

The Pillar: Chapter 5 (Part 1 of 3)

How Should We Treat People?

1 Timothy 5:1-6

Mark Vroegop

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, ²older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

³Honor widows who are truly widows. ⁴But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. ⁵She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, ⁶but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives (1 Timothy 5:1-6).

When we began our study of 1 Timothy last year, I referenced a familiar children's Sunday school explanation of the church which included some memorable hand motions. It went something like this:

"Here's the church...here's the steeple...look inside...and see all the people"

I used this simple children's rhyme to introduce the painful subject about how a person can create problems in a church or even split a church. Some of you have observed that, and you unfortunately know from personal experience what it is like to see church at its worst – when people are awful, when Sundays are tense, and when there is controversy in the air. If that was a part of your past, I'm really sorry, and I want to thank you for entrusting us with an opportunity to show you that it doesn't have to be that way.

The church can actually be an amazing place – a little slice of heaven. In fact, when the church is spiritually healthy it can be unlike anything else on planet earth. It can be a place where people from all walks of life and with lots of baggage from their past gather together under the banner of the gospel to worship Jesus and do life together. It can be a place to belong, a place to be loved, and a place to love others. The church can be wonderful.

I am presently listening to the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was killed by the Nazis in 1945 for plotting an assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer loved the church, and he thought a great deal about the idea of Christian community. In the midst of a culture that was fractured because of World War I and increasingly hostile as the seeds for World War II were laid, he held up a very attractive view of the church. In 1939 he published a book that every small group or Bible study leader, mentor, or discipleship leader should read. It is entitled "Life Together." Listen to what he says:

Christian community means community through and in Jesus Christ... Christians need other Christians who speak God's word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened because, living on their own resources, they cannot help themselves without cheating themselves out of the truth. They need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation. They need them solely for the sake of Jesus Christ.¹

Bonhoeffer's vision for the church is one we need to hear and consider – to understand the significance of “the people” as it relates to the church being the church. In other words, what kind of relationship should people in the church have with one another? How should they treat one another? How should they treat those in need? These are huge and important questions if the church is to be more than just a mass gathering of people consuming music and preaching every Sunday.

Practicing Church

The fifth chapter of 1 Timothy helps us answer these questions as Paul addresses some very practical issues that this young pastor faced in the historic but troubled Ephesian church. Last week we looked at ten commands that should frame pastoral ministry, and this week we launch into chapter five which addresses some specific ways in which the people in Ephesus were to live out the gospel. This chapter marks the beginning of our descent in our study. Paul is starting to wrap things up, and so are we.

By the way, the plan is to conclude our study in this book by the end of May and start another summer study in June on selected Psalms under the following title: “Honest to God: Tough Questions from the Psalms.”

This chapter is incredibly practical. Take a look at chapter five, and you will see the following issues we'll be examining over the next month:

- 5:1-6 – How Should We Treat People?
- 5:7-16 – Thinking Correctly About Compassion
- 5:17-25 – How to Care for Those Who Care for the Church

This is a chapter with important and timely instruction on how the church is to live in community together. It is a chapter about the church's practice of life and relationships.

Welcome to the Family

Our verses today introduce us to the way in which people in the church should be treated, and there is a noticeable theme of “family” that develops. There is a clear sense that while the church is made up of different kinds of people from various walks of life, the people in the church should view one another as though they were connected in a very special way.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, (New York, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954)

In 1 Timothy 3:15 we heard Paul refer to the church as “God’s household.” This theme of “family” is an important aspect of what it means for the church to be the church. It is what makes the church special and a community of people within the community of the culture. However, there is a real danger that a large church like College Park could lose this vital trait. So let’s look at this concept a little more broadly than the immediate chapter in front of us.

Let’s start with the basics of how one becomes a part of God’s family in the first place. It is clear that not all human beings belong to God’s family; only those who have received Jesus and who are spiritually born again are welcomed into the family:

¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:11-13).

The effect of this is a spiritual adoption, a gift based upon the sovereign purpose of God:

In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:5-6).

The implications of this spiritual rebirth, based upon a relationship with Jesus, are stunning and sweeping. It means that real and living human beings now have a special, personal, and fatherly connection to their Creator:

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ... (Rom. 8:14-17)

And the result of this gracious act of God on behalf of sinful people is an overwhelming sense of awe that God would love people this way. Therefore church is a gathering of people who all know that they don’t deserve to be a part of this family:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are (1 John 3:1).

What does it mean to be a part of the family of God? It means that God has graciously welcomed you into a family to which you didn’t belong and which you could never join on your own. It means that because of what Jesus accomplished, you have a new relationship with the Father. It means that in the midst of this world and culture that there is a community within the community. Within the human race there is a group of people who have a common relationship with Jesus that defines them.

²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-28).

The church is family! The vision of the church is more than just a gathering of people who come on Sundays to consume biblical content; the idea is a people who come from very different backgrounds, experiences, pasts, and problems – but they share a common love for Jesus. And the result is that they are family.

Now what does that look like?

General Guidelines

Using this lens of a family, Paul gives Timothy some general guidelines as to how he is to treat particular groups of people within the church. There are four different groups of people that he specifically addresses: older men, older women, younger men, and younger women. Each group has a special instruction based upon the connection they share as family.

1. Treat Older Men as Fathers

Paul begins this section by giving Timothy two commands. This follows the theme we saw in 4:11-16 when he gave Timothy ten commands for pastoral ministry. These two commands are very practical. How is he to treat men in the church that are older than him? The answer is two-fold: 1) He is not to rebuke them but 2) to encourage them. But notice in what way! "...as you would a father."

Timothy is to pastor and shepherd older men with respect and honor. The word "rebuke" means to strike, and carries with it the idea of speaking with strong disapproval as a type of punishment. In other words, it would be the kind of words a person in authority might use for someone who is out of line. While Timothy is certainly an authority figure, he has to recognize that an older man needs to be treated differently since his life experience should be honored. The older man should honor Timothy's authority, but Timothy should be honorable as well. It was important for this young man to see the gift that older men gave him when they chose to follow him.

I remember very well a comment by one of our older church members just after I was voted in at my first church at age 25. I had zero Senior Pastor experience, and I had no idea what I was doing. But the Sunday after the vote, he greeted me and said, "Well, there's my PASTOR! Good morning!" It was such a gift. I didn't deserve such honor, especially from someone with as much life experience as he had.

So rather than rebuking an older man strongly, Timothy is to encourage him as he would a father. The Greek word here means to ask for something or to appeal to a person. Paul links it with the idea of the way that you would talk to your father – with respect and honor. So it is not that the older man gets a pass on godliness or that his life experience means he can say and do whatever he wants. No, he still needs to be lead. But Timothy needed to value older men and treat them with a fatherly respect and kindness. He needs to correct them by honorable appeal. These older men are not just older men; they are to be treated like fathers because they are family.

2. Treat Older Women as Mothers

I'll come back to the younger men in a minute. Let me skip ahead and look at how older women are to be treated.

Paul continues this theme and encourages Timothy treat older women in a way that is also unique. In the same way that older men should be treated like fathers, the older women should be treated like mothers. What does that mean? In short, it means that they should be loved and listened to.² Isn't that what your mom loved? Or think of it another way: what really hurt her or made her mad? When she didn't feel loved or when she wasn't listened to. These older women should be treated with the gentleness and the love that is fitting and appropriate for mothers. They weren't biological mothers, but they need to be treated as such.

Additionally, they should be cared for when they are in need. We will look at this later on in the text and into next week, but it is important to just introduce this theme here. Using the lens of family, these older women needed to be viewed through a framework of the way that one would care for a mother. Treat older women like that!

While I was writing this sermon I received a great illustration of this. Don Helton, our Pastor for Student Ministries sent an email that a high school student was organizing a group of students to paint a fence for an older woman in our church. Isn't that great?

Now, I put older men and women together for a reason even though the text doesn't read that way. I wanted to group these two together to make an important point about how the church should look. Don't miss the fact that Paul assumes that there will be older people in the church! There is something really valuable about a church that has an inter-generational quality about it. The church needs young people, but it also needs older people who have lots of life experience and wisdom. In light of that, can I issue a challenge to you? Be sure that somewhere in the context of your sphere of relationships and among those whom you ask advice is someone who is at least twenty years older than you. And if you get a chance to spend time with an older person, ask them lots of questions and find out what lessons they've learned; I think you'll be surprised at how helpful that conversation can actually be.

3. Treat Younger Men as Brothers

Paul continues the theme of family, and he describes the way that young men are to be treated. Instead of talking down to them or treating them as an inferior group to himself since he has been put in a position of authority, he should treat them as peers. They belong to the same family, and they have a common bond that goes beyond titles and positions.

To view younger men as brothers means there is a depth of relationship. As brothers are inexorably united together in the same family, so too are brothers in Christ. Relationships between

² Philip Ryken, *1 Timothy – Reformed Expository Commentary*, (Phillipsburg: New Jersey, 2007), 197.

these men are forged with a common understanding of the challenge of living in a world broken by sin and a shared love they have for Jesus. They are a spiritual band of brothers who love one another in a depth that could only have been created through God's grace.

So let me encourage you men to think like that in regards to other men. You need to see yourselves as brothers to other men in this church. You need to view your commitment to one another as more than just casual acquaintances. You need to treat one another with the kindness and camaraderie of family. But even more, you need to be committed to one another – to walk through tough times, to speak hard things, to watch one another's backs. After all, you are family!

4. Treat Younger Women as Sisters

The fourth and final instruction is regarding how Timothy is to treat the younger women in his congregation. Paul again uses the family analogy to give us great insight in how these young women are to be treated. Since they are a part of the congregation, they cannot be ignored. At the same time, Timothy needs to use discretion because of the obvious potential of the perception or the real issue of sexual impropriety. That is why Paul adds an additional comment here. He says "...in all purity."

Timothy is to treat these young women with love and concern, but it should be comparable to the love and concern that one has for a family member, specifically a sister. His motives and his actions must be honorable. But I suspect that Paul is also speaking to the broader audience of all the young women as well. Paul is giving them instruction as to how they should conduct themselves. Timothy and the young women have boundaries to keep.

In the midst of a culture that promotes, often views, and treats young women like objects, Paul calls the church to be radically different. Young men and young women are not to use the church as their Christian "meat-market." At the same time, the church should not be a place devoid of relationships between young men and young women. The key is what context that relationship is in, and clearly Paul wants them to treat each other like family. After all – family is what they are!

Older men, older women, younger men, and younger women are all to be treated as family. The church is to be a group of people who love and care for one another in a way that highlights the common bond of Jesus that unites them. Look around you. The people in this room and in this church are not just fellow church members; they are part of the family of God to which you belong.

Do you belong to this family I'm talking about? It may be that you are here today and the bottom has dropped out of your life. It may be that your earthly family has proven to be a huge disappointment or even extremely hurtful. It may be that you don't really know what it means to be a child of God. Today I'd like to invite you to become a part of God's family – a group of people who came to the understanding that their greatest need in the world was to have a personal relationship with Jesus. If you've grown weary of the path and consequences of sin, I want to invite you to definitively turn from your sin, receive Jesus into your heart, and become a part of God's family. *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..." (John 1:12).* The church of Jesus Christ is a family.

Introducing Special Guidelines

Paul next moves into some specific instructions about how to treat people in special circumstances. This is simply an extension of the theme of the church as family that we've just examined. Since the church is a family, then it should take care of people who are in special or challenging circumstances. Family is who you call when life gets really hard. Look at verses 3-6 to get our bearings on the text:

³Honor widows who are truly widows. ⁴But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. ⁵She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, ⁶but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives (1 Timothy 5:3-6).

Paul is obviously talking about widows and how to care for them. He will continue this theme through verse 16, and we will look at this issue in-depth next week. Today I simply want to introduce, at a fairly high level, the idea of a compassion ministry as an overflow of the gospel and the nature of being part of the family of God.

I want you first to notice how much time Paul spends on this subject. He gives a number of specific instructions about how the church is to navigate the various issues that arise when you jump into the "deep end" of people's lives. It may have been that Timothy wrote Paul looking for help, or Paul may have known about some challenges that the church was having. Regardless, he spends a lot of time talking about this issue.

Part of the reason Paul spent so much time talking about this is because the compassion ministry of a church is extremely important. A loving and helpful concern for people who are in need, especially if they are within the body of Christ, has always been a part of fabric of Christianity. The book of James says this:

²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27).

This goes back in history to the way that God wants his people to live – even before the New Testament. The Old Testament is filled with instruction regarding the concern that the people of God should have for compassion and justice related issues. Further, it is part of God's very nature to be deeply concerned about these things, and he expects his people to respond in like fashion. Listen to how this is framed in Deuteronomy 10:17-19:

¹⁷For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. ¹⁸He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

God is concerned for the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner. What's more, those who have been the recipients of God's kindness ought to demonstrate their understanding of God's grace by being concerned for others. When this doesn't happen, God is deeply disturbed and judgment comes.

Those of you who grew up in church are likely familiar with the statement in the Bible that goes like this: "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow." Often that verse was used as an evangelistic verse. But do you know what prompted God to say that, and do you know what he was upset about?

*¹⁵When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.
¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.
¹⁸"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool (Isaiah 1:15-18).*

The sins that are like scarlet are the sins of a lack of compassion; they are the sins of injustice. In other words, the people of God were to be concerned about hurting people around them, and they were to do something about it. God is deeply concerned about those who are the most needy, and he expects his children to have the same heart.

The issue, really, is whether or not a person truly understands what the love of God is all about. John makes it so painfully clear:

¹⁶By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth (1 John 1:16-18).

Do you see it? Do you see how this connects to the practical ways in which we are to treat people? The good news of the gospel – that Jesus came into the world to save sinners – changes our relationship with God, but it also changes our relationships with people, especially hurting and needy people.

The church is to be a community of grace and love in the midst of a world of sin and pain. The church is a place where transformed people treat one another like family. After all and because of Jesus – that is what they are!

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