



CHARITABLE CHALLENGES

Something you might not realise about church leadership, particularly on an administrative level, is the kind of stuff that ends up in our email inbox each week. Everything from invitations to cut utility bills to better deals on the MFC photocopier; offers to improve our church's website to removing negative feedback on Google. (And then there are the conspiracy theorists. Don't get me started ...).

In amongst all these are the appeals – the cries for help. These can be from individuals, from some ministry or another, or even from whole organisations, some we might have heard of, some not.

Because yes, the world is a needy place. But in such a needy place, we can't solve every problem. How do we decide what's legit and what isn't; and if it is, what we do, and for whom? In today's passage, Paul gives advice on a certain situation Timothy was facing. And he provides a case study for our own 'charitable challenges':

1 Timothy 5:1-16

Paul sets the tone for the next chapter or so, by referring to everyone who belongs to Jesus – those in our own church, those in other churches – as family. I'll add 'as good family' because obviously there are families that may not live up to this ideal. But you can sum up the advice like this:

"Honour up, honour down, honour all around."

Paul then goes on to discuss a particular need which the church was seeking to meet – that of helping widows who were struggling. The church had set up this Ephesian widow program but was beginning to feel overstretched. So, Paul offers some advice. Now please note:

- This was written for a specific situation in 1st century Ephesus, not 21st century Maidstone.
- The principles apply to whole-church, long-term giving, not personal one-offs.
- Some of it might sound a bit 'tough love' today. But there are reasons for that, as we'll see.

Bearing all that in mind, what does this passage have to teach us about our own 'charity ethic'? There are 5 principles:

1) The need for active giving. The loss of a loved one is obviously a terrible thing, but in the ancient world the loss of a husband came with its additional challenges. While there were some exceptions, most women in the Mediterranean world had to rely on their husbands for support, so if you become a widow, you might become destitute, too. No social services, no government hand-outs – which is where the church comes in. We're not just talking sympathy here: widows needed practical, often financial, assistance. Which is why Paul instructs Timothy to give them 'proper recognition', as in active help.

2) The need for grateful giving. Next, Paul says, "Don't rob a widow's relatives of the need to observe the 5th commandment", as in "Honour your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). Now honouring parents is more than just showing them respect while you're young. It's caring for them when they're vulnerable, just as they cared for you, when you were. A child who fails to do this is worse than an unbeliever, Paul says, as your parents are the closest thing to God on earth. The point being: sometimes it's down to those nearest a situation to deal with it. But in the absence of that, it's down to us.

3) The need for targeted giving. Funds should go to those who are truly in need. To qualify, a widow needed to be 60+ (a way of saying, 'beyond marriageable age'), have had only one husband (the inference being they mustn't be married now, or be relatively well-off as a result of multiple marriages), and have a reputation for being a 'spiritual mother' to others. I.e. she has to be someone whose situation is *known*. Now that might sound a bit stingy, but giving to one cause always means taking from another. So, limit your *regular* giving to those you have a connection to; to causes you're familiar with.

4) The need for sensible giving. We all have to make judgement calls, at some point. In the case of the widow program, younger widows were to be excluded, as there was greater potential for them to remarry, and financial support was encouraging them to abuse the privilege rather than returning to parents, assisting with a family business, etc. We're talking more than just

gossipmongering here (though that would have been bad enough). We're talking women who had imbibed heresy and were helping to spread it. The point is: not all needs are created equal. So, a church must be wise in how it responds.

5) The need for holistic giving. The Ephesian widow-program was more than a one-off handout: it was a holistic opportunity, where a widowed woman was offered not only money but the chance to 'pledge' her time and skills. And it's a reminder that people need more than just a roof over their heads and food on the table: they need a reason to get up in the morning. It's vital to both our physical wellbeing and our psychological one. Sometimes, our attempts to help others can be their own kind of hinderance, if all we're providing is a short-term solution. We need to give towards *lasting* change.

From That Century ... To This

Paul is talking a 1st century reality here, so, it's down to us to work out how these principles apply to us today. But what is non-negotiable is the fact that, as the body of Christ, we are Jesus' hands and feet. The earliest Christians got this: they saw themselves as continuing Jesus' mission and followed His example, meeting both spiritual *and* practical needs.

As James 1:27 says:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

In the west today, where concepts such as empathy and generosity have started to be called into question even by some Christians, it is more important than ever to remind ourselves of Jesus' example, and the teachings of people like Paul and James. There are 2 things we need to beware of: 2 sides to the 'selfish coin', if you like:

- **Self-centredness:** the cynical, 'it's all a scam / what's in it for me' approach to giving.
- **Self-righteousness:** the horn-blowing, virtue-signalling 'look at me' approach to giving.

Instead, we must endeavour to be instruments of love and compassion, mercy and grace. To be what God in Jesus has been, to us.

With all the challenges that come with it.