

Closing The Generation Gap

1 Timothy 5:1-2

“Never speak harshly to an older man, but appeal to him respectfully as you would to your own father. Talk to younger men as you would to your own brothers. ² Treat older women as you would your mother, and treat younger women with all purity as you would your own sisters.”

Every generation throughout human history has struggled with its own version of the generation gap between the young and the old. I can picture Adam and Eve complaining about the next generation, predicting the demise of the human race because of the values of their children and grandchildren. I can almost hear Adam complaining to Eve, "The problem with kids today is that they have no respect, no sense of sacrifice or responsibility." I can picture Adam and Eve's kids rolling their eyes, and whispering to each other, "Mom and dad need to get with the times."

It seems like every generation thinks that the next generation is worse than its own. Older people can tend to look at younger people with suspicion and concern. Younger people look differently, they dress differently, they embrace new technologies, and they're filled with dreams and new ideas. Let's be honest: it's hard to take someone seriously who only has to shave once a week.

Younger people fear older people will always look at them as kids, even after they reach adulthood. And younger people tend to disregard the wisdom of older people. They figure older people just don't understand. As a result, older people tend to feel unappreciated by younger people.

I think Mark Twain's comments about his father best sum up the generation gap: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got

to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

The generation gap exists in churches as well. Many of the power struggles churches go through result from tensions between different age groups. It's no wonder that older Christians start to get nervous when younger Christians start rising to positions of authority and responsibility in the church.

And it's also no wonder that many younger people simply give up on the established church and start their own thing. Before you're too quick to condemn that kind of thing, I would just simply remind you that some of the largest and fastest growing church in America began with a group of believers who wanted a place where they could worship in non-traditional ways.

Although it is true that when you are young older people can tend to not take you seriously, it is also just as true that when you get older younger people tend to not take you seriously. And the older I get the more I have to work keeping a loving and trusting relationship with the younger generation. I have had to get to the place that clothes and hair are just clothes and hair. **I have more and more come to realize that my greatest asset toward young people, other than salvation, is to help them follow their passion and make wise decisions that they won't regret later.** And that is not always easy unless we are able to lay aside some of our deep-seated opinions.

How can we close the generation gap? I am convinced that Paul closes out 1 Timothy by giving us the answer.

First, Paul gives us the Principle. Look again at verses 1-2, "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father..."

In our last study we saw how Paul encouraged his young protégé Timothy to not be intimidated by older church members.

And now he reminds this young preacher that although he might strongly disagree with some of the older believers, they still demand his respect.

Through my years of ministry, I have come to realize that most older people really don't want to hold younger people back from chasing their dreams. But what they do want from our younger people is to be respected. They want their opinions to count for something, and their experiences to be helpful. I am absolutely convinced that most older people want to contribute, not to control. They want to be respected.

And do you know what? I have found that respect is also what younger people want from older people. They want older people to take them seriously, to not write off their dreams as unrealistic and their idealism as impractical. They want to be taken seriously, to be respected.

Second, Paul gives us the application of the Principle. Now to apply this principle Paul focuses on three groups of widows. The Greek reads like this in verses 3-16, “Take care of any widow who has no one else to care for her. But if she has children or grandchildren, their first responsibility is to show godliness at home and repay their parents by taking care of them. This is something that pleases God. Now a true widow, a woman who is truly alone in this world, has placed her hope in God. She prays night and day, asking God for his help. But the widow who lives only for pleasure is spiritually dead even while she lives. Give these instructions to the church so that no one will be open to criticism. But those who won't care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith. Such people are worse than unbelievers. A widow who is put on the list for support must be a woman who is at least sixty years old and was faithful to her husband. She must be well respected by everyone because of the good she has done. Has she brought up her children well? Has she been kind to strangers and served other believers humbly? Has she helped those who are in trouble? Has she always been ready to do good? The younger widows should not

be on the list, because their physical desires will overpower their devotion to Christ and they will want to remarry. Then they would be guilty of breaking their previous pledge. And if they are on the list, they will learn to be lazy and will spend their time gossiping from house to house, meddling in other people's business and talking about things they shouldn't. So I advise these younger widows to marry again, have children, and take care of their own homes. Then the enemy will not be able to say anything against them. For I am afraid that some of them have already gone astray and now follow Satan. If a woman who is a believer has relatives who are widows, she must take care of them and not put the responsibility on the church. Then the church can care for the widows who are truly alone."

Now why does Paul use widows to apply this principle of respect? There are probably several reasons, but one of them is that **widows were the most vulnerable and needy.** In the ancient world, a widow was any woman who lived without her husband, so it also included women who had been *divorced* or *abandoned*. **When a woman's husband died in the ancient world, all of her husband's property and assets passed to his children, not to his wife.** So widows had no rights or assets. There was no government assistance for widows in the Roman Empire, and surely no family court to enforce alimony or child support. If a widow had no children to care for her, she'd return to her father's home, and if that didn't work, she was totally dependant on other people's charity.

So the first group of widows that Paul talks about are the widows who are destitute. But a widow only qualifies for this kind of respect if she has no other source of support. If the widow has Christian children or grandchildren, they should put their Christian faith into practice by caring for the needs of the widow. **I am confident that throughout this section, Paul has the fifth commandment in the back of his mind.** The fifth commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother." One application of that commandment is for adult children to care for their elderly parents. **To qualify as a destitute widow deserving support from the church, the woman must be truly alone,**

with no support from family. The Christian community offered financial aide to these destitute widows because no one else would.

A second group was ministering widows. To qualify as a ministering widow Paul says the woman must be over sixty, which was considered very old in the ancient world. Most men never made it to sixty and very few women made it to sixty. So this was the high end of the average lifespan in the ancient world, even though it sounds pretty young to us. **The good deeds described here are probably the kinds of things ministering widows did in their church ministry.** Bringing up children doesn't refer to the widow's own children, but to working with other people's kids. Perhaps these ministering widows led the church's ministry to kids, or perhaps they cared for orphans. Part of their ministry would be with kids.

They were also to show hospitality. When a guest speaker came to visit the church in Ephesus, it was these ministering widows who would open their homes for the guest speaker to stay.

They also helped those in trouble, which probably refers to what we think of as "pastoral care." They probably did home visitation with people who were sick and struggling. They prayed with these troubled people, seeking to be an instrument of God's care and comfort in their lives.

Historians tell us that by the second century this particular group of widows took a vow to remain single, and were called "the order of widows." This was probably the first example of an organized women's ministry in the early church.

The third group was worldly widows. These were younger widows who are living their lives for pleasure, addicted to a life of luxury. Although they were younger, they refused to work or remarry, expecting the church to take care of all their needs so they could live a lifestyle of selfishness and indulgence.

Notice that Paul's advice is not to give these younger widows any ministry responsibilities. Why not? The answer is really pretty simple – they were young and still had some pretty strong desires in their life. And those desires were likely to cause them to become involved in sexual immorality, or to jump into a marriage relationship. Either way, Paul doesn't want to put these women in a position of making a vow and then later breaking the vow.

But that was not the only problem these younger widows were bringing into the fellowship of believers. Apparently there were false teachers in Ephesus who were making inroads through these younger widows. This what Paul means in verse 15 when he says, "Some have turned away to follow Satan." Obviously, some of the younger widows had become captivated by ideas and doctrines that were not biblical, thus falling into a false religious system. Bible scholars believe that the false teachers in Ephesus were making inroads into the church through these worldly widows.

Because of some instances of sexual immorality, some instances of false doctrines, and some instances of the younger women refusing to work to support themselves, they were hurting the testimony of the church in the community. That's what Paul means by not giving the enemy an opportunity for slander. Therefore, Paul says the church is not to give these younger widows any financial aide.

So the question is - how does Timothy encourage mutual respect with these three subgroups of women in the church? The church shows respect for these widows by either giving them financial aide, using their talents in ministry, or giving them some measure of correction and direction.

So what have we learned from Paul's teaching to young Timothy? How is it possible to close the generation gap in our churches? The answer is simple, yet profound – that feat is accomplished by a mutual respect between the generations.

The older I get, the more I realize that there is a lot of waste when you are young. Young have so much idealism, but so little wisdom. They have boundless energy and enthusiasm, yet they lack many of the life skills necessary to harness that energy and enthusiasm for lasting good. **They are ready to take risks, yet often they take foolish risks, rather than calculated ones.** So much is wasted during our youth.

And the older I get, the more I realize that being older has a lot of waste as well. When we finally have the wisdom of hindsight, we no longer have the guts to take the risks we did in our youth. All that wisdom, learned from the school of hard knocks, yet its wisdom we'll probably take to our graves with us. **We have the perspective of experience, yet we distrust new ideas, so we waste that perspective.** Aging has a lot of waste.

But what would happen if the young and old respected each other? What would happen if the generation gap closed to the point that the vigor and idealism of the young was joined with the hindsight and wisdom of the older? What would happen if the young and old had a common vision of God's kingdom work on this earth, and instead of discounting each other; they respected each other for what each group had to offer? It would almost be like the day of Pentecost, when the church began, and God's Spirit was poured out on both men and women, young and old, slave and free, where all without distinction received the Spirit of God because of their faith in Jesus.