

The Communion of the Saints, 1

Early Christianity

By Bob Vincent

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Bible Text: 1 Timothy 5:3-8, 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12
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1 Timothy 5 and beginning at verse 3. 1 Timothy 5, beginning at verse 3.

3 Honor widows who are really widows. 4 But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. 5 Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. 6 But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. 7 And these things command, that they may be blameless. 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

May we pray.

Heavenly Father, please fill me again with Your Spirit that I may be under the influence of the Holy Spirit and not under the influence of my proud, pompous self. Lord, I would be full of Your Spirit that so, Lord, my words would be true to the written word of God but spoken with the lips of Christ and not the lips of Satan or carnality. So Lord, fill me and help me to address things from Scripture today. For the sake of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Well, I want to direct your attention along the idea of the communion of the saints and what do I mean by that? The communion of the saints is not simply a reference to holy communion, that is partaking of the Lord's Supper, it is the sharing of what we have with one another. God has given you and me spiritual gifts and we need to remember this, God has also given you and me needs. So God's desire is that he would take the gifts he has given us and use them to meet the needs of other believers so that as we give and receive with each other, our hearts are knit together in love. I'm not talking about some involuntary thing. I'm not talking about the perversion of biblical truth that was concocted by an atheist named Karl Marx. I'm talking about a voluntary situation where moved by the Spirit of the living God we are touched with the weaknesses and needs of

others and by the Holy Spirit showing us our own abilities, we attempt to meet those needs out of the resources he's given, and I'm not fundamentally at this point thinking about money but money certainly is a matter in this text as we see that deals with the widows.

So I want to think about it for a moment. This is the first in a series, again, continuing ancient or early Christianity first in the series of communion of saints and it has to do with taking care of each other. Now I want you to see some texts here that are very very important. I want you to know there's something more important for you to do with your tithe than giving to the church. "Oh, what did he say? I can't believe he said it! There's something more important to do with my time than giving it to the local church? I thought the Bible taught storehouse tithing?" By the way, that's something that people have concocted. But under the New Testament, indeed throughout both testaments, here is a principle and it's 1 Timothy 5:8. Let this be embossed on your mind. Let it be imprinted on your heart. This is a fundamental truth, "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." Does the church need your money? Well, of course the needs your money. We want to keep the lights on. We want to pay the preacher, of course, and that's a biblical principle. You don't muzzle the ox threshing the grain, but something is more important than giving to the church as an institution, and it's taking care of your own family. If your children are hungry, if your children don't have clothes, if your children don't have shoes, what do you do off the top? Off the top you are giving to God when you give to your children.

Listen, that's very critical. You tune in to certain tv preachers and they will tell you that you've got to take it off the top and give it to them. That's not God's way. God's way is to take care of your own family first, then and then only do you give to the church. Let that sink in for a moment. I'm going to reread the verse, "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." There is nothing more hypocritical than people who go to a church particularly where the pastor actually owns the building and they're shaken down to give money and sent a bill based on their W2 form. Do some churches do that? Oh, yes they do. There's nothing more hypocritical there than people who have deprived their children, their spouses, those in their extended family of the help they could give in order sacrificially to give to a human institution, particularly when that human institution is run by one man or one family. I free you in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, I free you from any promise to give to an institution when you are not able to take care of your own family first. "You have that authority?" Absolutely, I have that authority. I'm a pastor. I am a preacher of the word of God and God's word commands you to take care of your own.

Now let's look at why that's important. Listen to what it says here going back up in verse 3, 1 Timothy 5:3, "Honor widows who are really widows." Look at verse 4, "But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God." What's he saying? He's saying that the church is to take care of its own people. That's a very basic truth that we're

exploring this morning, the communion of the saints, but Paul is telling us how vital it is that we take care of our own families first. Parents and grandparents, I'm grateful that I have 13 grandchildren and five children but my job is to continue to work so that I'm not a burden to them, so that I take care of my wife and I help take care of them until the day God calls me home, but the important principle that's here is family comes first. Family comes first.

Giving to your family is giving to God and that's what he's saying here, honor widows who are really widows. Why does he single out females at this point? Well, for the very basic reason that in the ancient world women were at a distinct disadvantage because a man was able to do certain things in the ancient world that a woman was not able to do, and so a woman who was a widow was destitute. They did not have back in biblical days the kinds of things that we have in modern society. And so but notice this is an important principle.

St. Paul is saying that it is the duty of the church to take care of her own people when they cannot take care of themselves and when there's no extended family to take care of them, and so he's saying honor widows who are really widows. What does he mean there? And this is what he says in verse 5, "she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day." So a widow who is truly a widow in the sense here of qualifying for the help of the church is someone who has no one else to help her. She's destitute. She's crying out to God.

Now I want to say some things and, God willing, over the next couple of weeks I will address some of this. If we followed the law of God in the Old Testament, there should not be any poor among us because there were ways to take care of people. Gleaning. When a farmer harvested his crops, he was never allowed to go back over it and get everything. The poor could go in there and gather what was left. In fact, the book of Ruth is all about that kind of gleaning.

There's another thing in the Old Testament that we'll look at, God willing, in the weeks ahead and that is that there was never under the Old Testament law if Israel had practiced it long-term poverty because at the end of seven cycles of seven years, the horn would sound and it was the sounding of the Year of Jubilee. Have you ever wondered why we call the Liberty Bell the Liberty Bell? Because it has engraved on its side that verse from Leviticus. What happened in the 50th year? In the 50th year not only were all debts canceled, debts were canceled every seven years, but people went back to their hereditary homeland and so they got a fresh start. There was no long-term generational poverty in the Old Testament but that's a topic for another day. One thing I do want to say in alluding to it though is this, it has always been a principle of the Bible that God's people need to take care of God's people who are truly in need.

So again he says here in 1 Timothy 5:5, "she who is really a widow," again, he's not talking about somebody whose husband has died, he's talking about someone who is utterly destitute, who has no one to help her, who has no children, who has no grandchildren, no extended family to help her. He's saying she is "left alone, she trust in

God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day," and then he gives some regulations to be followed there that we can go down to verse 9,

9 Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man,

What is he really getting at there? He's getting at a basic principle, what is God's will for your life. Unless God has clearly given you the supernatural spiritual gift of a single life, it is ordinarily God's will for you to marry and so we read this as we go down further. He's saying in verse 10,

10 well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work. [And then he says in verse 11] 11 But refuse the younger widows; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry."

Now there are things that we cannot know absolutely there but evidently there was an enrollment and once a person was enrolled in the church in this way, they were from that point on utterly dependent on the church as an expression of being dependent on Christ. But he talks about young widows and what is he saying? He's saying that in verse 14,

14 Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully. 15 For some have already turned aside after Satan.

What's he getting at? Well, let's back up a couple of verses and he says that the condemnation when they reject this, he says they've cast off their first faith, verse 12, verse 13, "And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not." Whoa, what's he saying there? Well, now hold your hand there, we're gonna go to the left for a moment over to 2 Thessalonians 3. 2 Thessalonians 3 where he gives this principle again and I want to say that idleness, idleness is the enemy of your soul. Idleness is the enemy of your soul. He's not talking about the need to take a break. He's not talking about the importance of getting a good night's sleep. He's not talking about a weekly break which if you don't ever take a weekly break, you're simply being a fool because God made humanity to need a break every seven days and that's structured into the reality of a human being himself. Jesus said the Sabbath, that is the Sabbath principle, was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So you need a break. That's not what we're talking about here in terms of idleness and rest. People need a break. They need rest but we're talking about idleness on and on and on.

Listen to what he says in 2 Thessalonians 3 when he talks about his own example of working with his own hands so that he would not be a burden to the church and he says in verse 10, that's 2 Thessalonians 3:10,

10 For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.

Let that sink in for a moment. In other words, it isn't the job of the church to take care of people who refuse to work. Now there are plenty of people that cannot work. They have diseases, they have weaknesses, they have injuries, they have age, they have many other factors that keep them from being able to work. Notice what he says, if anyone refuses to work, neither let that person eat. In other words, what he's saying is the church is not there to take care of people who are able-bodied and able to take care of themselves. And then he says in verse 11,

11 For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies.

What is a busybody? I like that expression, a busybody. That is, they're not busy taking care of their own responsibilities, they're always meddling in other people's affairs. They're always trying to correct other people where they've got a house that's in total disarray and disorder. So he's saying take care of your own responsibilities first.

So he goes on, listen to what he says in verse 12, 2 Thessalonians 3:12,

12 Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.

In other words, what does God want for you and me? As long as we're able-bodied and my prayer is that I can be able-bodied until the day I die because I want to die working, I mean, that is my ambition. My ambition. You say, "Oh, I don't want to ever be in church when that happens." My ambition is to have a massive heart attack after I've finished preaching the Gospel and extended a Gospel invitation for people to come to Christ and at that moment saying something to the effect, "And you don't know whether you have another day or another week or whatever," and at that point to have a massive heart attack. That's my ambition. I don't want to retire. I want to work, work less but still work. I want to be busy because idleness produces terrible things.

So he says in verse 13,

13 But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good. 14 And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. 15 Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

So that principle we come back to 1 Timothy 5 as we consider the widow. The widow is a person who has no family, no way of being supported, she cannot make it, and it is, what? It is the responsibility of the church to take care of such a person and that is very important.

Now we go back to 1 Timothy 5 and we look at verse 15 and he says, "For some have already turned aside after Satan." You know, there's a saying, it's not explicitly found in the Bible but it's certainly biblical, an idle mind is the devil's workshop. An idle mind is the devil's workshop and as I reflect on things, I believe that America is bedeviled with the problems of an idle mind. People get and read all of these bizarre stories. I don't know what's the truth in the news and what's not. What's fake news and what's not? I don't know. You know, the only news source I know that's true, it's the source in this book. This book guides me and helps me. I don't have my head buried in the sand. I'm aware of the things that are going on in the whole Western world, indeed in the whole world with the coronavirus and the economic troubles that have come and that are going to come as a result of this virus. But the worst thing that you can do is to get up in the morning and start reading news stories and then to meditate on gloom and doom. Let me tell you, turning on the television first thing, the radio first thing, reading the news even on a computer or your cellphone, that's not how to begin your day. Begin your day with the book. Begin your day confessing that God is good. Begin your day believing the promises of God, that he will take care of you.

Listen, I've been young and I'm now old but I've never seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread. He is ever-generous and he lends to other people but, this is huge, but God works through means. God rarely just drops things on people like money or food or what have you. Now Sandy and I have experienced that many many times when we were destitute. We've gotten on our face before God and we said, "Lord, we don't know how we're gonna have this happen," but we've seen God again and again miraculously provide. I've told many of these stories before to you. Just to repeat one was a time we needed to, I thought, borrow money to fix up something for somebody we cared about and I said to Sandy, "I don't see any way around this except to go to the bank and borrow money." And she said, "Why don't we pray about it first?" So I left and I did some things with a friend of mine, I repaired the water heater and when I got to my office, there had been an envelope inside the locked closet on top of the safe that said, "Please give to Bob and Sandy." There are other Bobs. There are other Sandy's. But no other Bob and Sandy. And so I went in my office and I opened it up and it was money. It was full of hundred dollar bills. Inside were 100 one hundred dollar bills, \$10,000. I was very excited. I've told this before but I'm telling it again in case there's somebody that's never heard the story because it's but one of many examples and that's this, I called her and I said, "Sandy, you're not gonna believe this." And she said, "Oh, well, after you left I began to pray and as I prayed God impressed me that I was to ask for \$10,000." So she asked and you know what's so amazing is? "Before they ask, I will answer." God had answered her prayer before she prayed it. My point is this: I don't know whether an angel went in there in the middle of the night and put it there, or I don't know whether God used a human being, the point I want to make is this, God uses human beings to meet the needs of other human beings. And so what he's saying here is that it is the obligation of the local church to take care of her own people. That is critical. That is absolute.

Now I want to reflect on another principle and as we ponder these things in the world in which we have, we find ourselves and for that I want to turn to Galatians 6. Is the church

only to be concerned with its own members? And the answer to that is no. Listen to these words and he says beginning at verse 6, Galatians 6:6,

6 Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches. [I like that verse.] 7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. 8 For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

Now he's bringing it back to money and other giving. Verse 9,

9 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

You know, a lot of times people say, "Well, I tried this and it didn't work." Well, did you keep trying until God made it clear to you that he had another plan? Never give up. Never quit. He says don't be weary in well-doing, in due time you'll reap if you don't faint.

Now look at the next verse, verse 10, Galatians 6:10,

10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Think with me for a moment. What is St. Paul telling us in Galatians 6? He's telling us the same basic principle there that he's telling us in 2 Thessalonians 3 and in 1 Timothy 5. The test of whether you and I are actually Christians is are we generous with those who are in need? Let me say it again: the test of whether you and I are genuine Christians is are we generous with those who are in need? Now that's not just a generalized principle, what he's basically saying is this: if I have a hands off policy with God about any area of my life, time. Do you know what's very valuable to me? Time is very valuable. I cherish time and I have to confess because I haven't yet died and gone to heaven that I struggle with people who take time, not when I've finished what I'm trying to do but in interruptions because when I get interrupted, my whole train of thought is lost. So I have to give that to God every single day, sometimes multiple times a day, but don't let that hinder you from picking up that phone and calling me if you have my cellphone number. I welcome your call. I want to pray for you and Sandy loves for people to call her and ask for prayer. But I'm saying that time is something I have to give up to God. Spending time with my family is something I cherish deeply but sometimes I have to sacrifice that because of one reason or another. The important thing is this: you can never have a tight-fisted attitude about your time, your money, your talents, including time with family.

I learned this lesson, that if I'm tight-fisted and I say, "God, you can't have that." Who am I kidding? God can open my hand and take it right out. God doesn't need my permission to do anything. Are you kidding me? Why would I ever say to God, "No, God, You can't have that"? God can take it all. He owns it all. My wife isn't mine, she belongs to God. My health isn't mine, it belongs to God. My children don't belong to me, they belong to

God. My house, my money, everything, it all belongs to God. He doesn't need my permission but, you know, you need to give God permission. Why? Because there's a freedom and a joy when we give to God.

Now again, we're bringing this back to this principle and that is, it is the responsibility of the local church to take care of her own and to make sure that when she's taking care of her own, they are people who are in real need, but we don't limit it simply to fellow believers. As we have opportunity in Galatians 6, we are to do good to all people, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Let's see if we can tie this up in a very practical way. The church for the first 300 years of its existence did not do certain things. It never coerced others to the faith nor did it try to reform the Roman Empire. Let that sink in. How did the church change the Roman Empire? The church changed the Roman Empire not because Christians were willing to kill for their faith but because they were willing to die for their faith. The church won the Roman Empire by winning individuals by acts of kindness and love and mercy and generosity and by sharing their faith with others. In other words, biblical Christianity of the first 300 years is not coercive. The weapons of the warfare of the church are not carnal but powerful; they're spiritual and mighty through the Holy Spirit. So we change society by seeing individuals loved and changed.

Now at the present time the crisis in America is dreadful and I think that it's a time for people who look like me to be very careful what we say in public. What do I mean? It is the height of hypocrisy for somebody like me to try to say to somebody who did not have my advantages growing up, "Well, I understand what you're going through." I'm going to tell you a quick story. When I was in the 10th grade, I was arrested because I had a sawed-off shotgun. Wow. The officers arrested us. I had two friends. After they quizzed us, they let my two friends go and they took me in and the detective went over things with me and when he found out who my daddy was, do you know what he did? He said, "Alright, now you go back to school and take your afternoon exam," it was in January, "take your afternoon exam and when you get home, when your daddy gets home, you need to tell him what you've done and have him come see me." I won't go into an elaborate description of daddy's reaction but I can tell you I never forgot it. But he left the house. He went down to the police department. I don't know what all was said, but when daddy came back that was the end of the matter. Why? Because, 1, I had a father at home; 2, my father was a well-know and well-respected man; and knowing the world that I grew up in, having been born in the '40s and raised in the '50s and '60s, I know that had I not been a person like myself, what would have happened to me? Very possibly I would have been shot and killed. I had a sawed-off shotgun. I made it myself. When my brother went off to the Air Force academy, he gave me a shotgun and I customized it myself.

What am I saying? When people like me begin to say to people who are in an inner city, who are struggling, who have terrible disadvantages, "Well, I know how you feel," and trying to explain things, I don't know how people feel. So what do I do? What I do is I need to be a friend. I need to listen to people. I need to be swift to hear and slow to speak. And above all, I need to be a person of prayer because it's only as the Spirit of God is in

the words that I speak or the words you speak that they are effective at all. Otherwise it isn't simply like water off a duck's back. Words that are not spoken under the anointing of the Holy Spirit in a critical time of crisis like this are actually like sword thrusts that do more damage than they do good. But there's an opportunity for the church to do good. I commend Trinity Evangelical Presbyterian Church because for a decade they have reached out to their community to disadvantaged people, particularly for veterans who are destitute, and they have given food and many other things and honored these people at a heroes luncheon once a month. I think that's the kind of thing that's good. People know that that church is there to give and not to get.

So this is a time that calls for prayer and it's a time for doing. If your neighbor is in need, for Jesus' sake take some of the money that you would give otherwise and give them something. Maybe it's food. Maybe it's fixing a meal. Maybe it is money. But do good, do kind because as we have opportunity as a church and as individuals to do good, let us do good to all people but especially to those of the household of faith.

So think of these things. We want to continue this, God willing, next week inside the sanctuary. Pray. Keep your mouth shut unless the Holy Spirit gives you words to say to someone who is really hurting. Never forget this as you look at the book of Job. Job's three friends were wonderful comforters until they did what? Until they opened their mouths and explained things.

So don't be weary in well-doing and the church of the first century went out and did good. They rescued abandoned babies, particularly abandoned little girls and they took them in and they raised them. It was because the church fed those who could not take care of themselves. That Roman society was changed so radically that within 300 years it was converted.

So let us pray.

Lord, I pray for everyone listening to this sermon today. Touch our hearts. Give us to be wise. Give us, Lord, to be restrained. Give us not to pontificate with all kinds of explanations because, Lord, for people who look like me, there's no way that I can understand the rage that many people feel at this time. Lord, it's easy to criticize acts of lawlessness and indeed we do because that is not Your way, but Lord, I wonder how many of us who criticize others have ever lost our temper, broken a plate, shouted, said some terrible hurtful thing to someone because we just lost our temper. Lord, give us to remember that our nation has problems that the church as an institution and that government as an institution cannot solve. Lord, we are on the brink of collapse. Only You can solve the problems we face and so we begin at that point, we lay these problems at Your feet. Lord God, show us what You want to do. Lord God, help us and have mercy on us. Bless us and pity us and shine on us with Your face. And if there's anybody here today listening to this message who does not yet know Jesus, Lord, that is the beginning, that we would never ask You to change the world before we've asked You to change us. In Jesus' name. Amen.