

TO BUILD A GOOD CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

1 Timothy 5:1-25

Key Verse: 5:8

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.

St. Paul teaches us how to build a good Christian community. He tells us how we should show basic respect for one another. He also teaches us how both male and female elders should live godly lives.

I. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY (1-8)

In the first part of the chapter, Paul gives us some practical guidelines we should follow in order to build a good Christian community.

First, show basic respect for one another (1-2). Look at verses 1-2. *Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.* The way we treat others depends on how we see them. When a butcher looks at sheep, he sees meat. When a textile businessman looks at sheep, he sees wool. When a wolf looks at sheep, he sees dinner. But when a shepherd looks at sheep, he sees sheep! So how should we see each other in a Christian community?

In our society, people tend to see others based on certain human criteria. They tend to admire people with money, power, and social status, while talking down to those who seem to have little to offer. But all of us in our Christian community are forgiven sinners by God's grace. We have been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. As such, we should see each other in light of God's grace. We should have basic respect for each other because all of us have received the grace of salvation from God.

Paul first tells Timothy not to rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were his father. It is easy for young leaders to ignore old men as geezers whose time has passed. But Paul teaches us to treat them like a father, with respect. Older men are usually wiser. They have gone through more in life. Their experiences should not be ignored. They have seen more of good and bad. We can often learn from their wisdom and experience.

Next, we should treat younger men as brothers. We should not see them as rivals, as people often do in the business world. To treat them as brothers means we accept them with openness and honesty. We can learn from their fresh perspectives and youthful enthusiasm. We should encourage them to develop these valuable qualities to serve the Lord.

How about older women in our Christian community? How should we see them? Paul says we should treat them as our mothers. Notice that he did not say we should

treat them as mothers-in-law, because it may mean something else. Anyway, we learn that we should see older women with respect and affection just as we see our own mothers.

And we should see younger women as sisters, with absolute purity, that is, with no hint of sexual impropriety. This is especially important for young leaders in the church. If a spiritual leader sees a young woman with lustful eyes, he is no longer a shepherd; he becomes a wolf in shepherd's clothing. I think young women should help their shepherds by dressing modestly and behaving appropriately so that they don't tempt their leaders.

Second, recognize those who are really in need and help them (3-7). Look at verse 3. *Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.* St. Paul singles out widows as those who are really in need, but we can apply this principle to anyone who is in our community. In Paul's time, most women had no means of financially supporting themselves. So when their husbands died, they had to depend on someone else to support them. The church in the first century took care of these widows (Ac 6:1).

However, Paul was careful not to make the church merely a charitable organization. He didn't want all widows to receive financial support from the church. If they had children or grandchildren, it was best for them to take care of their own mothers or grandmothers. It is beautiful to see children repay their debt of love to their parents (4).

Paul teaches that we should take care of people who are really in need such as widows with no children. Helping people financially is not the primary responsibility of the church, but as a community we should recognize those who are truly in need and help them. We should also recognize those who need our emotional and spiritual support and come together to help them.

How should those who receive assistance conduct themselves? In our society, some people who receive financial support from government often fail to show their gratitude. Instead, they claim that they are entitled to the payments. (Actually, we call such social net programs 'entitlements.')

They complain rather than thank God. This is not biblical. In verses 5-6, Paul talks about two ways they may respond to God's grace and the generosity of a Christian community, using widows as examples. Some widows who were helped by the church put their hope in God and continue night and day to pray and to ask God for help (5). On the other hand, other widows lived for pleasure. Paul says that they were "dead" even while they lived, meaning, their lives weren't pleasing to God and they were useless before God.

Paul says that even a widow can have hope in God and live a life that is pleasing to God and a source of blessing to others. A good example is found in Luke 2. When Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for purification, there was a woman of God to welcome him there. She was a prophetess named Anna. She had become a widow after 7 years of her marriage. She was now in her 80's but she

had never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. She recognized the baby Jesus as the Messiah and was delighted to see him (Lk 2:36-38). Even a widow can overcome her sorrow and glorify God by serving God's ministry as a prayer mother, like Anna did. But a widow who lives for her pleasure is useless.

This is true for all of us, no matter what kind of situation we may be in. Look at verse 7. *Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame.* Whether we are in a position to help others or we are in the receiving end of financial and spiritual support, we should live a life worthy of God's grace so that no one may be open to blame.

Third, we are a family in Christ (8). Let us read verse 8 together. *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.* Paul says we should take care of our family members. How can we claim to love God if we don't care about people who are close to us? One question we should ask here is: Who is our family? Actually, Jesus asked the question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (Mk 3:33). Then he answered, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk 3:34b-35). We in our Christian community are all brothers and sisters who have been baptized by the blood of Jesus Christ (Ro 6:5). True family members share joys and sorrows together. We cannot be indifferent to one another. We should take care of those who are weak and needy, such as the elderly, disabled, ill or poverty stricken. We should also take care of those who are in need with their emotional and spiritual problems. Last week, I was encouraged by a Bible student who expressed his desire to provide a bicycle to a servant of God who is in need.

II. LEADERS IN A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY (9-25)

A Christian community, just like any other community, needs leaders. We need leaders who can lead by examples and who can rebuke and encourage the members of our community.

First, widows qualified to be God's servants (9-16). Look at verses 9-10. *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.* This list for widows seems quite extensive if it is only for the eligibility requirement for financial support. But there are some clues here to indicate that these qualifications were more than eligibility for a welfare roll. The widows were required to have a reputation for their good deeds. They had to be hospitable. They had to wash the feet of the saints as Jesus had done in John 13. They had to be devoted to Christ (11) and to all kinds of good deeds. We realize that this list included qualifications to serve the ministry. It appears that some widows with these qualifications were appointed as servants of God. The widows in the list served the church and received financial support which they needed.

Look at verse 11. *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.* Paul told Timothy not to include young widows (those under 60) on such a list. Several potential problems might arise. Some of them might decide to remarry and have a new family, which might make it difficult for them to devote themselves to the work of God. Paul was also concerned that the young widows on the church welfare roll might become lazy, and engage in gossips going about from house to house. That would break down the church, not build up. Paul noticed that some widows in fact already turned away to follow Satan, *i.e.*, they committed immoral acts with their pagan neighbors (15). Paul says in verse 14. *So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander.* He also says 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.*

Second, elders worthy of double honor (17-19). Look at verse 17. *The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.* Some elders in the first century not only took care of the church affairs well, but also devoted themselves to preaching and teaching. They distributed food to widows, organized retreats, took care of church finance, ... and had many 1:1 Bible studies each week. Paul says that they were worthy of double honor. They deserved honor and respect from the congregation. Not only that, they deserved financial support (if needed), just as the worker deserves his wages (18). This is how Eugene Peterson paraphrases the verse: “Give a bonus to leaders who do a good job, especially the ones who work hard at preaching and teaching.”

Unfortunately, some people not only failed to show respect and honor for the servants of God, but they brought accusations against them. So Paul says in verse 19. *Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.* There are always two sides of a story. We should not even consider an accusation against a servant of God unless facts are clearly established by two or three witnesses. We should not entertain one person’s accusation, in case he or she may have a personal grudge against God’s servant. I heard that the officials of a church dismissed a young pastor based on a letter they received, charging him misconducts. But it turned out he was dismissed unjustly. A church secretary had a personal grudge against the pastor and wrote an anonymous letter accusing him with the false charges. We should not let such things happen in our church.

Third, the art of rebuking (20-25). Look at verse 20. *Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.* All of us are forgiven sinners. We are not perfect before God. We often sin before God. Then we repent and we struggle to live before God. Some of our sins are obvious not only to God but also to people (adultery, stealing, false testimony, ingratitude, ...). Other sins such as pride and greed are often hidden from people’s eyes (24). But no sins can be hidden from God and from people for long, just as good deeds are made known over time (25). What should we do when sins are exposed in our Christian community? St. Paul says those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. In fact, Jesus told us this in

Matthew 18:15-17. When a person refuses to accept our private counsel to repent his or her sin, we should take up the matter in a small group, and then eventually in a church. It is not healthy to sweep our sins under the rug and hope the problem goes away somehow.

Remember Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5? They wanted to be known as a sacrificial couple in their new Christian community. They sold their property, kept some of the money for themselves and offered the rest to the church. The problem was that they pretended they offered 100% of it. They desperately wanted to get a “sacrificial family of the month” award. They thought they could fool God as well as the church. But Peter knew the truth through the Holy Spirit. He said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God” (Ac 5:3-4). What this couple did was dangerous to the young church. Peter rebuked them harshly. And God punished both of them with death. The whole church learned that lying to the Spirit is not a joking matter.

Look at verses 21-22. *I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.* Paul told Timothy to keep his instructions without partiality and not to show favoritism. It is discouraging to see that many churches today ordain rich people as elders. They do so for obvious reasons. But why should church leaders avoid partiality based on such things as people's status, wealth, good looks, intelligence, and so on? We know the answer. Let us pray that we may keep ourselves pure before God as we struggle to build our Christian community.

St. Paul told Timothy in verse 23. *Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.* This was not to encourage him to indulge in alcohol; Paul's concern was Timothy's health. Perhaps the water quality in Ephesus was not good.

In today's passage, we learn that to build a good Christian community, (1) we should show basic respect for each other, young and old, male and female, married and widows; (2) we should take care of our family members who are in need; (3) leaders who direct the church affairs well and engage in teaching the word of God deserve double honor; and (4) sins should be brought open for repentance and good deeds should be praised. May God help us to keep these words in our hearts as we build our Christian community!