beliefs and standards upon Scripture, artificially restricting and manipulating the text.

To summarize, my position is that from verses 3-8, Paul discusses the general principles that govern how Christians should treat the widows who are in need, and who cannot support themselves. Then, from verses 9-15, Paul lists a number of specific principles and conditions that further limit the number of those eligible for such support. Finally, in verse 16, he summarizes his teaching on the subject.

Since verse 16 presents a straightforward and unmistakable summary of Paul's teaching, it must govern our interpretation of verses of 3-8. And if we are correct about verses 9-15, then verse 16 must govern how we interpret that portion also. However, since we will focus our attention only on verses 3-8, this is all that we need to emphasize for our study. That is, for our purpose, we only need to keep in mind that verses 3-8 and verse 16 go together.

We will not begin our main exposition of this passage until the next session, so I will just leave you with one thought about the purpose and the uses of this study. Those of us who have a basic understanding of biblical teachings realize that our main task is not charity or social outreach, but to preach a spiritual gospel. Of course, it is a gospel that carries implications about our physical needs and social relationships. However, it is still first a spiritual gospel, designed to save us from our sins and restore fellowship with God.

Again, that our primary interest is people's spiritual needs and spiritual concerns does not mean that we ignore their physical welfare. In fact, according to James, a faith is dead, false, and hypocritical if we will say to someone who is hungry and suffering, "I will pray for you," but then do nothing to help that person with his needs. As John says, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:17).

So, our purpose is first spiritual, and our message is first not a social but a spiritual gospel, although it is one that carries social implications. That is the way to look at it. Our question then, and the reason for this study, is to find out how we are to implement and carry out these social implications generated by our spiritual faith. Our passage for this study will tell us about our responsibilities, and it will also tell us how to prioritize our charitable works. We will see that the biblical teaching does not excuse a lack of compassion on our part, but at the same time, it will not tolerate idleness and licentiousness in those who request support and charity.

We began by noting that, according to James, a religion that is pure and faultless before God the Father is one that looks after orphans and widows in their distress. A person may consider himself a religious or spiritual man, and a great friend of God, but if he does not extend compassion to the needy, then he deceives himself about his own spiritual condition. He is not spiritual, but he is yet carnal and selfish.

Since the specific purpose of James is not to give detailed instructions on performing charity, but to expose spiritual self-deception, he does not tell us how Christians ought to help or support orphans and widows. So last time we turned to a passage in 1 Timothy, written by the apostle Paul. We read from chapter 5, verses 3-16. But rather than starting our exposition from verse 3, we had to divide the passage into two or even three parts. Verses 3-8 form one section, verses 9-15 form the second section.

Then, depending on how you interpret the rest, verse 16 either suddenly goes back to the first section, that is, verses 3-8, or if my position is correct, verse 16 is a summary of Paul's teaching in this entire large section that goes all the way from verse 3 through verse 15. In our study, we will not spend time dealing with verses 9-15, but we will focus our attention on verses 3-8.

Now we are ready to begin our exposition from verse 3. It says, "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need." A literal translation would be "widows who are really widows" or "widows who are widows indeed," and this is how it is rendered in the KJV, NKJV, NASB, and the ESV. The phrase, of course, refers to those widows who are truly alone and destitute, and so the NIV translates the verse according to its meaning, and says, "widows who are really in need."

Paul says that we are to give these people, that is, widows who are truly alone and destitute, the "proper recognition." The other versions give us the word "honor." What does this mean? The context makes the meaning unmistakable: Paul is primarily referring to the financial and material needs of these widows. The widows who are truly in need are those who cannot care for themselves, and who require the assistance of other people to survive. So the question now, is who should take care of them, and how.

In verse 3, Paul is instructing the church on how it should relate to widows in need, or more precisely, he is giving Timothy instructions on what he should teach the people and how he should operate the church, how the church should relate to these widows, and how the church should use its resources. He says that the church should give "proper recognition," that is, to give financial and material support to widows who are indeed widows, or to widows who are really in need.

Who are these widows who are indeed widows, and who are these widows who are really in need? The expression that Paul uses already tells us this. He says that the church should support widows who are indeed widows, and this means that not every woman whose husband has died is a widow that the church should support. That are some widows who are not really "widows," not truly left alone and destitute. Widows who qualify for the church's support must be truly alone and without help.

The next verse elaborates: "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God." In other words, a widow who is indeed a widow, a widow who is really in need, is a woman whose husband has died, and is left without close relatives to support her. This means that if a woman whose husband has died has children or grandchildren who can supply her needs, then it is up to these relatives to support her, and not the church.

Notice what Paul says about these relatives. They are "children or grandchildren." For them to support their parents and grandparents who are left alone and destitute, and who requires financial and material support to survive, is a matter of putting "their religion into practice." James offers the very same reason for Christians to take care of widows and those who are in need – for him it is a matter of putting faith into practice as well. We may stumble in our faith, but a faith that is consistently denied expression suggests that there has never been any faith in this person to express in the first place.

Also, Paul speaks of the children or grandchildren who support their parents and grandparents as "repaying" them. This means that when children or grandchildren support their parents and grandparents, it is not so much a matter of charity, as it is an act of gratitude and repayment. It is an acknowledgment of a debt, a debt to those who with patience and endurance raised us into adulthood.

The acknowledgement of this debt and its repayment is also part of putting our faith into practice. Thus the ultimate reason for Christians to acknowledge this debt is their faith and not their filial piety, even in this matter of taking care of our own parents and grandparents. The Christian position is God-centered and not man-centered. It is based on God's precepts and not human welfare or a social bond. To acknowledge this debt and to do it on the basis of our faith, Paul says, is "pleasing to God."

Regarding the question of who are these widows who are indeed widows, and who are these widows who are really in need, we now have our answer. Paul is referring to those women whose husbands have died and left no relatives to support them. But if there are close relatives who can support them, such as the children or grandchildren, then the church is not to be burdened with them. Thus these widows must first go to their children or grandchildren for financial and material support, or better, the children or grandchildren should actively and eagerly offer their support. Once the women's husbands have died, the widows should not have to beg for the help that is owed them.

If these children or grandchildren refuse to put their faith into practice, and if they abandon their widowed parents and grandparents, then these women would become widows who are indeed widows, widows who are really in need, widows who are really alone and destitute. In that case, verse 3 would apply to them, and these widows would become eligible for the churches support. As for the children or grandchildren who refuse to care for these widows, Paul will have something to say about them in just a few verses later.

And if these children or grandchildren are non-Christians, they might still decide to support their parents and grandparents out of ordinary human affections and a natural sense of responsibility, so that these widows would not be widows who are left alone and destitute, and they would not be eligible for the church's support. But if they are abandoned by the children or grandchildren, then of course verse 3 would again apply.

There is a related biblical teaching that we should bring up at this point. Besides giving us a better understanding of our passage, it will also serve as an example of why it is important to understand any biblical teaching in the light of the entire Bible. I am referring to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:14. There, he writes, "After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." We have no time to look at the full context, but if you look at the passage in your spare time, you should be able to see the relevance. Also, the idea expressed here is not found in an isolated part of Scripture, but it is taught throughout the Bible, both explicitly and implicitly, that the parents are to take care of the children and leave them an inheritance. Ideally, the children should not have to take care of the parent's financial and material needs.

That said, our passage in 1 Timothy 5 is not talking about the ideal situation. It is talking about a situation in which after her husband has died, a widow is left without the necessary finances to survive. She may be in such a state because her husband had squandered their earnings when he was alive. She may be in such a state because her husband had failed to make the necessary plans for her. Or, she may be left in such a state simply because her husband could barely earn enough for them to survive while he was alive, and could not save up anything for her. In the days of Paul, certainly there were many who could not leave their widows enough to sustain them for the rest of their lives.

Therefore, the children or grandchildren are to take care of these widows. Nevertheless, we must not undermine or discard the biblical teaching that, if at all possible, the parents are to save up for the children, and not the other way around. Paul says that "children should not have to save up for their parents." We may not always be able to attain the ideal, but we must always keep it in mind; otherwise, we will forget about it and never attain it, and the second-best will become the norm.

This teaching addresses something crucial to the development of a family. There is the pressure in some cultures and traditions for children to start giving money to their parents once they begin to earn their own incomes even when the children are struggling and the

parents are not. The children are expected to give part their income to the parents as a matter of principle, and not because the parents are suffering and in need.

While we can admire the intention of gratitude and the acknowledgment of a debt owed to the parents, this practice can often cripple a developing family, and inflict damage upon even the next generation, that is, the grandchildren. Even if this new family receives an inheritance from the parents afterward, fewer resources would have been devoted to establishing this new family during the grandchildren's developing years, perhaps when they needed these resources the most.

In 1 Timothy 5:4, the teaching refers to how the children or grandchildren should take care of their parents and grandparents who are, as verse 3 indicates, "really in need." So verse 4 does not apply when the parents are richer than the children. Of course, the children and grandchildren must still put their religion into practice, and they must still acknowledge their debt to the parents and grandparents in some way. Furthermore, it is also true that their needs are not only financial, but they have spiritual and social needs as well.

But it would be senseless to give part of the income to the parents when the parents have no need of it, and especially when the children need it much more. This is not an excuse for the children to abandon their parents, since the teaching is undeniable that if the widows, and verse 4 mentions even parents and grandparents, are in need such that they cannot survive without help, then the children or grandchildren must care for them. If you are a parent, know that you are entitled to your children's support when you are old, but if it is at all possible, you should make sure that this will not be necessary when the time comes.

We have been studying Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 5 regarding how a church should help "widows who are really in need." We have discussed the relationship between verses 3-8 and verses 9-15, and then also verse 16. Then, as we started our exposition, we have discussed verses 3 and 4.

As we noted, Paul does not say that the church should support every widow, but that it should support only the widows who are truly widows, those widows who are truly in need. By this, Paul is referring to those widows who are truly alone, so that they have no children or grandchildren to support them.

We mentioned the responsibilities of the children and grandchildren, that they must put their religion into practice, and that they are to repay their parents and grandparents, "for this is pleasing to God." In connection with this, we also referred to another biblical teaching, namely, that the ideal is that the parents should leave an inheritance to the children rather than having the children support the parents. However, when this is not possible, the children should demonstrate their faith by supporting their parents out of gratitude.

Now we have arrived at verse 5. We must remember that in this verse Paul is continuing what he started in verse 3. In other words, he continues to expound on the idea that the church should support with those who are truly widows, widows who are truly in need, and he is continuing to explain who these widows are. It would help us to retain this connection in our thinking by reading verse 3 and then verse 5 right away, temporarily skipping verse 4, as right now we will be dealing with verse 5.

Thus, Paul says, "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need....The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help." Verse 3 tells us that the church is to support the widows who are really in need. In verse 4, Paul excludes those widows who have close relatives to support them. Now in verse 5 he further elaborates on the type of widows who are eligible for the church's support.

First, he repeats that the church is to support the widow who is "really in need." She is someone who is "left all alone." And the kind of widow that Paul has in mind is one who "puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help." So the apostle is not concerned only about a widow's financial condition when considering whether a widow is eligible for the church's support. The church is also to take a look at her spiritual condition. A widow who is eligible for the church's support, besides being really in need and left all alone, is also one who hopes in God and who prays night and day. She is one who depends on God.

Then, Paul makes his meaning even clearer, for when we move on to verse 6, he refers to a widow whose characteristic is the opposite of the one in verse 5. He writes, "But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives." The words "lives for pleasure" refer to someone who is self-indulgent, who lives for luxury and who does not demonstrate the reverence and the dependence of the widow in verse 5. Some commentators think that even if this widow does not resort to prostitution, the expression suggests that her luxury comes from other men, from immoral living. Spiritually speaking, Paul obviously intends to convey the idea that she is the opposite of the widow in verse 5, and he says that she is "dead even while she lives."

Remember that Paul is not giving a general description of a spiritual widow in verse 5 and an immoral one in verse 6 for no particular purpose, or as a digression, but he is continuing what he started in verse 3. He is elaborating on the kind of widow that would be eligible for the church's support. Clearly, the widow in verse 6 must be denied and excluded.

After that, in verse 7, Paul tells Timothy, "Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame." This is the policy that a church leader is to implement in the church, and he is to instruct the people about these things and the principles by which the policy is determined. Following the biblical policy is crucial in maintaining the church's honorable reputation, which is a constant concern of the apostle.

Now, if our interpretation of verses 9-15 is correct, then Paul would continue to elaborate on the kind of widows that are eligible for the church's support, and he would indicate that these widows must be willing to work for the church. Certainly, a widow who is in decent health, who is not disabled, should be willing to serve the church in exchange for its support.

What reason is there for the widow, who is left all alone, to refuse to dedicate the rest of her life to the church that is now supporting her? Every Christian should be willing to serve the church in some way, but how much more should a widow be willing to serve, who no longer has other responsibilities, and who now receives her livelihood from the church? For her to refuse would make her resemble the widow described in verse 6, that is, one who lives for herself and her own pleasure.

In addition to the spiritual concern by which he determined this policy, Paul also shares his practical concern in verse 16: "If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need." The church is not to be "burdened" with helping people who could receive support from somewhere else, especially from close relatives.

We can summarize Paul's policy this way: The church is not to neglect the widows who are really in need, but it cannot offer support to every widow. Practically speaking, it must be realistic about its own limitations, so that it must exclude all those who could obtain their support from somewhere else. Spiritually speaking, it must protect its purity

and its reputation, so that it must not tolerate those widows who are self-indulgent, who are living selfish and immoral lives, and who would squander the churches support on luxurious living.

It is the consistent teaching of Scripture that the church should not be blindly sympathetic to those who appear to be in need, but it must consider why a certain person is in need, and whether the church is this person's last resort. In fact, Paul explicitly instructs his churches to be firm with people who are in need due to their own fault, and who otherwise would not require the church's support.

For example, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul writes, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us." He does not say that the church should indulge him and to keep him alive while giving him time to repent or anything like that. He says to keep away from him, to shun him, to exclude him. And then in verse 10, he writes, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'"

There is no indication in the text that Paul is joking or exaggerating. You might say, "Certainly, Paul does not intend for us to let this person starve to death, does he?" Again, the question assumes that the apostle would not implement such a harsh treatment against anyone, but as with before, this begs the question. Unless there are biblical passages found elsewhere that would preclude this straightforward interpretation, this verse is explicit instruction for us to allow the idle person to starve.

However, when this is the policy, this person might just get back to work in order to survive. But if you do not starve him, you might never know. Those passages on love and compassion, and others like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, do nothing to contradict this understanding. They just do not apply in a manner that would tell us to support the idle person, since the person does not really have a need that the church must supply – he just refuses to work.

We must still consider verse 8: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." This naturally follows from Paul's concern, as stated in verse 7, that "no one may be open to blame." But he adds an interesting statement here that confuses some people. It seems straightforward enough for many, and it appears that most commentaries offer the correct interpretation on it, but if one reads it from a particular angle and with certain assumptions in mind, it can indeed be perplexing.

I am referring to the last part where he says that a person who does not provide for his relatives "has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." It sounds to some that the phrases "has denied the faith" and "is worse than an unbeliever" must indicate that such a person is unsaved.

A person who abandons his relatives, and especially his immediate family, might indeed be unsaved, and this type of behavior is certainly sinful and displeasing to God. However, it is not the necessary implication from verse 8 that such a person must be unsaved. Remember that in verse 4, Paul says that the children or grandchildren should take care of the widows who are really in need, and he says that this is to "put their religion into practice." The opposite, of course, is to "deny the faith," that is, not necessarily in creed, but certainly in conduct.

As for the phrase "worse than an unbeliever," Paul cannot be referring to salvation. If Paul indeed has salvation in mind – if he has the *fate* of the person in mind – then there is nothing worse than the fate of the unbeliever. The most that one can say is that this person will suffer the same fate as an unbeliever. Rather, the phrase corresponds to Paul's concern as stated in verse 7. There he says that Timothy should relate these instructions and insist on them, so that "no one may be open to blame." Since even unbelievers would often take care of their own relatives, and especially their own parents, a Christian who refuses to do the same is certainly behaving worse than an unbeliever.

If a person claims to be a Christian, but who consistently denies the faith in practice, and whose behavior is consistently worse than (or the same as) an unbeliever, then this is an indication that the person has never been a Christian. That Paul declares this person "worse than an unbeliever" in fact suggests that he is not referring to salvation, but to a person's behavior as compared to the usual practice of the unbelievers. Paul's concern is for the church's reputation and God's honor.

Let us review what we have covered so far. I have been speaking from 1 Timothy 5:3-8. First, we discussed the relationship between this passage and verses 9-15, as well as verse 16. But other than affirming a continuation from verse 8 to verse 9, and then all the way to verse 16, we have not discussed the content of verses 9-15. Instead, we have focused our attention on verses 3-8, and also verse 16.

Verse 3 says that we must "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need." We proceeded to consider who these widows are. Verse 4 indicates that a widow who is truly a widow, or a widow who is really in need, is one who is without children or grandchildren to take care of her. In such a case, the church should intervene and supply for her needs, that is, provided that she also fulfills the other conditions mentioned in our passage. In addition, this verse indicates that the children and grandchildren are to take care of their parents and grandparents because this is to "put their religion into practice" and to repay the debt that they owe to their parents and grandparents, "for this is pleasing to God."

Then, in verses 5 and 6, Paul mentions two different kinds of widows. The first one is really in need and left all alone. She puts her hope in God and continues night and day in prayer, and to ask God for help. She walks in faith and godliness. The second one lives for pleasure. She is self-indulgent and wallows in luxurious living. The money enables her to live in such a licentious manner comes, if not by prostitution, then probably from immoral relationships with other men. A wealthy widow who has inherited her money from the deceased husband still falls under Paul's description if she is self-indulgent, wallows in luxurious living, and lives for pleasure. She is "dead even while she lives."

Verse 16 gives us Paul's practical reason for insisting that the church follows his policy in taking care of widows and in performing charity. He says that the church should not be "burdened" with those who are not really in need, and with those who have other people to take care of them. But there is a spiritual reason as well, and that is stated in verse 7 and 8 where Paul says that the church must follow his instructions, so that "no one may be open to blame." When a church formulates and implements a policy, it is important that it upholds the honor and reputation of God and of the Body of Christ. We are to show that we are clean and honest in all of our dealings, and free from all wrongdoing and scandal.

Although the main part of our exposition is complete, there are several loose ends that I would like to tie up in this final session. In particular, I would like to expand on this last point about the purity, the honor, and the reputation of the Body of Christ. The key is to implement a policy that demonstrates compassion, and that at the same time does not generate suspicion and create scandal in any way.

A church must have a biblical policy on charity, on taking care of widows and orphans, and it must adhere to such a policy. Any deviation from biblical instructions can lead to great destruction for the parties involved and dishonor to the Lord. When we stray from the biblical guidelines, not only those stated in our passage but also in the rest of Scripture, disaster is almost inevitable.

One fairly prominent theologian, the son of a much more prominent theologian, had established a church with the intent that families can form an intimate community and effectively implement a homeschool system. In a book where he discusses family and parenting, supposedly from a biblical perspective, he offers an illustration on how his church dealt with the needs of a widow. Let us consider what we can learn from it.

In short, this woman's husband had died and left her with several children. Since they were not wealthy, right away the widow began to face seemingly insurmountable financial problems, definitely more than what she could handle. She could try to find a job, but then she would have needed someone else to care for her children. And since this was a homeschool community devoted to obeying the "cultural mandate," the church naturally wanted to offer her a better solution.

So the church agreed to take care of much of the widow's financial needs. However, to the elders of this church, an equally pressing problem was that there was now a void in this family that only a man could fill. As far as the elders were concerned, there were various things related to the operation of a household that were more appropriately performed by a man. And what about the children? Now they no longer had a father figure in their lives.

It happened that another family from the same church lived quite near to this bereaved family. So the elders came up with the idea that the man of this family should now take on many of the roles that the deceased man used to fulfill. The man agreed to this and began to spend a lot of time over at this other family's place. He would help the widow do chores around the house, fix things that needed to be fixed, and so on. He would help the children with their school work, play sports with them, take them to places, and generally try to fill up part of the void that was left when their father died.

This is an abomination. Do you not see it? Perhaps my description is not as vivid and thorough as the one this theologian gives in his book, but in effect the church had asked this other family to share the man with the bereaved family. From the description given in the book, the man was spending *a lot* of time over at this other family's place, and he was performing every function that the deceased husband used to perform other than to have sexual intercourse with the widow. Now, who would be stupid enough as to be surprised if very soon he had taken on this final role as well? Apparently the possibility never occurred to the church elders, and if it did, apparently they thought the danger was not great enough.

Everything was wrong about this decision. The man's family was left with half a husband and half a father. With the husband spending so much time at the other place with a

lonely widow, the wife was now subjected to jealousy and suspicion – there must have been something seriously wrong with her if she was not jealous and suspicious, if she was satisfied with such an arrangement. Under the circumstances, if she had said anything, she probably would have been accused of being selfish and insecure. Still, she should have fought it like she was fighting for the very life of her marriage and family. I do not know whether she did or not. In any case, part of what makes a woman secure in her relationship is that her husband does not spend half of his time over at a widow's place, and spend hours and hours playing with the other woman's children!

As for the newly bereaved widow, she suddenly had a new man in her life that was assuming every non-sexual role that her husband used to fulfill, including the role of a father figure to her children. Who could guarantee that there would have been no temptation to take the relationship further? The church practically signed a warrant to commit adultery by sending her a man to be with her for many hours each week behind closed doors.

What about the children? They had just lost their father, and now another man, even if not a complete stranger, entered their lives and took on every role that their father used to fulfill. They might not see this man kissing their mother – yet – but was this supposed to assure them, or confuse them? What was he doing there if he was not in love with their mother? Why, their father had just died, and was their mother welcoming another man into the home so soon? Why was he acting like their father? How long was he going to assume this role?

The apparently compassionate thing to do is not always the right thing to do. Here the church made the most superficial decision possible. When the head of the house dies, the family is supposed to suffer loss. Things are supposed to change. The wife and children are supposed to sense the void that he has left. The church can do a lot to help alleviate their pains and their needs, but it cannot just pick a man from another family and plug him right into the bereaved family, telling him to take on all the roles of the deceased husband except that of a sexual companion to the woman. And the church cannot expect the wife of this man to share her husband with another woman, even if supposedly in a non-sexual way.

What a disgrace. What a shameful, stupid, stupid, stupid decision. What an abomination and dishonor to the Body of Christ. This church probably ushered this man right into the bed of this new widow, and thus destroyed two families at one stroke. And what were the elders going to do if the man had committed adultery with the widow? Discipline them? Excommunicate them? They were the ones who told the man to spend hours and hours over at the widow's place. They would have to excommunicate themselves along with them.

The church could have chosen from a great number of options in helping this bereaved family, any one of these options or any combination of these options would have been far superior to sending one man alone into a widow's home day after day. The church could have sent different *couples* to take turns in helping the family. It could have encouraged

greater participation of this family in the church's various activities. What this church tried to accomplish by sending this one man into the family could only be done by the widow's remarriage to another man. This man would then properly function as a father figure to the children, and to perform all the functions that the deceased husband used to perform. And there would be no adultery, no scandal, no confusion. If the widow had refused to remarry, then she would have needed to raise the children by herself, with the help of the church and the community, but without a husband or a father, and certainly without a husband or a father borrowed from another family.

This theologian relates his story as something that he is proud of, and as something that he wishes other churches would emulate. He thinks that what the church did was intelligent, compassionate, and effective. But I am ashamed of him. Paul says that we are to be beyond reproach, but this was a scandal in the making. It robbed one family of its husband and father (or at least half of him), injected temptation and confusion into the bereaved family, placed the man in the difficult position of caring for two families (to be a husband and father to one, but then a friend and father to another), tainted the widow's image and reputation, and thus also insulted her deceased husband.

I wonder what these elders would have done for a family whose wife and mother had died, that is, if they would have suggested that another family share a woman with the widower and his children. That would have been at least as dangerous and scandalous, if not more so. As such a community develops, there would be other widows and widowers, and I wonder if they would order the same to be done in each case. And if so, what they would end up with is mass spouse sharing, deep strain and suspicion in marriages, and numerous cases of adultery practically arranged by the church.

Can you understand why we need a *biblical* policy when it comes to charity, and helping orphans and widows? It is because, on the one hand, people can be selfish, and on the other hand, they can be very stupid and a little insane, as in this case. The Bible has given us a policy to follow, and church leaders ought to be firm and decisive in teaching it and implementing it. And please, if you are going to sin and defy the Bible, at least do not pair up people to commit adultery with one another!

A biblical policy will do more than to prevent abominations such as the one in our illustration. Since such a policy has been derived from Scripture, believers can follow it with confidence, knowing that they are obeying the will of God as they do so. This in turn protects them from doubt as to whether they are doing the right thing, from the subjective guilt of thinking that they are not doing enough, from the objective guilt of really not doing enough, and also from the manipulation of swindlers, and from many unbearable and unnecessary financial burdens.

On the other hand, since the biblical policy is a moral mandate imposed upon Christians by God, it also serves to protect the rights of orphans, of "widows who are really in need," and of others who are to receive help and support.

Finally, a biblical policy, while compassionate, is also intelligent and righteous. It does not encourage sloth or tolerate licentiousness, but it insists on both charity in those who give, and godliness in those who receive.