



# Faith Pulpit

## Real Religion, Part 1

The Faith Pulpit presents topics of interest to pastors and interested lay men and women. These two articles should especially benefit those ministering to ladies who have lost their husbands. Readers are welcome to photocopy these articles to make them more widely available. It is our prayer that Dr. Schmidt's treatment of this vital subject will be a help and encouragement to you as you minister to others, particularly to widows.

The word religion usually makes Bible believers nervous. The word is usually associated with man's attempt to earn God's favor, but the New Testament does use it a few times in a positive way. Perhaps the most significant New Testament usage is in James 1:26, 27. The emphasis of the word is on the external. "The term denotes the zealous and diligent performance of the outward and ceremonial aspects of worship,"<sup>1</sup> explains D. Edmond Hiebert. The focus of this Faith Pulpit is on James 1:27, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." As in his entire letter, James is here calling for a genuine demonstration of faith. Thus, he employs the word in its truest sense of an external activity, reflecting inner reality.

### Real Religion and Widows

The specific focus of this article is how real religion is practiced with reference to widows. James says, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit . . . widows in their affliction." It should be noted that the standard for evaluation is not man. It is God. "God and the Father" is the One Who gives the care of widows a high priority in expressing real faith. Perhaps the title combining God and Father contextually stresses His own high concern for widows. Douglas Moo elaborates: "Care for orphans and widows is commanded in the Old Testament as a way of imitating God's own concern for them—He is the 'Father of the fatherless and protector of widows' (Ps. 68:5)."<sup>2</sup>

Two words in James 1:27 demand attention if we are to understand the biblical injunction. The word visit has a challenging Old Testament background. It is frequently stated in the Old Testament that the Lord visited people. Those visits refer to antithetical experiences. The Lord visited either in blessing or in judgment. It is the positive aspect of visiting with blessing that provides the background for James' instructions. Doerksen clarifies and explains the approach. "True religion is 'to visit' such people. That denotes more than the mere paying of a social visit or the impersonal giving of funds through an agency; it is that personal coming to the aid of a needy individual."<sup>3</sup> Hence, to participate in what God desires of us with reference to widows, we must be personally involved in their lives. We must be meeting social, emotional, and practical needs.

The second word that deserves attention is affliction. The word translated "affliction" connotes an intensely negative experience. The range of meaning goes from the horrific events of the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21) and the pain of childbirth (John 16:21) to difficult circumstances. The words distress and pressure probably best capture the essence of the word.<sup>4</sup> Adamson helps identify the meaning in this specific context: "The 'affliction' to which James refers may be sickness or old age, in the case of the widow; the orphan and widow through bereavement were usually poor and needed money and other practical help."<sup>5</sup> Again, the necessity of meeting specific tangible and intangible needs is reflected by the word James used to describe the widows' condition.

## **Widows and the Bible**

Widows are addressed from two perspectives in the Bible—their contributions and their conditions. The contributions of four widows in particular stand out. Ruth is known not only as a classic example of devotion to her mother-in-law, but also as one of the ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5). I Kings 17:8–16 describes Elijah's sustenance by an unnamed widow of Zarephath. Anna's witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in the temple during His presentation as an infant begins New Testament times with a unique contribution by a widow (Luke 2:36–38). This example is complemented by the immortal lesson on sacrificial giving that occurred when Christ recognized the widow's mite (Luke 21:1–4). That these events are associated with widows adds to the impact of their accomplishments and the qualities they exemplified.

Although the contribution of widows is a focus of Scripture, their negative condition receives the major emphasis. Scripture does not in any way imply that widowhood is dishonorable. It presents widows as ones in special need of compassion and care. They are vulnerable and deserve the assistance of God's people. This truth is reflected in God's revelation concerning widows. A survey of the Bible impresses the reader with the Lord's sensitivity toward widows.

The book of Deuteronomy is God's reminder of His covenant with Israel and the resulting responsibilities of the new generation about to enter the Promised Land. Among those instructions are key principles with reference to widows. The Lord informs Israel that it is intrinsic to His nature to

administer justice to widows (10:17, 18). Consequently, He pronounced a curse upon any who would pervert justice in a matter involving a widow (27:19). In their giving (14:28, 29; 26:12, 13) and harvest practices (24:19–21) the children of Israel were to “favor” widows. Though it was legitimate to take a person’s outer garment as a pledge during the day (Ex. 22:26), this could not be done in the case of the widow. God designed the Mosaic Law in a way that deliberately safeguarded widows.

The Poetic/Wisdom books also reveal the Lord’s care for widows. Part of Job’s declaration of innocence included his disclaimer that he had not mistreated widows (Job 31:16), revealing that issue as a very important consideration for Old Testament believers. Both the psalmist (Ps. 68:5; 146:9) and Solomon (Prov. 15:25) make special note of God’s care for widows as well.

The prophets are bold as God’s spokesmen when addressing the issue of the treatment of widows. Isaiah lists “plead[ing] for the widow” as an evidence of a restored relationship with the Lord (1:17) and “neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them” as evidence of the degeneration of God’s people (1:23). Jeremiah reminds kings that part of fulfilling their responsibility is to “do no wrong, do not violence to the . . . widow” (22:3). Ezekiel’s condemnation of Judah included, “They vexed . . . the widow” (22:7). And in the concluding book of the Old Testament, the Lord warns, “I will be a swift witness against . . . those that oppress . . . the widow” (Mal. 3:5).

The New Testament continues the emphasis on widows. As noted above, the Lord used a widow as the ultimate example of giving. Revealing His compassion for the plight of widows, He raised the widow of Nain’s only son from the dead (Luke 7:11–18). In a parable stressing the necessity of importunity in prayer, He used the vulnerable condition of a widow to make His point (Luke 18:1–7). In His scathing denunciation of hypocrisy, Jesus said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation” (Matt. 23:15). Reading the Gospels leaves no question regarding the Lord’s attitude toward widows and their treatment!

The first internal conflict of the Church Age involved the neglect of widows. The result is what may be considered the office of deacon in embryo form (Acts 6:1–7). Dorcas (Tabitha) illustrates the fact that a major aspect of a believer’s good works includes care for widows (Acts 9:36, 39). The most instructive passage in the New Testament regarding widows is I Timothy 5:3–16. The amount of space committed to the subject proportionate to other matters dealt with in I Timothy reveals the importance God (through Paul) placed upon the ministry to these ladies.

A phrase occurs three times in I Timothy 5:3, 5, 16 that clarifies Paul’s point—widows indeed. The phrase seems unusual. Common sense says, “A widow is a widow,” but Paul is making a specific point. The phrase identifies those the church is to support financially. A “widow indeed” is one who does not have a family member who can support her (vv. 4, 8, 16). The passage assumes that her family will meet her needs. In fact, this is the context of the frequently quoted phrase, “If any provide

not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (v. 8). If a widow did not have a family to care for her, the church was to assume the responsibility. She had to meet age and spiritual qualifications (vv. 5–7; 9, 10). Younger widows were to remarry and concentrate on the Lord and the home, lest they subject themselves to spiritual failure (vv. 11–15). A “supported” widow seemed to have a very significant ministry in the church (v. 5), much like Anna in the temple (Luke 2:36–38).

There is no hermeneutical reason to make I Timothy 5:3–16 dispensationally inapplicable. The passage presents crucial truth for the church today. We may be tempted to assume that widows do not have a similar situation in modern times. In some cases, the deceased husband has made ample provision by investments, his will, and insurance, but not in all cases. Thus, the church needs to fulfill its scriptural obligations when there is no family to assist.

Even if a widow is “well taken care of” financially, there are other vital areas the church needs to address. A widow has spiritual, emotional, and social needs that money cannot buy. She lives with loneliness. She was able to share everything with her husband, but when the Lord called him home, she immediately lost her best friend and confidant. At the same time, she lost the one who likely took care of a multitude of practical everyday needs such as car maintenance/repair, home repairs, driving on trips, and the list goes on.

This article has provided an overview of the Bible’s treatment of widowhood. Part two is intended to suggest practical ways of obeying God’s Word in the vital responsibility of caring for widows. I have asked five widows who are currently serving at Faith or whose spouses served here in the past to share ways individuals and churches can minister to widows.<sup>6</sup> We need to hear their suggestions, so I asked them to bare their hearts. Thus, what is summarized in part two is not a result of self-pity or negative attitudes but a sharing of real life experiences from the perspective of widows. Please read it in light of God’s high concern for widows stressed in this article. Then “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” with reference to widows.

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