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Newman's
Last Sydney

Deacon/Elder Lecture Outlines

Lecture 14

How to Properly Serve the Widows, Elderly and Other Needy

I. Introduction

- A. Have you heard the phrase the survival of the fittest? You probably have if you have studied evolution. It means that the species we have today are alive because they were strong enough to survive, but the weak died out.
- B. Of course, man did not evolve, but man does indeed function in a similar way in society. That is, only the strong survive. Sad to say, such is the nature of Satan's world.
- C. This may be the way man's world works, but it is not the way God's system is to work. God's ideal is that all survive -- and prosper! Indeed, God's way is, as Romans 15:1 says, that "we then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (King James Version). The strong should care for the weak!
- D. Nowhere does this command to help the weak apply more to God's Church than in the case of widows, elderly and other needy.

II. SPS

This lecture will explain how to effectively deal with the widows, elderly and other needy. It will mainly address serving widows because the problems they face are typical of the needy in general. Widows' problems are usually the most severe of the needy group. If you know the principles of how to deal with widows, you will also know how to deal with the elderly and other needy.

III. Need

Here are some reasons we need to study this topic:

- A. Widows and elderly are at a time in their lives when they are physically weak and need extra help.
- B. God warns against oppression of the widows and, by implication, against oppression of all those who share their problems. Read Exodus 22:22: "You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child." See also Deuteronomy 24:17, 27:19, Zechariah 7:10, Malachi 3:5 and Matthew 23:14.
- C. God directly commands that we care for them. Read Deuteronomy 24:20-21, Isaiah 1:17 and Jeremiah 22:3.
- D. God praises service to them (Deuteronomy 24:19, James 1:27).
- E. God Himself cares for the needy, and we should emulate Him since we are to be His children. See Deuteronomy 10:18, Psalm 68:5, 146:9, Proverbs 15:25 and Jeremiah 49:11.

Special Note: No one can read these verses without being powerfully struck by God's jealous zeal for the widow and other needy. Clearly, we have a solemn duty to make sure our responsibilities to these people do not go unfulfilled.

IV. Who Are Widows and Other Needy?

- A. The term widows includes all women who physically or spiritually are alone.
 - 1. A widow is a woman, old or young, who has lost a husband to death and has not remarried. Most widowed young women should be considered simply as eligible singles. They share some characteristics of widowhood, but not others.

Paul said that we should "honor widows who are really widows" (I Timothy 5:3). This usually means older women who are not as able to care for themselves. This doesn't mean we ignore the younger ones, but that we discern their different abilities to help themselves.
 - 2. A woman may not physically be a widow but can have the same needs. For example:
 - a. A woman who is married but her husband is not in the Church. Some of these women will need little extra attention because they have good husbands, or are younger. Others will require much help.

- b. A woman who is divorced. The older ones have nearly the same needs as true widows. Younger divorced women will have nearly the same (lessor) needs as a single, eligible girl.
- c. An older woman who never married.

Special Note: The primary element that Paul seems to stress in determining whether one is "really" a widow is whether she is "left alone." Read I Timothy 5:5. (We try to avoid the use of the term "spiritual widow." It can unnecessarily cause offense to nonmember mates.)

B. Other Needy

Usually these are elderly, but the fatherless, orphans and poor share many needs with the elderly.

V. Special Needs of the Widows, Elderly or Other Needy

It should be obvious that the special help we hope to offer to the widows and elderly is in response to special needs that arise out of their unique problems. It is helpful to list some of these special problems and ways we can serve:

- A. No helpmate -- Widows and elderly often have no one to rely on to help with their day-to-day needs.

Deacons and deaconesses charged with the responsibility of caring for the widows and elderly would do well to become familiar with the daily physical needs of those they serve.

Depending on the circumstances, daily needs may include preparing meals, shopping, bathing, washing and fixing hair, writing or mailing letters, taking walks, handling bills, making repairs around the house, housecleaning, laundry, yard work, special errands and dozens of other responsibilities we may take for granted.

- B. Health problems -- Widowhood and old age often go hand in hand, and with older age often come health problems.

Ways to serve here include taking widows and elderly to the doctor, dentist or other health professionals, helping them research and understand their health problems, doing chores they're not able to perform and providing and preparing nutritious food for them.

It may be helpful for deacons and deaconesses to become informed about the health problems associated with old age.

- C. Loneliness -- In addition to lack of a helper, widows often feel lonely since they now have no regular company after having lived for years with someone to talk to at all times.

Frequent visits, calls and cards may be the best way to serve in this area. Show the elderly and widows you really care. Learn to be a good listener. Don't be afraid to ask a widower or widow about his or her deceased mate.

- D. Vulnerability -- Because of age, poor health and lack of a mate, widows are quite vulnerable to those who might do them harm (i.e., landlords, neighbors, ill-behaved teens).

To ensure their safety and make them feel more secure, it would be helpful to check doors, windows and locks. Volunteer to install a peephole or extra locks.

- E. Fear -- Widows and other elderly sense their vulnerability and often become fearful.

We can help alleviate their fears by giving them a sense of security by our time, concern and attention.

- F. Depression -- The above problems lend themselves to the development of discouragement and depression.

Again, involvement in serving their needs and being a friend they can rely on will lessen the likelihood of discouragement.

VI. We Owe a Debt

The Bible makes plain that the Church, through its ministers and concerned members, owes a debt of responsibilities to widows and other needy.

- A. The account of the ordination of the first deacons in Acts 6 implies that the Church has responsibilities to the widows, for the very reason the office of deacon was established was to meet those needs.
- B. The Bible commands us not to persecute widows. Certainly neglect is a type of persecution. Further, the Bible commands affirmative action to help the needy widows and others. The Bible highly exemplifies those who help the widows.

Special Note: Pastor General Joseph W. Tkach gained a reputation as being a friend of widows. As in all matters regarding the Church, we should consider this reputation as an example God hopes we will emulate. No doubt it is one of many reasons God chose Mr. Tkach for his present responsibilities.

VII. Whose Responsibility Is It to Help the Widows and Elderly?

A. The Ministers

It should be obvious that the minister, and first of all the local pastor, is primarily responsible for seeing that all of God's injunctions are followed in the local church, including God's directives regarding widows, elderly and the needy.

This does not mean he must personally see to every detail, nor that he himself carries out every charitable act, but merely that he oversees the process and sees that the needs of the widows are met.

The minister may delegate many day-to-day matters to those under him.

B. The Deacons

Acts 6 makes plain that the deacons must consider the care of the widows and other needy, as far as their physical needs are concerned, to be one of their primary obligations.

They should be so tuned in to the widows that they anticipate their genuine needs even before they are vocalized to the minister. And they should be prepared to help them in smaller matters even without checking every last detail with the pastor. Pastors should be kept informed of these matters, however.

C. The Members

Finally, all members should be educated about the special obligations they owe the needy in their congregations.

VIII. Responsibilities of the Church to Widows and Other Needy

The Church's responsibilities toward widows, elderly and the needy into two categories: spiritual and physical.

A. Spiritual Responsibilities

The primary responsibilities of the Church are spiritual. We, as well as the widows, can sometimes become so involved in the physical needs that we forget our first priority must be the spiritual character development of the individual.

Again, the Church does not exist just to be a sort of welfare system for the needy. Its primary function is to show people how to solve their own problems by living God's way and developing a deep spiritual relationship with God. God says, "Let your widows trust in Me" (Jeremiah 49:11).

But this means that the ministers must from time to time focus on the special, spiritual needs of widows and elderly and tell them how to deal with these needs.

B. Physical Responsibilities

The Church has the obligation -- indeed, the privilege -- to help in physical matters. However, this help must be in accordance with certain guidelines.

1. Relatives of the widow should help first.

The Bible is plain about the need of relatives to help their own before the Church is called upon to lend assistance. This is easiest when the relative is in the Church, but even relatives outside the Church can be diplomatically informed of the person's needs and encouraged to help out.

If relatives decline to help, then we must fill the void, as the widow has no other recourse.

Read I Timothy 5:4: "But if any widow has children, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God."

See also I Timothy 5:16: "If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows."

2. All forms of available government assistance should be sought first.

The United States government, for example, offers many types of assistance to seniors, widows and

other needy. As citizens of the United States, widows and others have a right to take advantage of these resources when they are eligible for them. These include food stamps, welfare, social security, government pensions, "meals on wheels," plus many local programs.

3. The Church should respond to all remaining needs, plus those wants to which it reasonably can.

The Church, however, cannot respond to all wants. Often, people's wants are not good for them or for the Church. (This topic is further discussed under "Pitfalls to Avoid.")

4. The minister must abide by biblical and Church guidelines regarding matters on which a policy has been stated.

For example, third-tithe assistance should be administered as stated in the Assistance Manual.

IX. Ways to Serve the Widows, Elderly and Other Needy

As ministers, we often tend to serve those who require help as needs come to our attention, rather than anticipate their needs. For example, when they counsel after services about getting help with a bill they cannot pay, and we almost without thought write them a third-tithe check to help with the bill.

It would be good for us to stop and list the ways we can be of service. This does two things: 1) It causes us to consider how we might anticipate their needs, and 2) it causes us to be prepared to help them in the most effective way, not merely in a way requiring the least thought.

Here, then, are some of the many ways we can serve the widows and other needy.

A. By Providing Company

Many widows are lonely. When we visit them we help alleviate this problem. Often a problem described by a widow to be one thing, such as a minor health problem, turns out to be more loneliness than anything else. Remember James 1:27.

B. By Providing Physical Advice

Often, widows or other needy find themselves lacking

the guiding support and advice of a mate they used to rely on. They feel helpless and need advice. You can be of service by being sensitive to their circumstances and being ready to aid with such advice when it is wise to do so.

One caution here: Some will display feigned helplessness to get attention or to get out of unpleasant duties they are qualified to do. Be aware of this possibility.

Also, avoid becoming so deeply involved in personal matters, such as finances, that you virtually become their conservator. You have no legal right to delve too deeply into highly personal matters that may be the rightful domain of their relatives.

C. Spiritual Advice and Encouragement

Everyone needs this. But the special problems of old age simply may demand greater time with these needy.

D. Transportation

Often, old age brings health problems that preclude driving. Sometimes old age brings fear. In many cases widowhood is virtually synonymous with low income. All these things mean that the needy often need help with transportation. The minister can help solve this problem through the good graces of those in the congregation who can provide rides to Church and other activities.

E. By Providing Work Parties

Many needy don't have the health or finances to do needed repairs, run errands or shop. Here is one big way that we can help those who are unable to help themselves.

F. Special Bible Studies

The physical and spiritual needs of the widows are unique. It can be good to hold special or even regular Bible studies to address their problems and offer solutions.

G. Social Events

All people of all age groups need the fellowship of similarly aged persons with similar life situations. In balance, as it is practical in any given Church

area, it is good to schedule special social events for the widows, or at least the seniors.

H. Telephone Visits

A brief call on the phone can be a real source of encouragement to a lonely widow.

X. Learning the Needs of the Widows and Other Needy

Sometimes we learn about the needs of the widows and other needy by accident. But we should make the effort to uncover their needs before they become so big or so many that a crisis is created that could have been avoided.

Here are ways we can discover their needs:

A. Directly, by them telling us their needs.

This is often how we learn of their needs, but it has the disadvantage of perhaps being embarrassing to them. Of course, the more you have served them, the more likely they are to share their concerns with you.

B. Indirectly, by others telling you.

This is also common. It is good for the congregation to be sensitive to the needs of the elderly or widows. However, this has the disadvantage of making the minister feel, or maybe even look, like he doesn't have the situation well in hand. (If he does, why does he need others to tell him what he should know?)

C. By observation.

This means that you keep a watchful eye on their welfare and check up on telltale signs of physical or spiritual distress or need.

D. By inquiring personally.

This is good since it shows your concern. But be careful not to sound like you are prying. This point is like A above, but differs because you initiate the conversation.

E. By assigning someone to call upon them or telephone them regularly to inquire of their needs.

This can be a deaconess or other person who exercises wisdom, sympathy and compassion. This person then can regularly report to you. This is like B above, but,

again, in this case you take the initiative (although through a third party assigned to the task by you).

XI. Ways to Get People to Help

Once we see a need we often also see that we must enlist someone to help with that need. We can call upon a number of sources of manpower.

A. Yourself

We should be ready to help the needy with our own time and effort, but we must not leave the Gospel to wait on tables (Acts 6:1-3).

B. Deacons and Deaconesses

Acts 6 plainly proves that one of the greatest responsibilities of deacons and deaconesses is to stretch a helping hand to widows.

C. One-time Assignments

Some needs are one-time needs and can be met with one-time help. If you need a special type of assistance and someone in the congregation is qualified to help (such as a painter who could paint a door) consider calling upon the person for the favor.

D. Permanent Assignments

This can work well if a family takes a special liking to a particular needy person. They can "adopt" the person and tend to most of his or her special needs. This also works when a person does not take care of all a widow's needs, for example, but just one of them on a regular basis. A widow or needy person can come to depend on and trust the server.

A good illustration of this is when a person gives a widow a ride to Church services each week. He or she might not be adopting the widow in all respects, but is relied on by the widow for most of her transportation needs.

E. A Committee

Another resource is to establish a person or committee to look after the needs of widows and other needy. The advisability and practicality of this approach will depend on many matters, such as church size. It could be effective, or could be seen as too sterile, unfeeling or complex.

F. Volunteers

Ask for volunteers. This is often the approach used when work parties are needed.

XII. Pitfalls to Avoid

Even service to the widows and elderly has pitfalls that can befuddle those trying to help. Here are some pitfalls to look out for:

A. Looking to the Church to solve all one's problems instead of looking to God.

All people, including widows and other needy, must remember that God is our first and final provider, and that we all must live by faith. Read I Timothy 5:5: "Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day."

B. Giving becoming a one-way street.

At times people can be quick to take help but slow to realize they, too, have responsibilities.

C. Being lazy.

It is not good to do so much for people that you take away their initiative. You should encourage people to meet their own needs when they are genuinely able to do so.

D. Being demanding.

Some people can fall into the attitude that the Church, deacon or other member owes them total subservience. They become incensed if every little thing doesn't go their way immediately. This should not be allowed to occur.

E. Minister or other member taking place of husband to the hurt of the widow or helping person.

Sometimes a widow so dearly misses the constant companionship and support of a man that she adopts the minister's or deacon's family as her own. This can be a good thing in balance. While it is good to include others in your family structure as you can, realize that even this has some potential pitfalls.

The relationship with the widow or other person should

not hurt your family nor them. Everyone must learn to stand on his or her own feet and remember that God is their Savior and not a man, even a minister.

F. Having unrealistic expectations.

Some people feel the Church should help them reach a standard of living that is not practical. If their husband did not leave them an estate, it is not practical for the Church to provide them an expensive house and car, although the basic necessities can often be met.

G. Server becoming discouraged.

Some people cannot be pleased no matter what you do. Remember this lest you get discouraged, and then try to educate them about their personality problems.

H. Gossiping and criticizing.

The Bible plainly states that certain groups, like widows, tend to gossip and complain (I Timothy 5:13). Be wary of this and instruct them, in Bible studies and counselings, about this tendency if necessary.

I. Fearing to speak up to voice one's needs.

Some people are shy about letting their needs be known. They need to learn how to communicate with the minister and deacon regarding these matters, and to realize that while no one likes a complainer, no one can help another unless he knows the needs.

J. Wanting help when not eligible.

Sometimes, certain people want help when they should not have it.

1. Undeserving -- People need to know that their membership in the Church does not give them an automatic right to all opportunities. Those who have better attitudes and serve more deserve a bit more in return. Read Luke 4:25-26.

Also, read Acts 9:36-42 and consider whether Dorcas would have been raised to life had she not been such a special, serving person.

2. Ineligible -- People who can or should help themselves should be givers and not receivers. It is ludicrous for a member with a family, on a

lower wage, to drive 100 miles at his own expense to cut the grass of a widow who has a bank account worth \$400,000 plus stock dividends and a monthly pension and social security. She should be hiring a gardener and maybe even hiring one for her neighbor who is needy.

Special Note: The pitfalls listed in this section are intended to make us wise as serpents but harmless as doves. They should not be taken as excuses for neglecting our duties to the needy, but merely as cautions so we serve with wisdom.

XIII. Obligations of the Widow, Elderly and Other Needy to the Church

As stated above, the Church is primarily concerned with people's spiritual welfare. The Church is the Body of Christ and hence a spiritual training ground for the salvation of the individual and for teachers for the world tomorrow.

Each person, including the needy in one of the special classes listed in this lecture, needs to remember his or her duties to God and the Church.

A. The duty to faithfully obey God in all things.

This should go without saying but needs to be emphasized. Some people begin to become preoccupied with their problems and hence ignore their spiritual priorities.

B. The duty to pray for the Work, Mr. Tkach, the ministry and the members.

The biblical illustration of Anna, recorded in Luke 2:36-38, is a powerful example that should serve as a constant reminder here. See also I Timothy 5:5.

C. The duty to serve others as able.

The example of Dorcas is a powerful example here (Acts 9:36-42).

D. The duty to meet one's own needs when able.

Read II Thessalonians 3:10.

E. The duty to tithe and give offerings as able.

No one expects a widow or needy person to give

something she does not have. But remember the widow's mite in Mark 12:41-44.

XIV. Conclusion

While it is the way of this world for only the strong to survive, it is the way of God that the strong take care of the weak, not grudgingly, but in love (Romans 15:1). Only when a minister has met both the spiritual and physical needs of the members of his congregation can he rest in the realization that his whole job is being done.