Biblical 'Social Justice'

[1] Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort *him* as a father, younger men as brothers, [2] older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity. [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. [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, [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. (1 Timothy 5:1–10)

[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. (1 Timothy 5:16)

For many people in the secular world, running a soup kitchen is about all the church is good for. And sadly, some people who claim to be Christians seem to think the same thing. They say the church isn't fulfilling its role unless it is giving to the poor, holding soup kitchens, giving food and clothing packages to the poor and homeless, providing shelter, or addiction recovery services. What good does it do, they say, to just preach these fancy messages, when there are starving people all around?

Nor is this a new thing. I remember my father telling me that the local church in his hometown of Harrismith did nothing more than provide soup kitchens and handouts. During the 19th century, teachings that came out of Germany began to spread in the professing church. These teachings said that the Bible shouldn't be regarded as God's Word; it had errors, and the miracles didn't actually happen, they're just myths and parables with symbolic meaning. All this talk about sin, Jesus dying on the cross, faith, heaven, Hell, that all needed to be discarded. Instead, the church needed to teach good ethics, the morality of the Sermon on the Mount, and then try to to make a difference socially. And pretty soon, even teaching the ethics fell away, and many in the church felt they had nothing important to say to the culture, nothing to preach to it. The only thing it could do was provide some social services: food, blankets, shelter, money. This became known as the social gospel, and many mainline churches became nothing more than providers of the social gospel.

In our day, it has reared its head again, even in so-called evangelical churches. We hear people saying that to preach the whole gospel you must alleviate poverty. They say to truly preach the kingdom of God, you must address injustice in society: racial injustice, gender-based violence, the gap between rich and poor. And what you inevitably find is that again, the social justice soon becomes the tail that wags the dog, and soon we once again have a social gospel.

We could all stand to hear the words of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. But this is what William Booth himself said

"My Comrades, never allow yourselves to put social work before the gospel of the grace of God. Take a man who has ruined himself by strong drink, has become a confirmed drunkard, beggared his family so that his wife has been separated from him, and his children are in orphan homes. He is just a common drunkard on the street. Take that man and sober him up, get him to sign the pledge and promise never to take another drink, move him out into the country in a new environment, settle him down in a little cottage, teach him a trade if he does not know one, bring back his wife and children, make his home a comfortable one, and then let him die in his sin and go to hell at last! Really it is not worthwhile, and I for one would not attempt it."

But we do believe there is a place for mercy, for meeting practical needs, for assisting people in dire straits. The New Testament does speak about giving to the poor. But nearly all the references are in the Gospels, dealing with the poor in Israel. There isn't actually a single New Testament command that says, "Give to the poor". Not only so, but every reference of the church giving to the poor was always giving to its own poor, the poor within its own ranks. But perhaps the clearest passage on how the church is to dispense mercy is found here in 1 Timothy 5, Paul's church manual for the young pastor Timothy. He has taught Timothy what to preach in chapter one, how to arrange worship in chapter 2, the selection of leaders in chapter 3, and how to conduct himself as a pastor in chapter four. Now in chapter five, Paul begin to deal with the dependents of the church: the people that the church will financially support. One of those groups is pastors, which he deals with in verses 17. But the other group is widows.

Widows in ancient times were truly the poorest and most vulnerable group. They had no pensions, no savings, no safety net. When they lost their husbands, they lost their means of support. You remember one of the first disputes in the church in Jerusalem was about certain widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution. The church in Jerusalem had some kind of mercy ministry to its widows. We remember James telling us that "[27] Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world. (James 1:27)

So here is a test case for us to see how the church is to dispense mercy and social justice. Is it a soup kitchen for everyone? Is it care packages for the needy? To outline this passage, we can simply say that Paul gives a command for mercy to be shown, and then gives the conditions for mercy to be shown.

I. The Command For Mercy to be Shown

[3] Honor widows who are really widows.

The word for honour has the idea of a care that includes financial support. In other words, the church is to financially support widows, but only widows are are really widows, in the specific sense Paul means. He doesn't mean that someone who has lost her husband is not a widow, but he means that the kind of widows that the church must support are of a particular kind.

Verse 9 shows us that this financial support is quite formal and structured. Do not let a widow under sixty years old **be taken into the number,**

To be taken into the number means to be enrolled, to be signed up, to be put on the list. Evidently, there was a list of widows who would receive financial support, and if they met certain conditions, they could be enrolled, taken into the number.

That already tells you that this is not indiscriminate, anonymous mercy to anyone and everyone. This is not a free-for-all, not a provision of money to anyone off the street, anyone who seems to be suffering, anyone who is in need. No, there was a process by which a widow was enrolled on the list to receive financial support. A widow needed to meet certain conditions to qualify as a widow indeed.

So what were those conditions?

II. The Conditions for Mercy to be Shown

Paul lists out some conditions which we can group into three areas.

a) Lacking any family support

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.

First of all, the widow needing the church's support is to be a widow with no family who can support her. The one who is really a widow, according to verse 5 is left alone. The word means absolutely solitary. Her only hope is God, (which means she is a believer) and she turns to God and God alone in prayers and supplications. She is destitute, and has no means of support. Specifically, she has no children, no grandchildren, no descendants able to support her.

The normal and expected thing is that children and grandchildren repay the debt of love their parents invested in them by supporting them when they can no longer support themselves. This was standard in Jewish life and even in the Graeco-Roman world. The Lord Jesus had harsh words for those Pharisees who allowed adult children to cheat this responsibility. People would take the money that would be used to support aged parents, and then they would say this is "Corban" "dedicated to God", so it can't be used for parents. But it could be used by the children; so it was just a devious way of refusing to support your parents with some spiritual excuse.

Children repaying or requiting their parents is good and acceptable to God, it is a partial fulfillment of the fifth commandment: Honour your father and mother.

Even unbelievers and pagans have understood that the care of aging, frail parents falls upon children. Of course, it is a sad, growing trend, particularly in the Western world, to leave the care of aging parents to nurses and homes. Certainly there are times when that is needed, particularly when physical frailty or mental disease has advanced that an adult child cannot properly care for the parent. But aside from those times, the normal situation is for adult children to bear the financial burden of aging parents. Verse 8 tells us that this is so normal even for unbelievers that Christians should not fall behind unbelievers in their piety.

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.

Even unbelievers don't always refuse this task, and so Christians should never lag behind.
First and foremost, this is a family responsibility.

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.

Notice verse 4 says, "let them learn to show piety first at home". If it doesn't come naturally to them, then they must learn it. And they only way they will learn it, is if they have to. If someone else takes the burden off them, they won't learn it.

Notice also what an adult child is doing when he or she supports aged parents: repay their parents;
It is not a formal debt, because no parent keeps a tally of everything he has spent on his child. But the debt of love should lead adult children to say, caring for my parents in their final years is a small way of repaying the debt I owe to them. This is where we get the English phrase, charity begins at home. Kindness and mercy should start with our family and then work its way out.

A widow as Paul means it, does not have any living family to support her.

b) Unable to Remarry or Work For Herself

9 Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number,

The age of sixty represents an age in the Roman empire when someone was considered elderly, not likely to remarry, and at the age where the kind of physical labour that women did was impossible. The Roman empire did not have pension schemes. There was no state support of the elderly, no government grants, no subsidies. A woman in Roman times was supported either by her father, by her husband, or by the labour of her hands. If her husband had died and she was this age or older, then it was likely she could not remarry or eek out a subsistence living through physical labour.

Younger widows still had options. Their first option would be remarriage. Their second option would be to use their existing health to work for themselves. We read of this standard in 2 Thessalonians 3:

10 For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. 11 For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. 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. (2 Thessalonians 3:10–12)

If someone is able-bodied enough to eat his own bread, then no one else is required to support him or her. If you do not work, you do not eat. When you finally come to that place where you cannot work, then someone else provides for you.

Indeed, even in broader economics, governments could learn from these principles. Whatever you subsidise, you get more of; whatever you penalise, you get less of. Penalise laziness, and you'll have less of it, subsidise laziness, and you'll have more of it. Penalise industrious and prosperous businesses, and you'll have less of them, subsidise able-bodied people looking for handouts and you'll have more of them.

What does this tell you about anonymous soup-kitchens, anonymous care-packages, first-come first serve money and food? What does this tell you about the poor person you don't know who asks for food or clothes or money? It tells you that while you are free to give to whomever you want, there is no obligation to give to people whose working status you don't know. If you don't know if someone has tried to work, if that person has worked hard to find work, then you don't know if the person has become a chronic sponge, a lazy, entitled layabout who lives off other men's labours. You don't know if the person is disobeying this Scripture that those who do not work do not eat.
In the church, we get to scrutinise and check if the person needing help has done everything he or she can to work. Even in our ranks, the fact that the person is in dire straights or in need is not enough to automatically merit money from the church. If someone refuses to work, out of fear, or laziness, or weakness, or apathy, or excuses, then that person's poverty is God's discipline. And the church is not there to obstruct the hand of God bringing upon a disobedient person the fruit of their ways. In fact, as harsh as it might sound to our ears, 2 Thessalonians calls on the church to church discipline the chronically lazy and deliberately unemployed member.

A widow who could be enrolled for financial support had to be unable to earn her own money through age or unable to have the support of a remarriage because of age.

c) Lived a Generous and Faithful Life

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.

and not unless she has been the wife of one man, [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.

The widow as Paul means it is not someone who lives a selfish, carnal life. Some people reach their senior years and they become more selfish, more self-centred, more inwardly focused than ever before. Some widows in the Graeco-Roman world would turn to immorality to gain some financial support, and Paul says these people are dead while they live; deadening their souls through sin just to prolong their physical lives. Timothy must command these things so that the church is blameless in its distribution, so that the widows are blameless, so that the families of widows are blameless.

But now Paul gives us a list of what kind of life merits the support of the church.

v 5: **She prays**: like Anna, the widow who met Joseph and Mary in the temple, she has made a ministry of praying for others. Her time is not spent on soap operas, gossipy phonecalls, aimless social media. She has a good and robust prayer list and prayer life.
V 9: **She was a faithful wife**. She hasn't been married multiple times. I don't believe Paul meant to exclude every possibility of someone who had been married more than once. But in most cases of having had more than one husband, if she is a widow, then either she has been through the unusual situation of multiple husbands dying, or possibly she has been divorced and remarried multiple times. Now either this means she may actually have more sources of income through stepchildren and other relatives, or it may mean she hasn't been relationally stable.
V10 **She was a sacrificial mother**. When it was her turn to be a mother, she was all there: raising, nourishing, caring for her children. She poured herself into her children. Now again, we have to assume if this is the case, either her children died, or her children so abandoned her (possibly because of her faith) that they have disowned her, otherwise, it is their responsibility.
V10 **She was hospitable.** She opened her home, she cooked for others, she didn't live in private self-indulgence, but embraced the happy inconvenience of caring for others.
V10 **She refreshed God's people**. The washing of feet is what they did in the ancient world when you entered their home, as both a practical thing and a gesture of hospitality. It cleaned your feet from the dirty and dusty roads, made it appropriate for you to recline when you would eat, but also was a kind way of welcoming you to the home. It refreshed you
v10 **She showed mercy to the hurting, afflicted, grieving**. Again, she opened her heart to the poor, the sick, the grieving. When she had opportunity, she blessed others.
V11 **She served wherever she could**. He good works are acts of service, acts of kindness.

What does all of this mean? She is a believer with a testimony. She has been generous when she did have money. When she had the support of a husband, she poured out her life to others. And the reason for all this is simply this: if the church supports her financially, they can expect more of the same. The money they put into her will not be spent frivolously, carnally, foolishly.

In fact, you will often find in a church, that older widows can be a source of great good or great evil. They either become powerhouses of prayer, faithfully attending, discipling others, finding any and every way to serve, help and bless. Or they become great drains on the church, sinking into bitterness, conflict, gossip, contention and self-pity. Paul obviously wants Timothy to support with church funds the kind of widow who already has a track record of faithful, generous service, not the

other kind.

What does this tell us about mercy giving? It shows that we are supposed to support the faithful, not the lazy. We support those who, through no fault of their own, go through a period of joblessness, or destitution, but whose lives have been marked by diligence, sacrifice, kindness to others. We support those who have already been good stewards of money when they had it, and now that they are without, we step in to assist.

When it comes to the local church, we have no command to meet the social needs of the world's population. As a church, our responsibility is for the poor in our midst. And among our poor, we use these conditions before we dispense money. This doesn't sound like broad soup kitchens for the public, indiscriminate care-packages, scatter-gun mercy. That becomes more an exercise in sentimentalism: feeling good about feeling charitable, rather than doing lasting, biblical good.

So can Christians not do soup kitchens?

Individual Christians can and have begun ministries to provide social kindnesses to the lost. Food, shelter, education, orphan care, medical services, disaster recovery, prison ministries. But even in these, Christians would do well to be guided by these principles: do not provide what unsaved people can provide for themselves, do not provide what is likely to be consumed by selfishness, corruption, neglect, or carelessness. When a man can solve his own problems, don't harm him by helping where he doesn't need it. When a man is a prisoner to his lusts, don't feed the beast that is consuming him.

There is a helping that helps and a helping that harms. The help that harms is the social gospel. The help that helps is a gospel-preaching church that responsibly helps its own, and wisely and thoughtfully helps all men.