MODELS OF MERCY
1 Timothy 5:1-16

INTRODUCTION: What makes you hungry? Walking past a bakery does it for me! The smell of yeast bread stirs my appetite, even when I am already full from a meal!

Another stimulant for my appetite is visual…the sight of a table filled with delicious foods, especially when my favorite dishes are all there just waiting to make it to my plate!

These samples…aromas that tempt my nose and visuals that awaken my taste buds…make me hungry, or if not really hungry, awaken in me a desire to taste and eat to my heart’s delight!

What stirs a person’s spiritual appetite? Perhaps you came to Christ later in life…what stimulated your interest and stirred your hunger to know God?

One appetite stimulant for some is exposure to the truth. Hearing the gospel stirs them to want more information, more knowledge about how to know God through Jesus Christ.

But others need more than just information. That want to see transformation…something that has the power to captivate them, to place before them a model, a sample, a vivid example of what knowing God can do in a person’s life.

**THESIS:** One of the greatest attractions in a life transformed by Jesus Christ is the presence of a genuine model of mercy…an example of what it means to care for others in a way that cannot be explained apart from Christ.

In order to give validity to the verbal message of the gospel, we have to learn how to speak appropriately to everyone and provide proportionately for everyone.

I. SAY THE RIGHT THING IN THE RIGHT WAY

--Having explained to Timothy the necessity of paying attention to his life and doctrine, and warning him about the spiritual drift of deceived and deceptive people, Paul now addresses the problem of how to speak up when it is imperative to do so.

**ILLUS.** Sometimes we are tempted to speak up when it is not really our place to do so…and we do not have sufficient information to do so with any certainty about the nature of the problem. I have seen the carnage when people presume to tell others what they ought to do or not do when they have no relationship with the one to whom they speak, and they are not wise and careful in how they say what they feel they must say.

A young woman in our church in the early years was trying to make a difficult decision when an older woman in our church heard about it. With insufficient information to give any informed counsel, she plowed ahead and boldly rebuked the young woman for even considering the issue in the first place. Much hurt was inflicted and little good was accomplished.

The older woman could have used some counsel from Paul and avoided a painful destruction of any trust for future impact on the younger woman.

--Paul explains to Timothy that having the right message is only to be part of the way home if he wants to speak the truth in a loving, helpful way.

--When writing to the Colossians, Paul mentioned the same concern when he told them…

**Col. 4:6** Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.

--In every church with a burden to see its community come to know and walk with Jesus Christ, there will be a wide variety of people—“cross generational” churches consisting of both babies and old ladies and everything in between.
--That was already true in Ephesus, even though the church had not been around that long…four
different groups of people are mentioned: older men, younger men, older women, younger
women.

--Not all are to be addressed in the same way if we hope to respond to each person in the most
appropriate manner.

A. TREAT OLDER MEN WITH RESPECT AND HONOR

--When a young pastor like Timothy has to confront wrong doctrine or inappropriate behavior
among the older men in Ephesus, he must take care to show them respect and honor.

--Too many young men speak carelessly, even rudely and disrespectfully to their elders.

--Even if they say the right thing but do so in an unkind way, the way they speak can
undermine and even overshadow the truth of their words.

**ILLUS.** In a world changing all the time with new technologies and methodologies, in the
business world and in the church, younger believers have to be very careful to show honor to
those who have been around longer, older men who may not know as much but who are
actually far wiser!

When I see a young person treat an older man as if he had no feelings…had no
value…was worthy of no respect…it saddens me, both for the arrogant attitude of the younger
and for the wounded heart of the older.

--But it is not just in what we say to them, but in what we think and say about them!

**ILLUS.** A bad habit many of us fall into? Making fun of our elders, talking about them behind
their backs in a demeaning way, not honoring them as we should.

We stand upon their shoulders in our faith. A little boy was sitting on his Dad’s shoulders
and someone said, “My, what a tall little boy you are!” He replied, “Not all of this is me!”

--Even if an older man has been misled, has wandered from the truth, has drifted away from his
spiritual moorings, those who offer a word of correction must never do so with a rebuke, but with
an appeal as if you were speaking to your father!

**ILLUS.** As my own father grew older, dementia had a devastating effect on him. I will never
forget a time when he had once again said something that crossed the line of propriety.
Someone had to say something. I was the only one available. It was one of the hardest
things I have ever done to speak firmly to my own Dad…to honor and respect him as my
Father but still appeal to him to admit his wrong and repent for his failing.

After a few brief words, carefully chosen to show my respect for him, I then appealed to him
to pray with me and ask the Lord to show him the right thing to do and say, to seek
forgiveness from the Lord and those who had been hurt by his harsh words.

The lump in my throat, the quickening of my pulse, the halting nature of my words…all
indicated that this was treacherous ground upon which I was treading.

B. DEAL WITH YOUNGER MEN AS PEERS AND EQUALS

--We can be no less loving in calling our peers to account, but we can address them as brothers,
not fathers and not worry so much about showing respect as in modeling grace.

--Speaking the truth is never optional, but neither is speaking that truth in love.

--Every word should be crafted with godly intent to build up and never to tear down…to cultivate
not merely to criticize!
Eph. 4:29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.

C. TREAT OLDER WOMEN WITH TENDERNESS AND CARE

--In the church in Ephesus, there were older women…probably old enough to be Timothy’s mother or even grandmother.

--Some of them were not acting their age and somebody needed to say something…and as pastor, the lot would probably fall to him!

--But Paul warns him to tread lightly…you speak firmly, even if it necessary, to somebody’s “momma” and you may find yourself defending yourself against an irate crowd blaming you for picking on her!

--The approach Paul recommends is to treat an older woman who needs to be addressed for drifting away in either life or doctrine is like the old R&B song, “Try a little tenderness,” and then sprinkle it with tenderness, soft words full of truth, but communicated with exceptional sensitivity!

ILLUS. As you find yourself in a position to have to speak to an older woman about an issue of concern, approach her the way you would want someone to approach your own mother!

On a few occasions when my Mom was in the hospital, I have realized how well I respond to those who treat her with kid gloves and respect her, and how defensive I get when she was treated in an impersonal and uncaring way as if she had no feelings or understanding.

D. DEAL WITH YOUNGER WOMEN WITH PURITY AND PRUDENCE

--What about a young pastor…or any pastor…or any man for that matter…in dealing with younger women in the congregation who need a word of encouragement to get back on track spiritually?

--First of all, if possible, let those words come from a older, wiser, godly woman rather than from you as a man (unless you are her father or husband!).

NOTE: But for Timothy, as a pastor, there would be times when an encounter of this sort would be unavoidable…but even then, it is inadvisable to do without some kind of back-up either present with you or near enough that they can vouch for you should there be in suggestion of inappropriate words or actions.

--So Paul gave invaluable counsel to Timothy about how to handle himself in this situation and emerge with his own character in tact and the young woman properly addressed.

--The summary of that advice was simple: Treat a younger woman as if she were your sister.

--The purity of your relationship with your sister allows no room for sexual enticement, no room for improper affections or lust, no room for flirtatious words…in short, no room anything but prudence and purity in how you think of her and address her.

--Do not shrink back from saying what must be said but do so with great care and call her back to Christ with kindness, understanding and genuine concern for her spiritual well-being.

BOTTOM LINE? Never back away when correction is needed, but pray, pray and pray some more that you would do so in the manner most suited for the individual to whom you must speak. This is not a “one-size-fits-all” assignment!

--In getting this right, you provide a model of mercy even as you undertake the difficult task of standing up for what is good and right!
--People are watching and looking to see how we treat one another and deal with awkward, difficult circumstances when they arise.

II. PROVIDE FOR REAL NEEDS IN ALL FAITHFULNESS

--Once he has offered words of wisdom on how to communicate tough truths in an effective and sensitive way, Paul goes on to address another legitimate concern…one faced in nearly every church.

--What is our responsibility for those with serious needs that threaten their very survival unless the church gets involved in a practical, merciful way.

--In this rather lengthy section, Paul goes over a wide range of possible situations related to widows in the church…who is responsible and for what…when and how?

ILLUS. You can tell a lot about a culture by the way they treat their families…the way they care for their youngest and oldest members of society.

When the rest of the world observes the rise of euthanasia in the USA, and take note of our abortion rate (how we treat the unborn) and infanticide (how we treat those born with special needs), the message is clear. We care more about ourselves than we do about those who inconvenience us at the upper and lower ends of our society. Eliminating them or ignoring them communicates that we can make no claim to being models of mercy!!

--The general principle for Paul is simple…the family of faith consists of individual families that must take care of their own as long as there is family to do so.

1Tim. 5:8 But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.

--But what happens when there is no “household” or family to step up and help out? The church must be faithful as their family of faith when their family of origin no longer can (or as in the case of an unbeliever, no longer will).

ILLUS. Christian families used to understand the need to take care of their own family members. Along the way, our culture has largely lost that sense of responsibility…one that now functions with the idea that either the government or the church owes the needy family member its care, not the family.

The church has largely turned to government programs instead of taking care of our own. Paul tells Timothy that in certain cases, it is up to us to do what no one else can or will do to come to the aid of those he refers to as “truly widows.”

A. PROVIDING FOR THE PRACTICAL NEEDS OF LIFE

--Paul identifies three distinct categories of people in 5:3-16 and lays out some policies for the church in how to view such folks and how to serve them well in the name and for the sake of Christ.

1. Widows with living relatives (5:6-8)

--Simple…if you have relatives in your own family who are widowed, take care of them!

--That does not necessarily mean that you must have multi-generational households like civilized people did for millenia, but it does mean that you make provision for them (how, we shall see in a moment!).

2. Widows indeed and truly in need (5:9-10, 16)
--In many churches in Paul’s day, and ever since, there are those who would qualify as “widows indeed” who meet the criteria outlined here to be included among those who are cared for by the church.

--There are three qualifications he gives for how a widow is to be viewed as a “widow indeed:”

a. Not less than 60 years old -- 5:9
b. A wife of one husband -- 5:9
c. A reputation for good works – 5:10

--Paul explains that by adding several conditions by which that reputation can be measured (not necessarily all of them but sufficient indications that her reputation is legitimate).

If she (5:10)…

- Has brought up children
- Has shown hospitality
- Has served the saints (symbolized by washing their feet)
- Has assisted those in distress
- Has devoted herself, always been on the lookout for opportunities, to do what is good

--So, there will be some who have been models of godliness, who have lost their husbands, who have no family, and have no means of support…place such women on the list of those who should be aided by the church!

3. Widows likely to remarry (5:11-15)

--In the case of younger widows, the church is not responsible for their welfare but should encourage them to become productive, contributing members of society and the church!

--When possible, Paul says, they should re-marry and devote themselves to their new families.

--But there are many in our culture today who would love to be married the first time, much less find a husband as a widow!

--The principle involved is that those who have the health and strength of younger years to be productive, they should do so and not expect the church to take over their welfare!

B. PROVIDING FOR THE RELATIONAL LONGINGS OF LIFE

--Not every widow needs financial help and not every elderly person needs physical care…but everyone longs to matter to someone else!

--As a culture, we have a tendency to idolize youth and ostracize the aging.

--But can we not step up and offer what we have to give? Ourselves?

**ILLUS.** In just over a year, Cathy and I saw her father become a widower (and has lived with us the past 5½ years) and my mother become a widow. There may come a time when the financial side of things comes into play, but for now, it is important that they have someone to make them feel loved, useful, wise, comforted, and in some respects, alive and that they still matter!

Listen to Molly Graham, an NC State student with a God-given burden for the older people in our community and all around us...[VIDEO feed]

**James 1:27** This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.
1. What you can give…
   
a. **Give them your time**
   
   --That which they have so much of as they age, you have very little of in your youth...so it has that much more value when you sacrificially give your time.

   
b. **Give them your listening ear**
   
   --After decades of life, there are many stories to tell, many lessons learned, many experiences to recount—some that have no particular value except that they are there in their memories, have special meanings and just need to come out to be enjoyed in the light of loving conversations with someone who cares enough to listen.

   
c. **Give them your respect**
   
   --One of the greatest signs of respect we can give is to ask them questions, treat their ideas and memories as honored treasures—even if they no longer have meaning to others, respect them to honor what matters to them!

   --This is not a one-way street of noble sacrifices on our part, but there is much to be gained in return.

2. What you might receive…
   
a. **A loving friendship**
   
   --Many lonely people of all ages are missing each other because they do not think to look beyond their own generation.

   --Multi-generational friendships is one of the hallmarks of the body of Christ, the family of faith…so take advantage of the privilege, take a chance at a new friendship with a person of another generation.

   --Many have so much still to give and no one left to whom they can give it!

   
b. **A life-time of wisdom**
   
   --The church has a wealth of wisdom to be found, but usually not in the formality of an official mentoring relationship but in the context of engaging in relationships with those who have lived longer and know more.

   
c. **A faithful prayer partner**
   
   --Why neglect a great source of prayer power by neglecting some of the greatest “prayers” to be found anywhere?

   --Age does not guarantee prayerfulness, but many older men and women would count it a joy to pray for their younger brothers and sisters in the faith if asked!

   --Churches are breeding grounds for relationships that build people up, showcases for models of mercy in how we engage in life together.

**CONCLUSION:** What is the aroma of relationships that stirs the appetites of people outside the church? It arises from treating one another in a manner that honors Jesus Christ and builds loving care into the atmosphere we breathe!

   The bounty laid out on the banquet table of lovingkindesses entices those on the outside and draws them near to see if they might partake of this feast of mutual care shared in the body of Christ!
But you might say, “I wish that were true, but unfortunately that has not been my experience with the church.” Well then, how can it become so if you and I do not heed Paul’s words and lead the way?

**1Tim. 3:15** but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how ne ought to conduct himself in the household of God...

1. The gospel creates harmony among His followers.
2. The gospel demonstrates honor within His family.
3. The gospel cultivates holiness in His followers.

**Take aways:**

- Our words and our ways will build up and never tear down—we will speak to one another and treat one another in the most appropriate way.

  --In what you say and how you say, as representatives of Jesus Christ, you and I must learn to speak with sensitivity and care, even when it is necessary to address a problem in the body of Christ.

- Our widows and our lonely ones will be loved and embraced as valued contributors to godly community—as evidence that the compassion and character of Christ are at work here.

  --Ask yourself if you have been faithful in your own family to care for those entrusted to you...we must not be worse than an unbeliever (5:8)!

  --Ask yourself if it is right for you to abandon or ignore those aging saints around you who need you…will you build some time into your life to care for someone God puts on your heart?

The world is looking for authentic love, practical demonstrations of affection that go beyond the human heart and tap into the eternal love of Jesus Christ.

Rather than living unaffected and indifferent lives, God calls us to embrace one another with His unconditional, sacrificial love…sometimes to speak a hard word of truth, but always to speak with love as is fitting the person and appropriate to the moment. That will provide models of mercy which will stir the appetites of anyone hungry to know God!