

The vital work of mercy ministry

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[0 : 00] I don't know about you, but I find it so frustrating when you've got a big project on the go, and there's one little thing that you need to complete the project, and you can't find it, and it's not there.

Guys know this all too well. I don't know about it. Every time I have a DIY project, you just miss that one little scruffy, or the thing to make it work, and your whole car sits there with the wheels off, and it doesn't work because you can't find the number, who knows, what is it?

A 13? No, that's a... You see, you see. What number puts the thing back on the wheel? Ladies, maybe you've got you planning a trip, and you've got everything you need.

It's a holiday. You're looking forward to it. It's the first time you've been able to get away without your kids. No, you take your kids with you, you and your husband, but you want to look fresh. It's like a second honeymoon with your husband, and you get to the vacation spot.

You forgot the hairdryer, and now your holiday's ruined, and you can't... The thing that you're looking forward to, you can't complete. It's not going to work. Or maybe worse, you left your cell phone charged at home.

[1 : 12] How many times haven't you left home, and your little battery is shrinking away? Most things in life only work when all the parts fit together, and sometimes it's the smallest part that's easily overlooked, but that's still very needed, in fact vital, to make the whole thing work properly.

Well, in our passage today, we're going to learn that the church is no different. Just a reminder to us that Paul's letter to Timothy is all about making sure that the church works well.

So our theme verse, chapter 3, verse 14 and 15. Turn there if you've got your Bibles open. You can flip there on your phone. So chapter 3, verse 14 and 15.

Paul says to Timothy, So it's a very high calling that Paul is setting out here for Timothy to reach the church, but the church itself has got this high calling.

We're the pillar and foundation of truth. If we get this wrong, if we don't do church well, God's delivery mechanism of truth into the world isn't going to work well. And there's times, periods in church history, where the church was really not doing a good job.

[2 : 44] So 500 years ago, at the time of the Reformation, there were a handful of people that knew and understood and preached the gospel. Which is why, in Timothy, the number one thing, really, teaching is important.

If you want a well-functioning church, you need good teaching. That's why Paul says we mustn't have false teachers. And why Timothy, in chapter 4, verse 15, must devote himself to public reading, preaching, and teaching.

Well, that's verse 13. Chapter 4, verse 13. Devote yourself to public reading, preaching, and teaching.

So if you don't have good teaching, you're not going to have a solid church. We know that. The other thing that Paul says to Timothy, leaders are important in the church. If you don't have good leaders, you'll soon not have a good church.

That's chapter 3. Maybe it might be surprising that one of the things that God considers vital for his church to function well is ministry to the vulnerable.

[3 : 56] How the church looks after the poor. And so, it might come as a bit of surprise that the church only works well if it cares for the poor.

But this book is about how the church should work, and we've got an entire chapter in only six chapters of Paul telling Timothy how God wants his church to work.

That should tell us, oh, this is actually important then. One of the most important things that Jesus wants his people to know if they're to have a working church that accurately reflects his priorities

and values is to take care of the elderly, the vulnerable, and especially widows.

So, if we took teaching away, if we took good teaching away, we just wouldn't have a good church. If we took good leadership away, we wouldn't have a good church. And similarly, if we take care for the vulnerable, you can't have a properly functioning church.

Could be a surprise for us. Is it that important? We shouldn't. We shouldn't actually be that surprised. And maybe at St. Mark's we're not, which is good. But just to remind us, if you don't know it already, that right the way through God's word, he pays particular attention to those that find life hard in a broken world.

[5 : 28] We came across it in Exodus, in our time in Exodus. I mean, the whole point about Exodus is God looking after his people that are crying out to him under oppression. He says, no, I'm going to come and save you.

In fact, I've got to, I swear, he makes a covenant, an oath, a binding oath that he's going to come and save his people because they're being so badly hurt. And then the laws that he gives them, he says, because I've done this for you, you must be careful how you treat others.

So Exodus chapter 22, you don't have to turn there, I'm just going to remind us, don't take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused and I will kill you with the sword.

Your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. God takes it very seriously, the care that we give to those in need, those who are vulnerable, those who need help.

That line of care that God wants his people to give carries out in the Old Testament and into the prophets. We saw that from Isaiah 58, from our Old Testament reading.

[6 : 34] God talking about the kinds of fasts that his people are meant to give and there in the Old Testament they were given this hypocritical religion. They were pretending to fast, pretending to do the stuff that God wants, but he says, no, I'm not interested in that.

I'm interested in what you do for poor people, for the vulnerable, for those who need help. If you're not helping them, I don't care about you coming to church. I don't care about the money you give. I want you to care for the people who are hurting.

What kind of fast do I want? It's to, what do I, he's saying, Isaiah 58, God is saying, what do I want you to do? Here's what I want you to do. I want you, my people, to loose the chains of injustice, to untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free.

Is not the fasting I've chosen to share your food with the hungry, provide poor, provide the poor wanderer with shelter, and when you see the naked, to clothe them and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood to look after your family.

And then into the New Testament, Jesus draws attention to the poor and vulnerable throughout his ministry. In fact, those are the people that he most associates with.

[7 : 57] He didn't come to call the strong, but the weak, not the healthy, but the sick. In Luke 14, he's at a banquet with some Pharisees, with leaders of the community, and all jostling for position.

And he says, no guys, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you'll be blessed.

Although they, and then this amazing promise, although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. So, God wants his people to be, to reflect his nature, his protective nature, his helping nature, his caring nature.

In fact, we're to be marked. He wants his people to be marked by this kind of behavior. What he really wants to do is he wants us to work as a family.

which brings us to our next surprise in the text is that while God wants the church to be a caregiver in a sense, someone who provides welfare or relief or help for people who are struggling, the church is not the primary caregiver but the family unit is and so we need to remind ourselves of that.

[9 : 23] So, as much as God wants his church to act as a family to each other, he expects Christians to make sure that charity starts at home, their home.

Christians are not to be neglectful towards the care of their own family but in fact are to be the best carers that our families have and the reason for that is because caring for your Oma and Opa is actually an act of worship.

So, have a look in Timothy chapter 5 and I'm going to look at verse 4, verse 8 and verse 16. where Paul addresses the responsibilities of Christians towards their family.

So, he says, if a particular widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn to show respect, godliness, to their own family.

That is to say that the children and grandchildren are to look after the widows and they must repay their parents because notice this pleases God.

[10:31] God. And if they don't do that, verse 8, if anyone does not provide for his relatives and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Echoes of that reading from Exodus 22. 2. And then a reminder again at the end of the passage, verse 16, if any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them.

Let the church not be burdened so that it may care for those who are truly widows. the one reason here in this text, the main reason we take care of our families is because God really likes it when we do.

It makes him happy, that word where it says where it pleases God when we do this. It's an idea of opening arms, of welcoming someone, of being glad to see them, of being rejoicing in something that they've done.

when our kids do something good, done well at school or made their bed, well done boy, well done. You get that smile, you get those open arms.

[11:40] It's the same kind of feeling God gives in this text. It's the same kind of idea that if we look after our own family, God is happy with us when we do. But, God also takes us seriously.

So to not provide for your parents is to utterly fail in your duty as a Christian. You get this terrible label, worse than an unbeliever.

It's a shame you want to avoid at all costs. So, just as a way of thinking through this, I think we need to be careful or give careful thought to how we look after our families.

I think we must be careful of accepting the status quo of how the modern world seems to do it. It's very easy to accept the way the modern world says we should look after our elderly parents, especially if one of our parents has died and there's particularly vulnerable, widows are particularly vulnerable, but it's talking about families, older members as well, who need our help, anyone who needs our help really.

And so we've got this thing where we stay at home, our family units are very split apart in the modern world. So the New Testament or in this passage, I don't know if you noticed, but it talks about household, depends on your translation, it talks about the household.

[13:18] And in those times a household was a unit that stayed together, but it was multi-generation staying in one location. granny, opa, oma, mom and dad, children, and hangers on.

Very often multi-generations living under one roof. Now we take it for granted that this won't happen. We see it as a sign of success when our parents can support themselves and live on their own.

I think we need to think through how it would be possible to keep families together instead of just automatically assuming that it's better that parents live apart and don't impact us.

Although we do support them, I'm sure most of us do, but be careful that you do. Don't just accept the status quo of having your parents live somewhere else, especially if they're far away.

Just to let you know, there's a huge benefit in having grandparents and living with the family. You don't see that a lot anymore these days, do you? It might be, not in my experience, it's very few, not often that we see that.

[14:36] But if you can keep them with you, think through whether you can keep your parents with you, that's going to be helpful if you can afford that, if you can do that. But if you can't do that, if you can't keep them with you, we need to incorporate them as much as we can into our lives.

Can they move close by? Can we move close to them? How can we incorporate them more into our family life? How can we keep in touch with them if they're far away? Can you fly them out to visit you if you can't take your family to visit them?

Now, it's not, Paul isn't saying the entire burden of care must fall to family members. care is the church as an institution is also to provide care for those who need it.

But that brings us to our next surprise in that while the church is absolutely expected to provide care, there are certain conditions and qualifications attached to how it provides help to the vulnerable.

And so the third surprise is that the church's care is conditional not unconditional. Conditional not unconditional. So, the church is not to have what is called in the NGO world, we call it a bleeding heart syndrome, where you just want to help and you go out and help as much as you can, whoever you can, however you can.

[16:08] This is an approach that most governments take and it has a hugely detrimental effect. Just giving without expecting anything in return is known as enabling in the drug rehabilitation world.

We need to take a more nuanced approach in how the church offers care to people. We do have a heart, but we also have God's word. We don't want the helping to hurt, we want it to actually help and build others up in the faith and be more effective as Christians.

Because we're not just fixing what they don't have, we're fixing other things as well. Often, very often, you're fixing broken relationships and isolation. hurt and pain and unforgiveness.

Those things have to come out if you want to provide proper care. The church is to provide care for family members who need it, especially the vulnerable, here epitomized by elderly widows.

But the surprise is this care is not a one-way street. It doesn't come without qualifications. And so who are we to provide care for?

[17:15] Well, let's have a look. So we'll run through those verses again. So verse three, we're to honor widows who are truly widows. So there's people who, not that they deserve help, but that qualify for care.

Then in verse five, she says, she who is truly a widow, who is left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. So it's someone who needs help who's committed himself to God and spends prayer and spends a lot of time in prayer.

And then verse nine and ten, let a widow be enrolled. So there's a list that the church needs to make of people that need help, but there's qualifications.

If she's not less than 60 years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works. If she's brought up children, has shown hospitality, washed the feet of saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

So there's quite a high bar of someone who has the right to receive help from the church. And again at the end of verse 16, if any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them.

[18:37] Again, the family must get involved, but let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows. Well, that's actually how we operate our helping hands here at St.

Mark's. If people need help, we'll make an assessment, we'll check your needs, we'll see, we'll ask, we'll see, can you not get help from your family first? And very often they can't, and then that's fine, but we'll start a process of saying, okay, well, what is it that's stopping you from getting help from your family?

Have you burnt any bridges? What have your actions been like towards your family? Maybe you need to change some things, be wise about how you live. That's going to require a bit of discipleship, a bit of counseling, a bit of walking alongside and helping them know how to speak and how to react and how to forgive.

So immediately there, help isn't just physical stuff that we give them, food or money, it goes beyond that when you give Christian help. And then we don't just give handouts and then see you on your way.

We expect you, we incorporate you into the wider life of the church. We want you to respond by helping out at soup kitchens, by speaking to others who need help, by praying for others.

[19:57] And so we're doing exactly the thing that Paul is telling us to do here. I'm thinking, well, that's not how help normally works. If I need help, why are you expecting me to pay you?

I thought grace was free, love is free, why are there conditions attached? But actually it's a good thing to expect some sort of repayment in return, but it's not really a payment.

Think how God works in our lives. God blesses us by saving us. His love, of course, is unconditional towards us.

There's no strings attached there. There can't be because we can't earn it. We can't do anything to make him love us, but he does that. But he doesn't expect us then to receive his love and sit and do nothing for the rest of our lives and then die and then go to heaven and look at his wonderful face all day long.

That's a dysfunctional relationship where one person inputs everything and the other person does nothing. Think about your relationships with each other, your husband, your wife, or even with your children and parents or friends.

[21 : 13] It just would be so boring if you had this one person telling you how much they love them and they didn't want you to do anything. They just sat you in the corner looking pretty. Girls, you don't want that.

You want to be part of something bigger, part of an adventure. You want to respond and be involved and give back. God blesses us by saving us so that we become fit members of his kingdom so that we can bless others so that the kingdom can grow so that God's name can be honored.

We become active participants in his kingdom. That, in fact, ties in very well to Trinity Sunday. The longest liturgical section of our church's calendar is Trinity.

It stretches from here until Advent, just before Christmas. And apart from reminding us of the triune God, as Nick rightly points out, it reminds us the Holy Spirit is now working in the world and the church is busy working in the world.

And that's why it's the largest chunk of the church's year. It's like, hey boys, the ball is in your court. I've given you the Holy Spirit, run with it, score as many tries as you can.

[22 : 25] That's mixing your metaphors, I guess. But I've given you the power to change this broken world to better look like heaven.

And so we want to, when people receive help from us from the church, we don't just give it and leave it. We pull them in and want them to become members of the church that maybe they weren't before.

And I mean just physical members like membership role, but involved in church activities. Well, things like what? Well, here, ladies, because this chapter is really about the woman.

Prayer. Lots of prayer. Lots of prayer. And don't think it's a small thing. It's a major thing. The widows in the early church were known as the altars of God.

They were highly prized in the early church. In fact, there was this order of widows. They actually, they took this oath. It's actually mentioned in the text. That's why you've got the young widows, they're not to break their pledge.

[23 : 38] It's not their pledge to Christ as such. It's their pledge to live as these women who are devoted to Christ, to God, and it's not just a small thing that they do when they incorporate them into the life of the church.

They take an oath to promise to live like this and receive the care from the church. Prayer. Doing all kinds of good works. Helping those in need.

Being hospitable. Caring for the sick. In the early church, Tertullian is an early church commentator, theologian, and he talks about how Christian wives and women were very different from pagan wives and women.

He says this, who else would be willing to let his wife go through one street after another to other men's houses? Talking about Christian men and their Christian wives. And indeed, to the poorer cottages in order to visit the brethren.

Who would like to see her being taken from his side by some duty of attending a nocturnal gathering? At Easter time, who will quietly tolerate her absence all the night? So there's Christians met at night in those times.

[24 : 49] Just before dawn sometimes. Who will unsuspectingly let her go to the Lord's Supper, that feast upon which they heap such calumnies, which the pagans don't like? Who will let her creep into jail to kiss the martyr's chains or bring water for the saints' feet?

Well, there's a ministry we should start. The creeping ministry of going into jails to kiss the martyr's chains. But what a difference this engagement with receiving help from church and then pulling these ladies in to serve Christ in an incredible way.

It had a huge impact on the ancient Roman world. a huge impact. This stuff actually changed the world.

It doesn't sound like much, but the retired ladies club, if you want to put it like that, of the early church, changed the world.

It was a huge growth opportunity for the church, and it solidified the church as an institution in the ancient world that could provide care to people. It was never provided like this before.

[26 : 08] You either got it from your family and you really often didn't get it from your family, especially women who lost their husbands who were widowed. They were often shunned thinking that they had caused their husband's death.

In many parts of the world, the widows were expected to be buried along with the husband or burned. It's the Christian church who said, no, no, no, you've still got a role to play. You're important. You can give care. You can do stuff. You're not just there to receive help. You can give back as well. It was a Christian widow who started the first real hospital, and that movement hasn't stopped.

It was started in about the 400s. In fact, it was so powerful that one of the emperors, just after Constantine, who was actually his son, I think, or son-in-law, stepped back to being a pagan. Constantine was the first Christian emperor in the early 300s. And he complained about how good the Christians were taking care of themselves and others.

[27 : 14] He says this, it's disgraceful that when no Jew ever has to beg, and what he calls the impious Galileans, the people from Galilee meaning Christ and the Christians, it's disgraceful that they support not only their poor, but ours as well.

All men can see that our people lack aid from us, meaning the pagans. So the Christians outstripped them and outdid them all. They helped them within the church, and it was so obvious what was happening that people just flocked into the church to receive, not just receive that help, but to be involved in something bigger than themselves.

Rodney Stark is a social commentator, social historian of that period. He's a Christian, but he says this is how Christians made this big impact. To cities filled with the homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope.

To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family.

To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. and to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services and it was all done through the retired ladies widow club and others in the Christian church.

[28 : 45] Well, I think this must make us think about how we serve in the church here at St. Mark's. not just the ladies now, but men as well. We need to think through this passage which speaks to us about how involved we are to be in the church.

These widows took oaths, vows, to receive help from the church but then to help the church. It wasn't just volunteering in the sense that we've got it at the moment. Well, we don't have it as volunteering.

It's not volunteering. You're doing ministry here in the church. But I think we treat it a little bit like volunteering. Maybe we should start an oath, an oath taking for the servers at the back, the door servers, or an oath taking for the TV servers, or an oath taking for the musicians.

I think we need to take our service at St. Mark's way more seriously than we do. Way more seriously. You can come back at me privately if you want to.

Do take it seriously. That's fine. If you take it seriously, good. Keep taking it seriously. If you don't, think I can't make it today. You don't even send a text message. What's this?

[29 : 55] You're not doing nothing.

You're building God's kingdom. You're serving the king. You're not serving me or Nick. You're serving each other, but you're serving the people of God. And you're serving the people that God most wants you to serve, who need help, who he himself cares for.

If you're going to give half-hearted service, this, would you treat your own family that way? When your children ask for help, you're like, sorry, I couldn't pick you up today.

And your son is, he doesn't know what's going on, or your daughter's stuck somewhere, and you're just, oh, well, you know, I was busy. No, man. We don't do that with our own family.

We should not be doing that with our Christian family. So if you are volunteering, if you're serving, don't think of it as volunteering.

[31 : 01] Think of it as something much more than that. And if you're not doing anything for the church, why not? When are you going to get stuck in? Come and join us.

We're going to run knitting projects this year. We've got this jars of care. We've got our care teams. You know, when you get involved and do stuff together, it's not actually duty, it's actually fun.

Ladies, you know when you get together, you laugh a lot. And everyone who was here last year helping us fix our church up, it's a lot of fun when Christians get together and do stuff. But just to conclude then, we're not saved.

We're saved not in order to escape from the problems of this world, but to be part of God's saving actions to fix the problems of this world. For the church to be the church, it's vital that we take care of our own biological family and our spiritual family.

In fact, we're really seen as one family in the scriptures. It's not something external or extra we do as Christians, being involved in church activities. Because we are part of God's family, caring for each other as family is actually part of our DNA.

[32 : 16] It marks us out as true believers. Not doing it will severely impact our ability to be the church, but doing it will make our heavenly Father happy with us.

I don't know about you, but I think that's an excellent reason for getting stuck in and getting involved in helping people. through prayer. Well, Lord, this is an important passage of scripture and it speaks to us of how you want us to care for others and be involved in church work, how to care for those who need it in our own families as well as our church family.

Lord, we long to be the people who you want us to be, but we need your help. Please, Lord, give us your spirit. help us to catch the vision of building your kingdom and being part of your people and how exciting and fun and good that can be.

Help us to build your kingdom by loving others. In Jesus' name, Amen.