

Caring for Each Other

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[0 : 00] Well folks, lovely to see you today. My name is Graeme, I'm the pastor here at the church. Let me add my welcome to those who have mentioned it already in the service. So 1st Timothy chapter 5 open in front of you. Let me encourage you to do that. And let me tell you what I've realized the more time I've spent in this passage. I've realized just how much against the grain of our culture the central message of this passage in 1st Timothy 5 is. Right, let me just give you a little example of that, see if you connect. The culture vultures out there may have spotted this over the last few weeks. Do you know who's got a new album out at the minute? Adele. Right? Adele, she's one of the kind of biggest selling singer-songwriters that we've ever produced in this country. So she releases a new album over the last month or so. It hits the press for two reasons.

Firstly, because it's the first album that she's released in six years. Now if you're an Adele fan, you'll know that that is a big deal from someone who kind of hit the scene so early on in her life with such wonderful music that people went into the streets and hit the shops and bought it. First time she's released anything in six years. So it's a big deal. Second reason it's a big deal is the motivation behind where she got the ideas for her music was and is. So by her own admission, this whole album that she's produced tells the story of her decision to walk away from her marriage and walk away from her family in pursuit of her own happiness. Now one reviewer that I read this week said this, he said this, here's the sounds, he's reviewing the album, here's the sound of a woman who has dismantled her entire world, realizing that she needn't feel guilty for putting herself first. So this is what the reviewer was commenting on as he listened and reviewed the album. And what he's saying I think is so revealing for where we are at as a culture. Because right now you and I are living our lives in a world that is platforming and celebrating the me first story. So the fact that my happiness is the most important thing in life and our world is affirming it and is absolutely lapping it up. I think it's exactly what you see in that comment there from the reviewer.

She shouldn't feel guilty for putting herself first. And so here is where this passage is so radically different from the message that our world is communicating at the minute. Because really simply it presents us with a picture of a church family who are being called to adopt a mindset that is the polar opposite of the me first story. So if you come with me to the opening verses of chapter five, here's the culture that Timothy is to both realize and work hard to cultivate in Ephesus.

Do you see it? In this church that's made up of all sorts of different people, from all sorts of different backgrounds, from all sorts of different ages, what are they to him? So how is he to conduct himself as a young guy trying to lead this church in this city? The older men, do you see it? Paul says, treat them like you would your father. Do you see it? Same for younger guys. They are your brothers. Younger women, they are your sisters. Now, I think that's really fascinating. In a letter where one of the big themes is all about Timothy's personal conduct, to see here how he is to set the pace when it comes to purity. And in our culture right now where young women are scared to go out in case their drinks get spiked, in our culture where women are told that it's a really good idea to carry on them a rape alarm. Do you see how this is so radically different? So radically different.

[4 : 17] Timothy is being called to set the pace when it comes to purity. Timothy is to model to the church, to the world, that this is how you treat and respect a young woman. You don't find that fascinating?

In this culture, even right here, this is what Timothy's being called to do. She's your sister. And the older woman, you are to treat them and view them as mothers. Now, take that together.

What is it speaking of? What kind of culture is Paul telling Timothy to cultivate in Ephesus? One of love, one of respect, one of honor, one of commitment, and one of responsibility to everyone in the church family. Because here's what's going on. The gospel, the message of Jesus, crucified, risen, Holy Spirit sent, living inside of God's people, that has changed the relationship between us. I

mean, just think that we're going to think about really practically later on. You can start thinking that way. It's changed the relationship between us. So we are no longer strangers who happen to rub shoulders with one another in the same building on a Sunday and during the week.

We are family. Jesus Christ, our faith in him, has connected us. Connected us. So I find it one of the most fascinating things when you travel the world, if you've ever got the privilege of doing that, going to another, remember going to Malawi, bumping into people. I had absolutely nothing in common with him. And yet because we were in church, because we were singing praises to our same God, instantly we were united. It's an incredible feeling if you've sensed that in your life. Because Jesus Christ has united us together. We are family. So what do you say? And so with that understanding of the church, I think what Paul does this week, and we'll see two more next week, he identifies three relationships in particular that I think he probably knows might be vulnerable to abuse in this church in Ephesus. So as I say, we're going to look at two of them next week.

[6 : 30] But let me just introduce you to the one person who's in Paul's mind in this passage. As somebody who the church needs to step up and take loving responsibility for. Do you see her mentioned first at verse three, who is she? She is the widow. Do you see it in the text? The widow. Now that, by very definition, don't just skip that word. By very definition, remember there's a person, there are people represented by that word. By very definition, the widow, her life is full of pain.

Very definition. What has she lost in her life? She's lost her husband. She has been through incredible pain because of her loss. Right? Her husband, likely her best friend, but also remember in this culture, this source of financial income for the family, is she likely worked at home.

And because she's elderly, do you see in verse nine, how Paul, that's what that 60 is all about, which would have been very old in this society, in this culture. Given her age, not only is she unlikely to get another job or to, sorry, to get a job that might give her some kind of income, but there's very little prospect of her potentially getting remarried. And couple that with the fact that in this day, okay, there's no such thing as, as benefits packages or pension plans or income support. Make no mistake, widow in this society has absolutely nothing. She has got nothing.

And what is she? What does she represent in the church community? We'll see the phrase that Paul uses three times at verse three, five and 16. What is she? She is someone who is really in need.

She's really in need. And so the widow is the person who's in Paul's mind as he writes this little section. So here's the principle. And if you're sermon doodling, this is the point where you get your pen.

[8 : 42] As a church, we are called to take loving responsibility for those in our church family who are most in need. Say that again. We as a church family are called to take loving responsibility for those in our church family who are most in need. And so the time we have remaining, I've just got two questions to ask us just to help us think about how we're going to put this into action. The first is about concerns rather and instruction in the text. And the second question really is the application of the text. Okay. Now here is the first question. When someone is in need, who should step in? Now Paul's a realist. He's a realist. And he knows the reality for this church.

He knows the reality for every church. Here's the reality is that there is a limit on our resources, time, energy, money. And so the church needs to make sure that what we do have and what we can offer in terms of loving people, we've got to make sure that it goes to the right people. And so Paul, do you see it? He starts talking about a list at verse nine, right? A list. Presumably it's just a list of names of people in the church who they have come up with and who are most in need and who are in one way or another, they're being supported by the church. And I imagine what's going on in Ephesus right here in this moment is that this list is Scottish phrase bursting at the seams, right?

It is full. The church cannot cope. And I think later on in the passage, you see Paul talking about the burden that's on the church. And I think that's what's going on. This list is bursting at the seams because there's people on this list who shouldn't be on the list. Verse four, those widows who have biological families who can help, they are on the list. Paul saying they shouldn't be on the list, right? Who have got children or grandchildren who are stepping in to love and help mum when she's most in need.

And all Paul is doing here is just applying a commandment that runs right the way through all of scripture. And it's the call to care for, love and honour your parents.

All the way through scripture. It's a commandment that is so close to God's heart. It's why Jesus, when you see him in action in the gospels in Mark chapter seven, he challenges and he outs the Pharisees because they've come up with this whole system called Corban, right? And it's the money that would go towards caring for mum and dad. They're kind of saying, whoa, sorry, mum and dad, that money that would have gone towards you caring for you, I kind of needed to give it to God. So do you know what? You guys, all the best, you can kind of just go at it on your own.

[11:59] Come up with this whole system. And that sounds really pious, but I imagine when you strip it back, all it is, is a desire in their own hearts that people would see the money would be given to God and that therefore they would get the glory. And Jesus is coming along and saying, you've got a fine habit of setting aside the commands of God in order to keep up your own traditions.

Friends, do we see how this commandment is so close to God's heart to care for your parents? You know, do you know what I see? I see many of you right now sacrificially caring for your family members that you love.

And maybe in particular, you're caring for your parents. And I see it, friends, you're ringing them in the middle of the night or carers are ringing you in the middle of the night about them.

You're there. You're making sure that they're taking their correct meds. You're bathing them. You're putting on the tea for them. You're getting them ready for bed. You're spending time with them. You're cooking for them. You're giving up your evenings to go and just sit with them. And I watch some of you do it and it is inspiring. And I also see, though, the toll that it's taken on you emotionally, physically, spiritually.

[13:30] And so if that's you here today, I want you to be particularly encouraged by the truth that's at the end of verse 4. If you're here today and you're feeling that, the world might not see it, but you see verse 4, what you are doing that no one else will see, what you are doing is pleasing in the sight of God.

As you care for those in your family, it is pleasing in the sight of God. It is precious in the eyes of the one person that it matters.

It's a beautiful thing what you're doing. I don't know, perhaps likely what's going on in Ephesus is that people are swallowing this false teaching that's doing the rounds.

Remember we thought about a few weeks ago about don't get married. Do you remember that? That's 4-3. You'll see it there. Don't get married. This is what the false teachers are saying. And so you've got young widows in this church family, I'm assuming, who are perfectly capable of getting married, but they're swallowing this teaching, hook, line and sinker.

And they're just not doing it. They're not doing it. They're not entertaining it. And so they're finding their way onto this list somehow. And they're kind of sponging off the church's limited resources, meaning that those who can't get it, those who are really in need, they're just on their own.

[14:56] And all the while, those people are living questionable lives, leading non-believers in the community to ask, what, the church is picking up the tab for those guys?

And they're living like that? You can imagine how that's going to go down in Ephesus, bringing the church into disrepute. That's what Paul is saying. There's people on this list who shouldn't be on this list, but there are most definitely people who should be.

And I want you to come with me to verse eight. Who should be on this list of the most needy that the church has to care for? Do you see the widow whose life has been marked by godliness?

And here's what I want us to do, whoever we are here today, in our world of Instagram fame, in our world of Twitter bluetix, in our world of social media influencers, all of us here today, friends, need to get this widow and the description of her life.

We need to get the picture of her and put it on our bedroom walls because this is what we want to be. This is a role model for us all to follow. I'm pleading with you to look at the description of her and think that's what we want for our lives.

[16:14] Look at it. She's a woman who's been faithful in her marriage. She's a woman who's sacrificially brought up her children. Do you see this description of her?

It was the late John Wesley who once remarked that he'd learned more of Christianity from his mum than he had from all the theologians in England. It's an amazing testament, isn't it, to the power of a godly woman.

And it reminds us, doesn't it, that the home is the primary place for making disciples as we show our children what it is to love the Lord. She's a woman who's shown hospitality to others.

She's a woman who's washed the feet of the saints. Now get that one. It's an incredible, what lovely description. She is a woman who's washed the feet of the saints.

She is a woman. And standing behind that, remember, is a life that has been deeply formed and transformed by Jesus. Because why has she learned to wash the feet of the saints?

[17 : 17] Where does that come from? It comes from the fact that you know that Jesus has first washed your feet, as it were. He's the one who has served us. He's the one that came, that laid down his life on a cross.

He is the one who has risen. He is the one who's personifying what it is to be servant-hearted. And this woman, her life has been wonderfully formed by Jesus. She is a woman whose life has been marked by sacrifice.

And she's a woman whose life has been all about helping and devoting herself to the needs of others. In other words, her life is one that has just, over the years, just oozed the fruit of the Spirit. Friends, let me just ask, as we maybe bring this first little section to a close, who are the people in our church family who are really in need?

Who are they? Just think practically, who are those in our church family who are really in need? Just moving on, thinking of the widow and maybe just broadening it out a little bit to those, as it were, who right now are the kind of people that she represents, those who are really in need.

[18 : 34] As we think about those people, here's the second question. When someone is in need, friends, how can we step up? Just a few things to think about.

Thinking about, first of all, practically. Friends, what can we do to help those in our church family who are most in need? Right? Cook meals, babysitting, visiting, spending time, phoning, texting, offer to come and stay in our homes.

Friends, I remember being so blown away when I used to live down south, and my pastor texted me one Sunday afternoon. He just sent me a text saying, missed you this morning. Hope you're doing okay.

And anything I can do to help, just let me know. I remember being blown away by that as somebody who'd just moved to a new city. That somebody would notice that I wasn't there, that somebody would follow up in love.

Friends, who can we be in contact with this week? Remembering key dates in people's lives. It's just ideas, right? Maybe particularly anniversaries, birthdays of loved ones who've sadly died.

[19 : 41] Times over the year where it's difficult to be on your own. Christmas, Father's Day, Mother's Day. I heard recently about a church in Northern Ireland who started a hardship fund.

Fund flowing off from lockdown. Money set aside. They set aside to potentially help people who'd lost jobs, who were struggling with mental health off the back of lockdown.

Some of them we're looking into maybe starting here. But what are some of the practical things we can do to help people in our church family who are most in need?

And what can we do to help them spiritually as well? Getting alongside people, listening, bringing God's word to bear on each other's lives.

And just praying with and for one another. Do you know, I think the discovery of the Zoom prayer meeting, friends, I think that's going to open up huge possibilities for us. I just want to echo what Alistair said.

[20 : 38] Come tomorrow night. A huge proportion of that meeting is just praying for people in our church family who are in need. Please come along. And as you see how we're called to be a church that's there for people in their hardest times.

Do you see that? Do you see how this whole letter, do you see how it is the church back on track? A church that cares for one another.

And so here's what I want you to think about as we maybe just wrap this up this morning. Friends, how can we step up for those in our church family who are most in need? You know, just as we close, I want to leave you just with a story I heard this week of a church down in the Wirral.

You know where the Wirral is? It's just outside near Liverpool. And as a church family, over the last, I can't think, kind of six months as I heard this story, as they've emerged from lockdown and as they started kind of looking at each other in the eye, maybe picking up on things that they hadn't noticed when they were doing stuff on Zoom or online, as they've heard and listened to one another tell their stories.

I think they've realized, and we've all realized this, haven't we, just how much lockdown has taken a toll on each of us, and maybe in different ways. But one of those ways, I think, is they listen to people tell their stories.

[21 : 57] They recognize that particularly an older generation had really struggled, many of them, with bereavement. Many had lost spouses, many had lost friends, and as a result, just struggling with isolation and loneliness.

And so what just a few of them in the church started to do, they started to get together and pray, Lord, what can we do? And so they started this bereavement cafe in the church, just kept it really simple.

What they did, they just invited people to come to the church building, enjoy some nice biscuits and coffee, and just encouraged people to share their stories and struggles, to try and carry one another's burdens.

And they would listen to a short thought from the Bible, put some books on the table to take away, and just offer people the chance to be prayed for if they wanted it. Right?

Just keeping it really, really simple. And people found it really helpful. Really helpful. So much so that the people who started coming along and feeling the benefit of what it is to be loved, they started telling other people in the church family to come along.

[23 : 08] And they also started telling people outside the church family to come along. And so people just started coming to this group, and all of a sudden it starts growing. And so much so, and the lady who told me this on the phone has got no idea how this happened, but the local GP started to find out about the group.

And they started referring people to this little group because they understood if they were going to care for people holistically, that to be involved in a community which was safe, and which encouraged people just to talk about their problems and their pains, was a wonderfully healing thing.

And so now you have this little community down in Wirral that started with a handful of people trying to respond to a need in their congregation, and God is using it mightily in that part of the country. It's an incredible story. What God is doing just from simple faithfulness, God is using it to impact that local community. Friends, see what we've looked at today. It is not glitz and glam.

It's not glitz and glam, is it? It is tears and toil. But as a church family, see if we model this as we respond to God's word, as we allow him to form us as a community, as we care for those who are most in need, as we live our lives in this me first world, just see how we will be a city on the hill community that Jesus talked about.

[24 : 34] We will be that community of salt and light as we hold out the message of the gospel to a world and says, come and meet Jesus.

Come and meet him. Come and repent of your sins. Come to him. And know what it is to be loved as part of the church family, the community that's been birthed and is formed by his word.

So friends, two questions as we close. Who needs to step in? So if you think about those in our church family who are most in need, who needs to step in? And how can we step up?

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you so much this morning for the Lord Jesus. And thank you that he is the one who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. And we just thank you, Lord, for the unity which we have in him. All sorts of different people represented here this morning who probably are carrying all sorts of different burdens.

[25 : 42] And Lord, I pray by your spirit moving amongst us as you continue to form us by your word, you would help us to be a church community that really cares, that steps up, that takes responsibility, that loves our dear brothers and sisters who are most in need.

And so if I just pray, maybe just in the silence now before we close, for those who are here this morning who are hurting and who maybe feel the pain of everything that we've looked at today. Lord, I ask that by your spirit and through your people that you would bring hope and healing and the message of Jesus into their lives.

And Father, we commit ourselves to you in Jesus' worthy and in his loving name we pray. Amen.