

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
May 14, 2023

God's Household

1 Timothy 5:1-16

When I began serving in my first pastorate, I was 25 years old. I was fresh out of seminary, with a Bible in one hand and my degree in the other. During its presentation of me to the congregation, I could tell that the pastor search committee felt obligated to do some explaining as to why it was recommending a candidate who was two to three decades younger than most folks in the church. Youthfulness was good, but to some folks I may have appeared to be just a baby, an infant member of the clergy.

That may have been especially so to one person in the congregation. Her name was Ann Herron, but most people called her "Granny." She was 88 years old. She quickly set about welcoming me into her life and her home, fixing dinner for me, even asking me to bring my shirts over so she could iron them for me. In more ways that I can recall and recount, she incorporated me into her family, brought me into her household.

A few months into my ministry, Granny concluded that it wasn't a good idea for this new young pastor to be all alone in that big church parsonage, so she started doing some brainstorming about matchmaking. She had previously known Debby, who was living in West Virginia at the time. So Granny called Debby, asked her if she was seeing anyone, and told her that the church had a new young pastor that she would like for her to meet. With Granny being 88 going on 89, Debby understandably wondered what Granny meant by "young" pastor. Long story short, Granny set the two of us up on a blind date dinner at her house in June of 1989. In October we were engaged, and during June of the next year, married.

Granny lived to be 98. Though she was more than six decades older than me, this "sister" in Christ played a major role in shaping my life and ministry, helping form the bond of marriage that Debby and I share, and eventually the creation of our own family through the birth of our children. Our family will always derive part of its identity from Granny and her family. And it all began with intergenerational connections within the family of God.

In the opening of today's text, young Timothy gets some ministerial guidance from the older and more experienced Paul. Paul instructs him on how to interact with some of the members of the congregation who are significantly older than Timothy. Some of them are leaders who have embraced false teachings, creating disruption in the community of believers. Rebuilding the fellowship will require that Timothy engage these older members of the congregation with respect, recognizing the esteem in which others hold them. In other words, Paul wants Timothy to know that it's possible to correct these leaders without trying to give them a tongue-lashing. Instead, says Paul, approach them as you would members of your own family. If you're dealing with an older man, treat him with the respect due a father. Exhort him with gentleness. If you're ministering to younger men, in this case Timothy's peers, stress the common bond that you have in Christ. And when you're communicating across lines of gender, use sensitivity and caution, says Paul. When you engage with older women, treat them with the respect due a mother. If you're

ministering to younger women, make every effort to avoid even the impression of inappropriate behavior.

Notice how Paul draws upon family terminology and imagery to advise Timothy in his ministry responsibilities. Timothy should nurture the Christian community as if it were a caring, accountable family, committed to one another's welfare. In fact, two chapters earlier, Paul summarizes the purpose of his letter this way: "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (3:14-15). The community of believers is "God's household."

When we think of "family," we often default to the idea of the traditional "nuclear family," that is, two parents and their children. Interestingly, the results of the 2020 census revealed that the number of homes in our country with the traditional nuclear family was the lowest it had been since 1959. The data showed that 17.8 percent of the nation's 130 million households featured married parents with children under the age of 18. That was down significantly from over 40 percent in 1970.¹

As family configurations change, the concept of a "household" can help expand our understanding of how individuals can share life together for one another's benefit. When Paul spoke of "household," he had in mind the Greco-Roman household, the central social unit of the first century. The household included immediate and extended family members, as well as slaves, freed men and women, and other business associates of the male head of the household, also known as the *pater familias*. These various individuals and groups had certain duties and obligations. The household functioned on the basis of interdependence, acceptable conduct, and accountability.

On a more contemporary note, author Andy Crouch has summarized a household this way:

This old, slightly musty word is the best option we have in English for something that was central to life in the ancient world and is still central to life in many cultures today. A household is a community of persons who may well take shelter under one roof but also, and more fundamentally, take shelter under one another's care and concern. They provide for one another, and they depend on one another. They mingle their assets and their liabilities, their gifts and their vulnerabilities, in such a way that it is hard to tell where one member's end and another member's begin.²

As Crouch indicates, this seemingly ancient concept can still serve our understanding and practice of life in the church. Whether in first-century Ephesus or twenty-first-century Bryans Road, handling the gospel rightly involves more than just a weekly gathering of loosely affiliated listeners. Faithful gospel ministry creates a new kind of social unit called the church. As Charles E. Jefferson says,

A sharp distinction ought to be made between a church and an audience. An audience is a group of unrelated people drawn together by a short-lived attraction. An audience is a crowd. A church is a family. An audience is a gathering. A church is a fellowship. An audience is a heap of stones. A church is a temple. Preachers are ordained, not to attract an audience, but to build a church. Coarse and worldly men, if richly gifted, can draw audiences, but only a man who is given to the Lord Jesus Christ can build a church.³

That's what Paul wants for Timothy. He wants Timothy to grow as a person who is given to the Lord, evident in the way he builds and cares for God's household, the church.

In this case, God's household also included lots of widows. Caring for widows had always been an essential part of life in the community of God's people Israel. It was part of the character of God, who viewed widows with compassion and defended their cause. So for the people of God, the pursuit of justice and righteousness was inseparable from how they treated widows. The early church naturally took this up as one of its priorities as well. We get a sense of this from the fact that Paul devotes 14 verses of today's text to instructing Timothy on how the community should support widows.

Apparently the fellowship of believers had a pretty advanced system of care. They maintained a "roll" or "list" of widows who were eligible for support. But like all such systems, this one was vulnerable to abuse. In some cases, families of widows weren't shouldering their share of the responsibility, which put a financial strain on the church. Some of the younger widows had gotten on the list and were damaging the church's reputation by their involvement with false teaching and scandalous behavior. For all its history of compassion and good intentions, the household of God had its share of dysfunction, disagreement, and tension. And right in the middle of it is young Timothy, Bible in one hand and seminary degree in the other, trying to bridge generational and gender gaps, and maintain good order in the family.

But we need to hold in mind that the attractiveness of the Christian community was one of the reasons Timothy faced these kinds of challenges. Granted, the household of God was far from perfect, but those who joined themselves to it regularly found and experienced a kind of welcome, recognition, and acceptance that had been absent from their lives. This was especially true for people who had been excluded, abused, overlooked, and undervalued, particularly women, slaves, and the poor. For these, and so many others, the household of God became an alternative family, a way of living under the same spiritual roof, sharing in a common life and mission.

Andy Crouch writes:

This is the one thing we need more than any other: a community of recognition. While we must always insist that every human being matters whether or not they are seen or treated as one by others, we also know that no human being can flourish as a person unless they are seen and treated as one. And for that, the household is the first and best place. We need a place where we cannot hide. We need a place where we cannot get lost.

So much of the tragedy of the modern world comes down to this: Most of us do not have such a place.

He goes on to point out: "If you are looking for a single proximate cause of the loneliness that is epidemic in our world, it is the dearth of households."⁴

On this Mother's Day, we remember God's gift of family. It's still the primary place for cultivating marriage, raising children, caring for the elderly, and forming lifelong relationships with our relatives by blood. But let's also reflect on the grace we experience and share in the household of God. That's because your household and God's household need each other. Like the congregation that young Timothy was charged with cultivating, our own fellowship here takes shape in this interface between your biological family and our spiritual family.

Some of you are single. Some of you are here with your spouse. Some of you are here without your spouse. Some of you have young children. Some of you have grandchildren. Some of you have an empty nest. Some of you have a crowded nest, with adult children, or

other relatives, or maybe even non-relatives, living under your roof. Some of you are living under somebody else's roof.

Whatever the size or shape of your own household, it needs engagement with God's household. Our church needs your biological family, because there are ways it can help us see how to be a congregational family. Your family can provide the church family with models and examples of love, devotion, sacrifice, and service. But your biological family also needs this church. Your biological family can't be spiritually self-sufficient. You need the wider family of faith, the gathering of diverse people from different generations, to bring your family into the larger realm of God's kingdom and God's purposes. Here in the household of God is where we experience the mercy, the welcome, the support, and the love that embody and point to an eternal family where Christ's people share life together, for the glory of God.

¹ Stephen M. Lepore, "Just 18% of US households are 'nuclear families' with a married couple and children." *Dailymail* (December 4, 2021).

² Andy Crouch, "As for Me and My Household, 'We'll Resist Mammon.'" *Christianity Today*. April 18, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/may-june/crouch-money-home-me-my-household-resist-mammon-community.html> (May 10, 2023).

³ Charles E. Jefferson, *Leadership*, Vol. 11, No. 4.

⁴ Crouch, "As for Me and My Household, We'll Resist Mammon."