

Defender of the Widow

Good to see everybody this morning. Y'all doing alright? Love it. Well, the season is upon us now—don't know if you noticed from the everything in this room, but it's *here*. We brought out the Christmas decor, we've got the tree out in the lobby. Thanksgiving is this coming week. Which by the way, I'm praying for you on that. After a year or two of some decent reasons to *avoid* some of the people in your extended family, this year you have very few excuses. So good luck with that—I'm praying for the awkwardness at your dinner table. Godspeed to you.

But as a church, we really kicked off *our Christmas last week*. If you're joining for the first time this morning, or just weren't here last week, we started a new teaching series last Sunday called *Good News for All People*. And while it *is* a Christmas series, it's a bit of a different kind of Christmas series. We spent some time looking at that famous announcement made by an angel to shepherds keeping their flocks by night—the one in every Christmas song ever.

But we spent most of our time focusing on **the specifics of that announcement**: what does it mean that the gospel is “good news,” and what does it mean that it is “good news for all people”? So last week, we spent some time digging through all of that. And one thing we mentioned was that *part* of what it means for the gospel to be good news to all people is that it is *even and especially* good news for many *vulnerable* groups of people in our world. *Often* in the book of Isaiah, when the phrase “good news,” comes up, it includes a reference to the poor and oppressed and marginalized.

So in light of all that, we then **announced to you guys** that **this Christmas**, we are kicking off a long-term initiative to care for those types of people, ongoingly, as a church family. And we have five specific groups of people that we are focusing on to start with: *single moms*, the *homeless*, *foster children*, *refugee families*, and *exploited women*. Each Sunday, we're bringing an item or two that particularly helps each of those populations. So in theory, this Sunday, many of you brought either onesies or diapers or both to help single moms.

If you didn't know to do that, or forgot, no worries. You can still bring those items next week, or just hop in with next week's focus. All of that info is available on the back of your bulletins, and at citychurchknox.com/justice. If you want us to send you a reminder towards the end of each week about what to bring so you don't forget, you can **text the word REMINDER to 94000**. But this is our way of embodying the good news for all people proclaimed at Christmas, by meeting specific needs of people in our area.

But last week we mentioned to you that we **didn't just come up with those groups** of people out of nowhere. The groups of people we selected are **loosely based on** the groups that come up repeatedly in the *bible* as people who are particularly in need of care and provision. A group of people theologians have called **"the quartet of the vulnerable"**: the *widow*, the *poor*, the *orphan*, and the *immigrant* or *refugee*. And then sometimes, a fifth group just referred to as the *voiceless* or the *unheard*. In the bible, those groups of people are especially vulnerable, and therefore are particularly in need of care.

So **what we wanted to do** for the remainder of this teaching series, **here on Sundays**, is talk a little about *each* of those groups of people. Each week, we'll focus in on *one* of those groups, *study* some of the emphasis that that group receives in the bible, and then talk about the *parallels* to those groups in our society today.

And the **goal in doing all this** is that we can help better understand the plight of people groups we are serving. It's one thing to care and provide for people because we're *supposed* to; it's another thing to do it because we have done our best to understand their situation and developed compassion *for* them. Right? So in this series, I want to aim for the latter. To see these types of populations not just as an *obligation*, but as image bearers of God worthy of dignity and compassion and provision. Make sense?

Okay. So **today**, I want us to look specifically at what the bible has to say about **widows**. **Why is the bible, and the God of the bible, particularly concerned about caring for widows?** Let me try to give you some context for *why*: **in the time periods the Old and New Testament were written, widows occupied an incredibly vulnerable space within society. And some of that was simply due to the fact that they were women.** Most societies back then were heavily patriarchal—most cultures were led and governed by men. Most *laws* were established and enforced by men. Which means that sometimes, they didn't have the best interests of *women* at heart.

But **beyond just being women**, widows were particularly vulnerable because of the tragedy of their husband's death. If there was a surviving *son*, that son would get the deceased father's inheritance and could choose to care for his mom with it. But if there was no son, or if there was no *inheritance*, that left the widow without much of anything. Additionally, many money-making professions were only available to *men*. So widows were left without many ways to make money and provide for themselves financially.

And when you add to *that* that **quite a few husbands and fathers died young** due to war or pestilence or famine—or just the daily strain of manual labor—and you can begin to see the problem at a societal level. **Many ancient societies would have a population of**

widows—*younger and older*—that were in vulnerable social situations. Being a widow in the ancient world was unbelievably difficult and was often a devastating, life-and-death type of scenario.

Now it's *because of all this that the Scriptures advocate frequently and emphatically* for the *protection of widows*. God cares for—and regularly commands *his people* to care for—widows. I didn't tell you to turn to any particular passage this morning because we're going to cover *a lot of different* passages on this, and they're all relatively short and punchy. But this is a *repeated theme* throughout the bible. So you can follow along on the screen as we move through them. You can also download the PDF that we'll post online later today with this teaching if you want to do more study on your own. But I want to show you just a *glimpse* at the *frequency* of this emphasis on *caring for widows* in the Scriptures.

For starters, when God first *delivers the Law* to the Israelites, it contains regular reminders in it to look out for the widow. It also contains stark *warnings* for those who choose *not* to. For instance, *Exodus 22:22-23* says this (this is God speaking):

Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.

There are passages like *Deuteronomy 10:17-18*, where *Moses is reminding the people* of who God is and what he's like, and says this:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.

It's actually *interesting* how many times God *introduces himself* by saying that he is a *defender* of the widow like this. Almost like it's one of the *primary* things he wants people to know about himself. I mean, think for a second about the details you tend to include when you are first introducing yourself to someone. For me, it's usually something like, "My name is Kent, and I have two small children—that's the reason I look so sleepy all the time. Nice to meet you." That's one of the first things I say. It's *important*, because otherwise, people just think I'm bored with my conversation with them; my eyes are glazing over. So I say it *first*—I try to get ahead of it. It's *important*. Okay, well one of the

*first things God wants people to know about him is that he is a defender of the widow. That's significant, when it comes to God's character and who he is.*¹

Again in Deuteronomy 24:17:

Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.

So back then, what you would do if someone couldn't pay you for a product or a service, is that you would take a "pledge" (basically an IOU) from them. Often, a *cloak* (people's outer garment) was used as that pledge. But here it says that when it comes to your dealings with a *widow*, you aren't allowed to take her cloak as a pledge. Why? Because it might be the only one she has, and she's economically vulnerable. So you shouldn't take one of her only possessions from her. To do so, according to this passage, is equivalent to committing *injustice* against her.

Another passage in Deuteronomy tells people that farm and own fields that they have to leave the "edges of their property" unpicked and ungathered, so that widows and others can come glean freely from it for food.² Now, it's difficult for us to register the significance of that, because most of us aren't farmers that own fields (although we are in East Tennessee, so maybe you drove in from your farm. If so, howdy. Welcome to the booming metropolis of Knoxville). But the edges of your field were equivalent to *income*. This would be like God saying to all of us, "hey—structure your budget however you want. But the last 5-10%? Just set that set aside and leave it somewhere for the poor to come and get. It's theirs." This is part of how God cares for the widow (and others).

The next chapter in Deuteronomy contains a sort of liturgy—a call-and-response type practice that God's people do when they're gathered together. In it, one person standing in the middle says "cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless, or the widow." And then everybody else says "amen!"³ Which would be an interesting practice for us at our Sunday Gatherings, don't you think? One of us declares curses on people and other people say "amen" to it? I don't know that we could do it—no Alabama or Florida fan would ever show up. But it was this way of them collectively decreeing that it was wrong to ever take advantage of a widow.

There was also an interesting practice in ancient Israel known as the "kinsmen redeemer." It was where, when a woman's husband died, either his brother or another

¹ Tim Keller points this out similarly in his book, *Generous Justice*.

² Deuteronomy 26:12-13

³ Deuteronomy 27:19

male relative would marry his widow and provide for her. Now, I realize that's a very odd idea for us to imagine in our day and time—and you'll be happy to know that that particular principle is no longer binding for followers of Jesus today. But in its time, this was actually a very *beautiful* practice built around the protection of women, to keep them from suffering and hunger and exploitation. **The book of *Ruth* in the bible is actually a really beautiful story centered around this ancient practice.**

Throughout **the *Psalms***, God describes himself and other *righteous* people as *defenders* of the widow, and an *unrighteous* or *unjust* person as someone who takes *advantage* of widows. I'll give you just a few examples:

Psalm 68:5:

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

Psalm 84:5-6:

[Talking about people who are *unjust* and *corrupt*, it says...] *They crush your people, Lord; they oppress your inheritance. They slay the widow and the foreigner; they murder the fatherless.* And then...

Psalm 146:9:

The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

In the **book of *Isaiah***, it describes a person who “does *right*” as the person who *pleads* the case of the widow,⁴ and the *wicked* as the person who refuses to hear her case.⁵ *Jesus* then picks up where *Isaiah* leaves off, *condemning* the religious elite of his day by saying in **Mark 12:39**, “**They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.**” I’m just saying: of my goals in life is not to end up on any of the “punished most severely” lists in the bible. That doesn’t sound like a great list to be on.

In **Luke 7**, *Jesus* raises a widow’s *son* back from the dead.⁶ Now, that’s amazing for all the *obvious* reasons (I don’t know if you’ve ever witnessed a resurrection before but I bet they’re pretty cool). But what makes it even more *significant* is that *Jesus* was tangibly caring for and protecting a *widow* by bringing her son back from the dead. He was making sure she wouldn’t be left in a vulnerable social position. In other words, in *that* miracle, *Jesus* was doing as much for the *widow* as he was doing for her *son*. **On the**

⁴ Isaiah 1:17

⁵ Isaiah 1:23

⁶ Luke 7:11-17

cross, right before he took his final *breaths*, Jesus told his disciple John to care for his mother Mary,⁷ a *widow* who would now be without a surviving oldest son.

In the **book of Acts**, during the days of the early Church, we read about a situation where the leaders of the Church specifically appoint a **council of seven men** whose sole job it is to make sure widows get fed and provided for.⁸ In the book of **1 Timothy**, Paul spends the majority of a chapter⁹ giving detailed instructions to the pastor of a church on how to navigate the logistics of caring for widows. Evidently, this was a significant ministry for at least some local churches early on in the Jesus movement.

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And **that's just a sampling** of what the bible has to say about caring for widows. I've left quite a few passages on the topic for time's sake. I know that's a lot to cover—I would say “sorry for all the bible,” but that's kind of our thing around here. I just take you through all of that to show you that this focus on God as a defender of widows—and his desire that his *people* would be *as well*—is quite the pattern in the Scriptures. Groups of people like widows are very near and very dear to the heart of God. **God knew that the world is set up in such a way that widows, and other groups like widows, are often extremely vulnerable to harm and exploitation, and so he wanted caring for widows to be a focus for him and his people.** God is a *defender* of widows.

And **while a lot has changed** between the time the Scriptures were written and today, *some* things actually *haven't* changed much at all. Groups of people *like widows* certainly have more *options* today than they did back then, but their *experiences* and *difficulties* can sometimes be just as difficult. Today, **we could probably include** in that category women who are *abandoned* by their husbands, some women who are *unfairly or sinfully divorced* by their husbands, women who are survivors of domestic violence, and *single moms*. Each of those groups can find themselves in similarly vulnerable social positions to widows.

And **one of those groups—single moms**—is especially *prevalent* in our society today. There are nearly 11 million *single-parent* households in the U.S., and 80% of those are *single-mother* households. Of those *single-mother* households, about a third live at or below the poverty line. About a third also are considered “food insecure,” meaning they lack reliable access to the amount of food they need at prices they can afford. 62% of these households received food stamps last year.¹⁰

⁷ John 19:25-27

⁸ Acts 6:1-6

⁹ 1 Timothy 5

¹⁰ All these stats can be found [here](#).

Single moms encounter a **wide variety of challenges**, ranging from the tangible to the emotional. Access to safe and affordable housing, and the means to pay for it. *Most* single moms have no choice but to put their kids in daycare, and with that comes the challenge of finding daycare that is safe, close enough to work, and affordable to the single mom. Then there's the challenge of what to do on the inevitable weeks that a kid gets sick or daycare is closed. There's also the enormous *cost* of childcare. You have to find a job that makes enough money to pay for your children's daycare and still more on top of *that* for daily survival. All these are contributors to why a shockingly high number of single-mother households can end up *homeless*.

I asked **Paige Brereton**, a woman in our church family who is *both* a widow *and* a single mom, to share some of her first-hand experience when it comes to things she deals with on a regular basis. Here's what she said:

[One of the toughest parts of being a widow and single mom is] constantly having to be "on." There are no taking turns or taking a break. The mental load of running the house, daycare dropoff and pick-up, cooking, cleaning, discipline, potty training—that's all on me. There's no one to "tap in" when you're at the end of your rope. There's also only having one person's worth of sick days to take with a toddler in daycare.

She also said that while having a church family to help meet needs is helpful, that **always having to reach out to ask for help** can be exhausting. When there are two adults in the household, one of them can notice when the other is struggling and step in to help—notice I didn't say it always *happens*, but it is at least *possible*—with being a widow and a single mom, there's no one to notice that as often. // So my point is that **while it may look slightly different today, the plight of groups of people like widows and single moms can be just as difficult, and they can find themselves just as vulnerable in a world that isn't set up for them to thrive.**

But the God of the bible *has and always will be a defender* of those groups of people. As followers of Jesus, we believe that *God* is the same yesterday, today, and forever.¹¹ Which means his heart is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So **if God was a defender and supporter of groups of people like this back then, he also is a defender and supporter of groups of people like this today.** And just like **God called his people to be a part of that provision back then, he also calls us to be a part of that provision today.** Does that make sense?

¹¹ Hebrews 13:8

And **it is precisely our belief in the good news of Jesus that compels us to do that.** You see, as followers of Jesus, we all understand that *we were all* in a vulnerable situation once—whether that was due to our own actions, the actions of others, or circumstances outside of our control (generally, it’s a combination of all three). But **while we were in that situation, Jesus sought us out and rescued us. He cared for us. He provided for us. And he did for us what we could not do for ourselves.**

Within the Christian tradition, **we have language for that idea** (that God did for us what we could not do for ourselves): we call it *grace*. *Grace* is what you and I experienced when Jesus went to the cross for us. *Grace* is what you and I experienced when Jesus rescued us out of situations that we got ourselves into and situations that *he* did not create. And *understanding* that experience of God’s *grace* should *also* guide and motivate our compassion towards others. It should make us *just* people. It should necessarily *incline* us towards the poor and the marginalized and the vulnerable people in our midst.

Here’s the way pastor Timothy Keller puts it:

*The logic is clear. If a person has grasped the meaning of God’s grace in his heart, he **will** do justice. If he **doesn’t** live justly, then he may say with his lips that he is grateful for God’s grace, but in his heart he is far from him. If he **doesn’t care about the poor**, it reveals that **at best he doesn’t understand the grace he has experienced**, and **at worst he has not really encountered the saving mercy of God. Grace should make you just.**¹²*

Here’s the way **James 1:27** puts it:

*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: **to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.***

Following Jesus—genuinely, authentically following Jesus—looks like us being motivated by God’s grace to care for groups of people like the widow and the single mom. Because Jesus cared for us, we care for them. God’s grace *makes us just*.
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So this Christmas, we are helping and serving single moms in our area through an organization called **Bethany Christian Services**. Some you likely have *heard of* Bethany—they are one of the world’s leading organizations when it comes to faith-based

¹² From his book, *Generous Justice*, p. 90.

adoption. Several families in our church have actually adopted *through* Bethany. But what a lot of people don't know—in fact, I don't know that *I knew* it until friends of mine adopted through them—is that they also do a *phenomenal* job *caring* for expectant, single mothers.

These **moms will often come to Bethany because** they're overwhelmed, or scared, or don't know what to do. And Bethany will help them in a variety of different ways, from providing food from their food pantry, to helping them research daycare solutions, to connecting them to ways to help cover utilities or other bills they may be short on. **A woman in our church actually works as a Pregnancy Counselor for Bethany, and is involved directly in a lot of these services.**

But one of the ways they help these single moms is by providing basic items and clothing for these moms—two of which are diapers and onesies. So that's where we're hoping to step in and help. The diapers and onesies y'all bring will go to Bethany and be given to single moms that are in difficult situations, to help take at least a *little* of the pressure off. There are so many things that single moms need, and our hope is to be involved in even more in the days ahead within this partnership. But things like onesies and diapers are needs across the board. And if it's one less thing that a single mother has to worry about, that makes a difference in her day-to-day life. So that's what we're gonna do. And **our hope is that beginning with this initiative, God will continue to form us into a people who care consistently and sacrificially for groups of people like the widow and the single mom.**

So here's what I want to do. Before we're done, I'd love it if we could just **spend a few minutes in prayer** for groups of people like the widow and the single mom in our city, and in our world at large. We've talked about God's concern for them, we've talked about how God wants us to participate with him in caring for them. I'd love if we could close out by praying specifically for them. And I do mean *we*. So I'm just going to lead us in a few prayer prompts that will also be up on the screen, and ask you to pray along with me for each of them.

So **bow your head**, close your eyes, and let's pray together.

- **Ask that God would make his presence known to widows and single moms in our world.**
- **Ask that widows and single moms would find their way to communities of faith that can care for them.**
- **Pray that the Church would fully embody and reflect God's heart for them.**