

## **The Indispensable Widows**

By: Keith R. Keyser

If one were asked to make up a list of the most important people in our world today, the names would probably be culled from the ranks of the famous statesmen and policy makers in the various regimes of the globe. Doubtless, numerous brilliant scientists and scholars would be listed among the ranks of the great; other people would include immensely talented artists, writers, and musicians. Still others would discuss great business leaders, who help shape the economies of the world. On such a list of the 'Who's who', would we find people who are commonly called widows? Striking a bit closer to home, would we choose to build a new assembly around a core group of widows? Most church planters would probably prefer to begin a new local testimony with young individuals or couples, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such a desire. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the assembly has a desperately needed role for the widows to play. They are especially useful to God, and need to exercise their ministry among His people.

### ***Widows in the Old Testament***

In appreciating the value of the godly widow, it would be helpful to study the history of God's concern for these ladies. The Old Testament is filled with admonitions to care for the widow (such instructions are frequently coupled with instructions to help the fatherless and the stranger.) Consider the fact that the Mosaic Law commanded Israel to care for the widows. In Exodus 22.21 to 24 the Lord says: 'Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto Me, I will surely hear their cry, and My wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless'. Deuteronomy 10.18 assures us that 'He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment'. Widows and orphans were to be fed from the obligatory tithes that Israelites paid, Deut.14.29, and they were to be included in the festivities accompanying the Feasts of the LORD, Deut.16.11, 14.

In ancient times, widows were in most cases unprotected and destitute. If she did not have family to care for her, no one looked out for the widow's rights, or made sure that she was sustained. In some societies to this day, widows are forced to eke out whatsoever living that they may find. Such poverty and need found an answer in the Word of the One who described Himself as 'A Father of the fatherless, and a Judge of the widows, is God in His holy habitation', Ps.68.5.<sup>1</sup> Clearly God is devoted to the widow's defense and provision. His scathing indictment of the failure of Israel's leaders in the days of Isaiah includes the fact that '...they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them', Isa.1.23. Years later, the Lord assured Israel that such oppression

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<sup>1</sup> . In this verse, the word 'Judge' is being used to describe one who makes sure that a person is protected and that their rights are maintained; that is to say, the widow's sins are not in view in this verse.

would result in Divine judgment, Mal.3.5. These are but a few of the many Old Testament references to God's unceasing love and concern for widows.

### ***Widows in the New Testament***

The Lord Jesus' ministry shows us that God's interest in the widow was not confined to Old Testament days. Repeatedly, He condemned the scribes and Pharisees for their abuse of widows, e.g. Matt.23.14 & Luke 20.46-47. Furthermore, on seeing a mourning widow following the bier of her only son, the Lord intervened and restored the boy's life, Luke 7.11-17. At the time of the crucifixion, it is highly possible that Mary was a widow. The Lord's compassionate desire to have her protected is seen in His statement from the Cross, 'Woman behold thy son...son behold thy mother', John 19.26-27. In both the Old and New Testaments it is apparent that the Lord loves the widow.

### ***Widows as providers***

Having established God's ongoing interest in the widow, one may inquire, 'What then is the importance of the widow to the assembly?' Firstly, the Lord has used widows to provide for His servants. In the Old Testament, He used a Gentile widow to shelter Elijah during part of the famine, 1 Kgs.17.8-24. During the church age, He has likewise used many widows to house and help His people. Among the marks of a godly widow in 1 Tim.5:10 is that '...she [has] lodged strangers...[and] washed saints' feet'. At the Judgment Seat of Christ many widows will undoubtedly be honored for using their modest homes and meager possessions to further the work of God.

Widows are also indispensable for the assembly, because they were used by the Lord Jesus to set the standard for selfless giving. On one occasion He observed many affluent worshippers casting large sums of money into the Temple treasury. Rather than single out some huge financial contribution as an example of giving, the Lord Jesus focused on a poor widow, who threw in two mites--a paltry amount in comparison to the gifts of the wealthy contributors. Nevertheless, the Lord affirmed that she set the standard on sacrificial giving by throwing in *all* that she had. One has noted that she had two mites, and therefore, could have kept one for herself. (Who could blame her?) Instead, she gave *all* that she had. God affords the widows the honorable place of contributing out of their poverty, a privilege that many with large bank accounts will never know, Luke 21.1-4.

### ***Widows: An example of faith***

Thirdly, widows set an example for the assembly in their life of faith. 1 Tim.5.5 reminds us that 'she who is really a widow and left alone, trusts in God, and continues in supplications and prayers night and day'. (NKJV) It is all too easy to mechanically give thanks for one's daily food without really being grateful for it. For the widow with little or no means of visible support, procuring food and clothing is a repeated exercise in dependence on Jehovah Jireh's faithful provision. It is likely that the reluctance of many young people to devote all of their time and energy to the Lord's work on the foreign and domestic mission fields results from their lack of understanding God's ability to provide for His workers 'on faith.' Although such questions naturally occur to the human mind,

such believers would do well to study the pious widows, who depend on the Lord without 'letters of commendation'.<sup>2</sup> The assembly desperately needs faithful widows to remind it of God's generosity toward His children.

### ***Widows: A barometer of piety***

Another vital function that the widows play in the Lord's assemblies is as a gauge of the piety of believers. James phrases this aspect of widowhood well, 'Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world', Jas.1.27. How a believer responds to those who are less fortunate than himself is an excellent barometer for our love, sympathy, & selflessness. If left to themselves, Christians often get wrapped up in their own problems and needs. The presence of needy saints like widows serves to remind Christians to care for the weak and show the love of Christ in practical ways.

### ***God remembers the widows***

Widows also demonstrate God's faithfulness and mercy. Though widows are sometimes forgotten by humans, the Lord never neglects them. He affords them the inestimable privilege of being the objects of His special affection and compassion. To the theologian, God is academically merciful; to the widow, His mercy is known in every day experience.

### ***Widows as servants***

Any assessment of the widow, would not be complete without noting their remarkable contribution to the work of the Lord. The distinguished history of widows' service takes us back to Anna, who '...departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the LORD, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem', Luke 2.37-38. Anna has her modern counterparts in the church. Many widows faithfully serve the Lord around the globe as missionaries.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in North America and the United Kingdom

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<sup>2</sup> The author certainly supports the biblical use of letters of commendation; it is feared, however, that in some quarters, they are seen to be a guarantee of financing from the Lord's people. On being commended, a wise servant of God counseled me: 'Look to the Lord for your support, not to the assemblies'. I have found this to be good advice. God doesn't need 'a letter' to support those who do His business. J. Hudson Taylor's famous axiom bears repeating: 'God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply'. Widows show the ability of the Lord to provide for His own, apart from all human conventions.

<sup>3</sup> Along with single sisters, widows compose a large segment of active servants in Gospel work and other ministries on the mission field; for verification of this, one may consult the CMML Missionary handbook or the Echoes of Service handbook. It is easy to forget the widows of missionaries/fulltime workers once their husbands have past off the scene.

the efforts of widows have a strong impact on the character of the work of the Lord. Often it is still 'the widow's mite' that supports the work of the Lord. Similarly, in their prayer lives and worship, many widows are the backbone of the local assembly. Anna was a woman of prayer; likewise, only heaven will accurately tell the distinguished history of the widows who waged spiritual warfare through prayer. Often times critics of biblical principles of gathering accuse women of having a nonfunctioning role in the meetings of the assembly because they are silent. On the contrary, God hears the silent worship of the sisters (including the widows), and is pleased by it.

Having scanned the long history of the Lord's appreciation for and usage of widows, one must conclude that they play a vital role in the work of God. Rather than overlooking the widows, local assemblies need to practically care for them, pray for them, and tap into their piety in the testimony of the fellowship. May the Lord teach us the value of widows, and the significant role that they play in His plans. Furthermore, may we like the Lord, love them and help them in their quest to bring glory to the Almighty God.

*Many of the principles that are mentioned in this article also apply to widowers, single elderly sisters or brothers, and 'shut-ins'. God remembers them, and will reward them in a coming day at the Judgement Seat of Christ.*

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Let us continue to financially support the widows on the field, who are in many cases neglected.