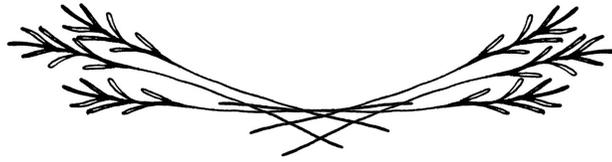


WEEK 10

THE CHURCH & WIDOWS AND ORPHANS



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The God of Israel is the protector and provider for orphans and widows. The psalmist writes, “A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in his holy habitation” (Psalm 68:5; NASB). In the Old Testament, the Law required that remnants of the harvest be left in the fields for orphans and widows to glean (Deuteronomy 24:19). Every third year, widows and orphans were invited to partake of the tithe of produce from that year (Deuteronomy 14:28–29). Obeying these commandments brought blessing. Ignoring them brought cursing, as is evidenced in Deuteronomy 27:19: “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.”

Orphans and widows were protected members of community life and valued as important in the eyes of the LORD. “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to me, I will surely hear his cry” (Exodus 22:22–24). The protection from the community was to flow from God’s own protection and care, “The LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, But He thwarts the way of the wicked” (Psalm 146:9).

In the Old and New Testaments, orphans and widows are often spoken of together as those in need of special provision from God and his people. James states that “pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). Thus, as would be expected, God’s

desire for the church is to be the facilitator of his nature—caring for and protecting widows and orphans.

Besides the passage in James 1:27, orphans are only discussed in a metaphorical sense in the New Testament. In Jesus' discussion of the Spirit in John 14, he promises the disciples that he will "not leave them as orphans" (John 14:18). Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 2:17, speaks of "having been orphaned" (my translation) from the Thessalonians for a short while, where he simply means separated by space and company.

Widows, on the other hand, occupy a more prominent place in the New Testament. In the story of the widow's mite in Mark 12:41–44, the widow, who gives two small copper coins of very little value, becomes the hero of Jesus' teaching because she gives "all she had to live on." This illustrates both Jesus' admiration for her sacrificial service to God, as well as the plight of poverty that widows often faced.

Jesus, having already referenced the widow of Zarephath story in Luke 4:25–26, proceeds to revive a widow's son in Luke 7:12. What is surprising in this story is that the son is not being brought to Jesus. Jesus notices the funeral procession at the gate of the city and has compassion for the deceased's mother, the widow. He could not keep from helping her. Jesus did not appreciate the scribes who "devour widows' houses" (Luke 20:47). We see in Jesus what we would expect to see from God in the flesh, carrying out his Father's desire to care for and respect those who are less fortunate.

The church has, and will always, struggle with finding the most effective and appropriate means for caring for the less fortunate. In the New Testament, one particular passage highlights the difficulties the early Christian communities faced as

they cared for widows. This passage is of supreme importance for the Lord's church today if we are to see how to proceed in caring for the underprivileged.

The passage comes from the Book of Acts and describes the effort of the earliest disciples to adapt to the needs of widows in the community. In Acts 6:1–7, we see that even as the church was in its infancy, there was already a process for caring for widows. This process, most likely, was a carry-over from the current Jewish practice called *tamhuy*, which was the name of the tray on which food was placed for distribution. However, this could also be referring to a financial distribution that was handed out from the *quppah*, the name of the box that was used to collect funds for distribution to those in need each week. At any rate, some widows within this growing Christian community were feeling neglected during this distribution of food or money.

This problem that arose in the early church was a good one. The text makes it clear that the issue arose because the church “was increasing in number” (Acts 6:1) and that the resolution of the problem resulted in further growth (Acts 6:7). Greek-speaking Jewish-Christian widows were experiencing neglect based upon the language and cultural barriers that they faced interacting with Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians.

This passage of scripture is significant for a few reasons: (1) Luke chooses to share with us that care for widows (and the less fortunate) was an integral part of the early church. The early church was a community known for its sharing, so much so that Luke could say that “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). This highlights how important it was to the disciples when it was discovered that those in need were being neglected. (2) The practice of the early Christians, which appears to derive from their Jewish custom, was to provide daily for short-term needs. Whenever this system became out of balance or was not working equally for all of the widows, it

was important enough for the Twelve to call a meeting and seek for a community solution to the matter (Acts 6:2). (3) The church's decision to appoint seven men of outstanding reputation to carry out the work of service to widows demonstrates the importance of good servant leadership in carrying out such a vital work. In the cases of Stephen and Philip, we see two servant leaders who not only cared for widows, but also became integral in the progression of God's Word to the world (Acts 7-8). What practical suggestions might we glean from these observations?

Do We Care Like God Cares?

The first practical suggestion for the local church to ask itself is, "Are we caring for orphans and widows (and the less fortunate among us) in the way that God would want us to?" The entire foundation of our Christian practice comes from better understanding God and his nature. We have demonstrated that Israel and the early church understood the significance of caring for widows and orphans because God demanded it in their communities. How well are we doing in our churches? What actions are demonstrating that we care the way God cares?

Do We Adapt Our Solutions to the Challenges of Service?

Just as the early disciples had to work through their circumstances in order to meet the needs of widows and orphans, so do we. In your congregation, it may not be that one certain group of widows is being neglected; it may be that *all* are being neglected. It may be that your local church has not thought about or reflected on the needs of orphans. Or, it may not be that widows are being neglected, it may simply be that their needs have changed. Is the church gathering together as a community to address these needs? Society has changed in so many ways, so what are we doing to ensure that widows and orphans in our churches have their basic needs provided for?

Are our methods working, or do we need to adjust them to ensure we are both meeting needs and growing the church?

Do We Appoint Servant Leaders for the Vital Guidance Needed?

Many times, it's not that we don't care, or even that we don't reflect on the consequence of not serving orphans and widows. Often, it is simply that we have not identified good servant leaders to carry out the work. Servant leaders, like Stephen or Philip, don't lead from the boardroom—they lead with their hands and feet. They are able to recruit fellow workers, rather than manage indentured servants. They are leaders precisely because of their ability to care for orphans and widows because they know that is what God desires for them to do. They aren't afraid to ask the hard questions mentioned above. Perhaps most of all, they aren't afraid of making mistakes and learning from trying. These are the types of servant leaders that churches should seek to delegate the essential task of caring for orphans and widows.

Questions For Discussion

1. Why do you think that God gives some responsibility for caring for orphans and widows to His community (first Israel, now the church)?
2. What were Jesus' feelings toward the less fortunate, including orphans and widows? Discuss the ways in which Jesus' views regarding those who were less fortunate translated into action and service.
3. What were the issues that arose in the early church regarding serving widows? How did the church resolve those challenges?
4. Is there only one right way for a local church to care for widows and orphans? If so, what way is it? If not, why not?