

“Will Work for Family” (1 Timothy 5:8)

[Have my son Joshua walk on stage with me.] I’d like to introduce you to my seven-year-old son, Joshua. Joshua, what is your favorite thing to do with your daddy? [Wrestling] Why do you like wrestling so much? [Male bonding with Daddy] What are you hoping to be able to do one day? [Beat Daddy to a pulp]

Last night, Joshua and I were wrestling and I was overcome with the power and rage of his 49 pound body. I said, “Joshua, you’re not even one-third of my body weight and you’re a handful. What’s going to happen when you’re 80, 100, 160, or maybe even 180 pounds? You’re going to crush me like a grape.” That’s when it dawned on me that I better be kind to Joshua because one day the tables will be turned, the roles will be reversed. Instead of being the Hulk Hogan of the Krell household, I will be more like a helpless child.

This reality is also true in life. We who once held our helpless children in our arms and nursed them and provided for their every need will one day be held in their arms as they nurse us at the end of our lives. The tables will be turned...the roles will be reversed. If the Lord tarries, we will find ourselves in need of care from our own family.

In 1 Timothy 5:8, the Bible teaches that one benefit of work is that it enables us to provide for the needs of our families. One of the principles of the Bible is: Our families provide an arena in which we can demonstrate the quality of our love for God.¹ As we provide care for our family members, we also have the opportunity to demonstrate the vitality of our faith.² The truth is people in our culture take notice when we care for the needs of others. Therefore, you and I must support our families.

Let’s look at 1 Timothy 5:8. Paul writes, **“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household,⁴ he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”⁵** This verse is part of a longer passage (5:3-16) in which Paul is concerned about the care of widows in the church. In the ancient world, due to patriarchal family and social structures, widows were often among the most weak and vulnerable members of society. As a result, the Bible speaks again and again about the Christian responsibility to care for widows.⁶ In these verses, Paul distinguishes between “widows who are really in need” (5:3, NIV) and those who have family able to care for them (5:4).⁷ Paul’s instruction is that the primary responsibility for the care of widows rests on members of the immediate family (children or grandchildren, 5:4). Only when that assistance is not available, when the widow is “left alone” (5:5), does the larger community become responsible.⁸ Paul grounds that instruction in two ways. Such action is first of all, “acceptable to God” (5:4). Second, Paul grounds his instruction in a truth stated over and over in the Word of God; namely, that one’s faith, one’s beliefs, must find expression in concrete action and relationships.⁹

Now let’s tear apart this verse. The word **“but”** is a word of contrast that refers back to the “but” in 5:4. The word **“anyone”** refers back to the children and grandchildren in 5:4. The phrase **“his own”** refers to his near relatives.¹⁰ The phrase **“and especially”¹¹** highlights one’s special responsibilities to one’s immediate family. The verb translated **“provide”** means “to think ahead” or “to provide by seeing in advance.”¹² In this context, the word involves foreseeing and planning for the needs of one’s family.

In the ancient world, as in the Third World today, there was no state pension or welfare. It was expected and necessary for children to provide for their parents. Today, despite the cultural nets of Social Security, retirement benefits, and interest on investments, Christian children are to care for their parents. If financial provision is unneeded, there is still a Christian obligation for hands-on, loving care. We must find every way possible to support our family. When we as sons and daughters do this, we are only repaying our parents or grandparents.

So how can we support our family? What does this look like? First, children are to care for parents. No family action more fully reveals the glory of Christian grace than to see children lovingly supplying the needs of their older parents—visiting them, making them feel comfortable, loved, and wanted, if they have to be supported outside the home, or opening their homes and allowing them to be a central part of their life.

I have been in rest homes that were horror pits, where older people were abandoned by their families—some of them Christian families. Month after month went by and no one went to visit these older people; they drifted off into senility. These homes, where people simply exist, are like animal cages. This should not be. There is a great ministry open to many in the congregation who have time to visit these homes and be surrogate children to older parents who have no one to look out for them. This is a wonderful, loving ministry for some to undertake. One of our members, Irene Canfield, has faithfully visited rest homes over many decades. She understands the importance of caring for those that are in need. Irene has fulfilled a duty that is central to the teaching of Christ and has done so without fanfare and applause. Her future reward will be great.

What message do you give when you care for aged parents or grandparents? If you seek to provide for them and meet their needs, God will honor you. When it is all said and done; you are the insurance for your parents. Yet, many people will say, “I don’t have the time or the money to care for my loved ones. Besides, I had a terrible relationship with my dad or mom.” I can appreciate these explanations but let me tell you a story. Imagine growing up in a home where your dad never said those words that every child wants to hear: “I love you.” Imagine being 11-years-old and discovering that your mom has breast cancer. How would you feel? What if your dad walked out on you and your family when he learned of your mom’s predicament? What if he never came back? How could you cope with this? Imagine going through these trials without a relationship with Jesus Christ. Now fast forward to your adult life. Let’s say you’re married and have a family but you’re barely making ends meet. In fact, your combined family income is about \$30,000. You learn that your dad has developed a terminal disease. What do you do? Can you imagine providing for your father? Can you fathom giving 25% of your meager income to him? Can you comprehend buying some of his possessions in order to further provide for him? Can you grasp going to the hospital and visiting him on a regular basis?

I didn’t make this story up. This is not some fantasy. It is the real-life story of Wes Fears, a young man in our congregation. I know that people who had abusive parents struggle with this idea. For these people, family was a place of pain and heartache, so caring for an aging family member hardly seems to be the repayment of parents we read about here. Yet God still calls us to care for these parents as they age, as rotten as they might have been to us. If nothing else, you can honor the parent for being your source of life.

There are numerous other applications. A husband is to provide for his wife and children.¹³ Husbands, God has called you to work hard so that you can provide for your family. A failure to do so is akin to denying the faith. Siblings should come alongside siblings and do whatever they can to meet legitimate needs. Once you have met the needs of your immediate family, then you can care for other relatives.

Before you tackle the command to support your family, remember two important principles: First, recognize that every family situation is unique. Do you think it is required that you take aging parents into your home?¹⁴ If you help them to pay for living in a retirement community, is that honoring them and honoring God? This text doesn’t tell us exactly how to care for our aging relatives so I suspect that how we do this will be unique in every circumstance. Every family has to face these problems and work them out as best they can, in terms of their own situation. No one has a right to judge others in this area. Let us look to God to give us wisdom to know what to do and how to do it, so that we might make the family a central part of our nation’s life again.

Second, reconsider what ministry God values most. It may be less exciting to read to a blind grandmother than to lead a small group, but which is more pleasing to God? Some of you have taken an aging parent into your home when they can't care for themselves anymore. You've sacrificed financially, personally, and spiritually. Some of you have had to pull back from your involvement in other ministry to care for the needs of a family member who needs you. I can assure you that there is no more important ministry that will bear fruit for all eternity.

The second half of our verse informs us that if a believer does not provide for his own there are two consequences: First, such a Christian **“has denied the faith.”** The word **“denied”** can also be translated “repudiate, disown.” The term almost suggests apostasy, but not apostasy in the formal sense of denial of or repudiation of the person of Christ (cf. 1 John 2:22). Rather, it is a denial in practice of the teachings of the Christian faith (cf. Exod 20:12; Matt 15:4-6). The Christian faith requires children to honor their parents as a part of their duty. In Ephesians 6:1-3, Paul writes, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.”¹⁵

Here is a direct command that we are to honor our fathers and mothers. How do you think most of us initially interpret that command? We apply it to small children. They are to obey their parents. That command, wherever it is found in the Bible, is for older children, not small children. A major way we carry out the command of Ephesians 6 is to provide for parents and grandparents. We must always remember it is proper gratitude for care received from parents. By caring for a widowed mother or grandmother, the son shows appreciation for the sacrifice and tender care he received at the hands of his parents. He should remember that old age comes upon all, and eventually he may be dependent upon his children for care.¹⁶

The second consequence the unfaithful Christian earns is the dishonorable distinction of being labeled **“worse than an unbeliever.”**¹⁷ It is crucial to understand that Paul is speaking of a Christian being functionally, not positionally “worse than an unbeliever.” Why is a believer “worse than an unbeliever”?¹⁸

First, we are denying a direct command of God (see Eph 6 above). Most unbelievers are unfamiliar with the following biblical commands:

- John 13:34 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”
- John 15:12 “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.”
- Galatians 6:2 “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”

Unbelievers down throughout time often see the need to provide for parents and grandparents.¹⁹ But believers are all too familiar with these passages. Paul is not condemning unbelievers; on the contrary, he is saying that they do in fact take care of their own widows (cf. Matt 5:46-47).²⁰ To do less is therefore to be less than an unbeliever; it equals a denial of the faith since it is to act worse than a person who makes no profession of faith.²¹

Second, most unbelievers are unaware of Christ’s relationship with His mother. Yet, believers are all too acquainted with the story of Christ’s infinite love for Mary. In John 19:26-27, while He was dying on the cross, Jesus provided for His mother a home with His beloved disciple, John. During the most excruciating period of His life, He was thinking about His mom. This should challenge you and me to be devoted to caring for our parents. Jesus esteemed it. He lived it out before us. We must follow in His footsteps and do the same.

Third, most unbelievers are unfamiliar with the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit that is at the believer's disposal. They are left to their own strength and they often function quite well from a human perspective. However, the Lord Jesus explains to us that we can do nothing of eternal value apart from Him (John 15:5). As a result, He commands us to abide in Christ and be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, in spite of this threefold lack, unbelievers often demonstrate great care for their family members. Hence, the person who wishes to be viewed as a Christian, but who, in spite of the clear teaching and privileges he has received, fails.

The Bible is clear we are commanded by God to support our family. As we do so, God promises us that we will be honored by Him. The world will also note the vitality of our faith.

Closing: Interview with John Mason

1. How have you "provided" for you own family members?
2. What challenges have you experienced?
3. As a man that is driven, how have you sacrificed work-related issues to provide for your family?
4. Would you care for other relatives in the future? Why?

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Notes

¹ Paul's concern throughout the book of 1 Timothy is that Christians live exemplary lives before the world (2:2; 3:1-7; 5:14; 6:1).

² The world will know that we are Jesus' disciples if we genuinely love one another (John 13:35). The fruit of the Spirit is to express itself in kindness and the practice of goodness (Gal 5:22). New life in Christ (Col 3:1-3) is to express itself in a life clothed with compassion and kindness (Col 3:12). Faith that fails to work is judged to be dead and inactive (Jas 2:14-17, 26).

³ Hiebert writes, "The form of the conditional sentence (first class) implies that Paul was aware that some were prone to this failure. Apparently they were trying to escape the personal responsibility of parental support by trying to shift the responsibility onto the church." See D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Timothy* (Chicago: Moody, 1957), 93-94. Fee agrees when he writes, "This verse may suggest that someone in the believing community (cf. 5:16) was neglecting or turning over to the church the care of a widowed mother or grandmother." See Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993 [1984]), 118.

⁴ The members of our immediate families are the first ones to feel the impact of our relationship with God. The expression "charity begins at home" is rooted in the conviction that if love of neighbor does not express itself concretely in our closest relationships, then our claim to love God ("our religion") is a lie (1 John 4:19-21).

⁵ The second paragraph (1 Tim 5:9-16) of this section adds a new dimension to what has been said, and at the same time also helps to clarify some of the items in 5:4-8. See Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 118.

⁶ In the Old Testament, God expressed a special concern for the widow, the least, the little ones, the oppressed, the powerless (see Deut 10:18; 24:17; Ps 68:5; Isa 1:17; cf. Jas 1:27). This theme carries over into the New Testament where the Christian community saw care for widows as a special responsibility (Luke 7:11-15; 18:2-8; 21:1-4; Acts 6:1; 9:39).

⁷ Given the fact that the early churches, on the whole, were constituted of people who were from the lower socioeconomic strata (see 1 Cor 1:26-28), their economic resources cannot have been extensive. Thus, the need arose to channel limited resources to meet the most urgent situations of deprivation. It may even be that the church's compassion for widows was expressed so consistently that charity became something to be expected, even when there was no real need. See Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997 [1996]), Electronic Ed.

⁸ What is the responsibility of the church toward widows whose families do not support them? Paul does not discuss that possibility. He rather emphasizes what should be the proper thing, that families should care for their own, and not shift the responsibility to the congregation. However, it should be obvious too that the church could not stand by idly if a Christian widow were in material need. See Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 170.

⁹ Thus, following a harsh rebuke against the emptiness and shallowness of Israel's worship (Isa 1:10-16), Isaiah calls on the people to "seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case for the widow" (Isa 1:17). A right relationship with God is expressed in the doing of justice, the loving of kindness (Mic 6:6), and the demonstration of steadfast love (Hos 6:6). The truest expression of the worship of God is when God's people are involved in letting "justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:24). See Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Electronic Ed.

¹⁰ The Greek phrase *ton idion* ("his own") is translated "relatives" in the ESV, NIV, NRSV, and NLT. The context implies that Paul has in mind parents or grandparents.

¹¹ Gk. *kai malista*, see Acts 25:26; cf. *malista de* ("and especially") in Gal 6:10; Phil 4:22; 2 Pet 2:10. See George Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 221.

¹² The only other NT usages occur in Rom 12:17 and 2 Cor 8:21.

¹³ Lock suggests that by implication this text may include the duty of a Christian to provide for his wife in his will. He notes, it was Jewish Law that a husband provide for his widow (cf. *Kethuboth* 1.2 in *Mishnayoth: Order Nashim*, 125-26). See Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (New York: Scribner's, 1924), 59.

¹⁴ The long-running success of *The Walton's*, the story of an entire family—grandmother, grandfather, father, mother and children—all living together demonstrates the value of family. There is nothing more beautiful in this world than a family that has learned how to love and live together. It is God's masterpiece.

¹⁵ See also Col 3:20. Cf. Mark 7:9-12 where Jesus also emphasized the importance of this obligation.

¹⁶ See Homer A. Kent Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1986 [1958]), 169.

¹⁷ Through his conduct, a true believer can deny the faith and become worse than an unbeliever (cf. 1 Tim 6:9-10).

¹⁸ See William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976 [1957]), 171. Of the 20+ commentaries I consulted, Hendriksen provides the most insight into this verse.

¹⁹ Stedman writes, “The secular writings of the first century show that in the Roman, the Greek and the Jewish world, families were always expected to take care of their older parents. In fact, in Athens a statesman was not allowed to speak in public if he had any blot on his record in this regard; if he was not taking care of his older parents he was not allowed to perform as a politician or a statesman. It was widely accepted throughout the whole Roman world that it was a shocking and disgraceful thing to not meet the emotional needs of parents, and the financial needs, too, if necessary.” See Ray C. Stedman, *The Care and Feeding of Widows: Studies in First Timothy* (1 Tim 5:1-16): <http://pbc.org/dp/stedman/timothy/3777.html%20&SermonID=11436>.

²⁰ Paul elsewhere says that even though pagans do not have the Scriptures, they do have “the work of the Law written in their hearts” (Rom 2:15), e.g., they instinctively recognize the obligations of children to parents.

²¹ See Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 118.