

A common theme in these verses is our relations with our natural families compared to our relations within the assembly.

First, Paul uses family analogies to instruct Timothy how to deal with various groups of people in the assembly. Then he sets down some rather severe rules restricting the support of widows in the church. His main point is that needy widows who have family to help them should be supported by the family and not by the funds of the assembly.

It can happen that we feel closer to others in the assembly than to our blood relatives, particularly if they are not believers. Luke 14:26 speaks of “hating” relatives as an exaggerated contrast to our proper devotion to Christ. But on the other hand, the Lord in Mark 7:11-13 rebukes the Pharisees for encouraging followers to neglect their parents in order to donate a gift to the temple. And two characteristics of the godless people in 2 Timothy 3 are disobedience to parents and lack of natural affections. Clearly a commendable unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ does not void our obligations of love and duty toward our brothers and sisters in the flesh. Mr. Kelly says, “The church was never intended to swamp the family.”

For study and discussion:

1. Verse 1 has instructions for the young Christian worker in how he should treat members of the family of believers. Older men, for example, are not to be rebuked but to be answered respectfully as fathers. Give a specific example for the other groups:

Younger men:

Older women:

Younger women:

2. What in this portion is an act of godliness?

The family continues as God’s basic organization of humanity in this life. It should not be surprising that false sects and teaching attack this principle. Examples are forced celibacy that prevents families from forming (condemned in the previous chapter), novel combinations of people being called families, and extreme isolation from families as a tool of psychological control in cults. And even misplaced love and generosity can unnecessarily make people dependents of the church and thus weaken the bonds that tie families together.

Notes:

5:1 This verse speaks of men older in age, not elders.

5:3 Honor here mainly means financial assistance but also has a sense of respect or esteem.

5:9,11 The description of widows being enrolled in a list implies a fairly formal system to distribute charity (also see Acts 6:1). This was later misinterpreted to create whole orders of unmarried women; that is, nuns.

5:10 Foot washing was not expected of hosts in the culture of this time, so this should be taken figuratively.

5:16 Some translations say only “believing woman” here, but better translations include both men and women as responsible to care for widowed relatives.

3. What widows are excluded from assembly support, and why?
4. Remembering that this epistle lays out proper conduct in the household of God, what behaviors invite criticism from others? Which of them apply equally to men?
5. Can you think of any women in scripture who could be held up as shining examples of godly widows or unmarried women?
6. See verse 8. How is someone who does not provide for his family worse than an unbeliever?
7. From what you have read, what are some general principles for assembly giving?