

INTRODUCTION

We are carrying on in our study of this passage, which is dealing with widows. Last time we discovered that the main responsibility of caring for the elderly is the family. However for those widows who have no family to take care of them, then it is the responsibility of the church to care for them. In verse 9 Paul continues to talk about widows but I think he is addressing a slightly different subject. He is not so much talking about providing for the widows, he is not thinking of what the church can do for widows but he is thinking about what the widows can do for the church.

The key to understanding this passage is to ask what Paul means when he talks about a list in verse 9. He is clearly thinking about an approved list of widows who meet the requirements set down in these verses. But what is the purpose if this list of names? Some people think it is a list of those widows who are really in need. But if you look at the requirements for being placed on this list then you have to be over 60, and surely there were some widows who were under 60 but in great need.

This list could mean that, but I prefer another interpretation and one that is widely accepted by modern day commentaries. That is that this list is an approved list of widows who are used in service within the church. They have the church's approval and commendation as they help in the life of the church and more importantly the community. This would make sense, for older people have seen life with all its up's and downs, they have a wealth of experience and they are wise, surely this could be used within the church probably to teach and train the younger women and children of the church (Titus 2:3-5). These widows could actually also be used by the deacons in assisting them with their work, although the woman helpers of 3:11 were not just exclusively widows.

Tasks like preparing women for baptism, visiting sick women, providing hospitality for visitors and strangers would all be within their remit. They may well have worked among the orphans, for most orphans ended up as slaves and sometimes as prostitutes in the first century. So you can see that there were plenty of tasks that could be completed by this list of dedicated widows. We do know that in the late first century and early second century that such a list of church helpers did exist.

People like Ignatius and Polycarp wrote letters, which were addressed, to such a group. I am not suggesting that the church supported all these widows, but it is likely that some of them were widows in need, and therefore depended upon the church for their support? But at the same time these widows would have time on their hands to minister to others on behalf of the church. Therefore they not only were financially supported but they were given dignity, as they were able to serve usefully the church. This is very important in our own society. It is one thing to make sure that our older people are cared for materially but we need to do a lot of thinking about how we maintain their dignity by giving them useful things to do. They can still contribute to society and certainty to the church.

If I am right in my understanding of these verses then we can see that these widows at Ephesus were not actually a liability to the church but were in fact a great asset to the church. What we have in this section is Paul's guidelines for those who should be recognised by the church as suitable church workers.

1. THE REQUIREMENTS OF CHURCH WORKERS (vs. 9-10)

a) Must Be Over Sixty - Paul tells us they must be over 60 to be placed on such a list. In the first century culture 60 was the age to retire. It seems from the instructions to younger widows that one requirement of being on such a list is a pledge to remain unmarried, so that you could devote all your time and energies into serving the Lord. The age of 60 may well have been considered the age when widows were considered unlikely to marry again and therefore able to fulfil their pledge.

b) Faithful to Her Husband - Such a widow must be a one-man woman. She has proven herself to be faithful in marriage and is therefore likely to be faithful to the Lord. Such a woman would be proper role model for the younger women and she could use her own experience to help the younger women to be faithful to their own husbands.

c) Must Have A Reputation For Good Works - Such a woman must be full of good works, for her good works will manifest her inward Christian character. Paul now lists the types of good works that these widows were to excel in.

i) Bringing Up Children – The Greek term means to nourish children. The picture here is of a godly Mother rearing her children in the atmosphere of godliness, caring for them and teaching them how to follow the Lord. This is a great privilege and responsibility of every Mother. In most homes Dad will be out of the house all day working, therefore it fell upon his wife to rear and teach the children the truths of God. Of course the husband has ultimate responsibility for seeing that his children are taught the things of God but in most homes this was delegated to the Mother.

Paul is not trying to deprecate women who were unable to have children or who had the gift of singleness. Such people fulfilled important roles in the church, but since having children was the norm in Paul's society he is simply giving a general principle. However a woman with no children of her own could manifest this quality by rearing orphans. Certainly it seems that only a woman with this experience could instruct younger Mums on how to rear godly children.

ii) Must Be Hospitable – Her home must be an open home; she must show sacrificial devotion to the needs of others. There were no hotels in the ancient world and the Inns were often unsavoury places for Christians to be, therefore first century Christians depended on hospitality from widows as well as others.

iii) Must be humble – Such a widow must be prepared to wash the feet of those who enter her house. That menial task was normally the task of slaves. Since the roads were dusty, guests entering a house had their feet washed to refresh them. I don't think that Paul necessarily meant that the widow is to do this task herself every time, but he is using it in a metaphorical sense, to speak of humility. She must be someone who in the past has been prepared to do such menial tasks for the work of God.

iv) Helping Those In Trouble – The word "trouble" simply means those under pressure and so here is a picture of a person who devotes herself to helping those under pressure, whether the pressure is caused physically, mentally or emotionally does not matter, she actively seeks to ease the pressure however it may be caused.

v) Must Be Devoted To All Kinds Of Good Deeds – She is someone who energetically and diligently gives herself to the pursuit of all kinds of good works.

Let me try to apply this before we move quickly on. All these qualities describe the character of a widow who qualifies to serve the church as a recognised representative. But surely these qualities are simply the standards for every Christian woman in the church. Widows who were to be put on the list were not to display these qualities only since they became widows, but since they became Christians. Therefore each woman should be seeking God now and asking God to help them become woman of real Christian character.

There is another brief application here as well. Because someone is older it does not mean that they cannot contribute to the life of the church. I think younger people have to realise this so that they do not get the idea that when someone retires that's it, they no longer can contribute anything useful to the life of the church. Older people have a wealth of knowledge and experience, they can show great wisdom and we all must to learn from them. Therefore for the older ones among us, do not think you have nothing to give to the church, for you are wrong, the church needs people like you, but make sure that you display these qualities so that you can be most useful to the church.

2. ADVICE TO YOUNGER WIDOWS (vs. 11-15)

Paul says that the church is not to put the younger widows on such a list and he then gives reasons for this, as we will see in a minute. The older widows are to devote themselves to the service of the church, but the younger widows are to get married. (v 14); presumably if these women are widows in need then they are to get help from the church until they find a suitable partner.

But they must not be placed on the list of woman workers within the church. Of course this does not mean that they do not serve within the church, but their service is not to be as committed time wise as the widows over 60 were committed. Paul gives two reasons why they were not to be put on such a list:

a) **Their Service To the Church May Not be Single minded** – When they feel very natural sensual desires, these desires may overpower them so that their promise to give all their time and attention to the Lord and his church could be broken because they want to get married. A young widow will not have given up hope of remarriage and therefore she will rightly be looking out for the right man, but this list appears to be made up of those who have no desire for remarriage and have given themselves to wholehearted devotion and commitment to the Lord and his church. The older widows have devoted all their time and energies to pleasing God and to doing his work in the life of the church and community. Paul does not want a younger widow to make such promises to God and to the church only to find herself frustrated because she has natural sensual desires that need to be satisfied.

Such a young widow might feel frustrated by her vow and although she could break it and get married she then has to live with a sense of guilt, for making vows was a very serious thing in Bible times much more serious than we hold them today. For in verse 12 Paul tells us that such women will be held accountable for breaking their pledge or vow.

Perhaps we need to realise how serious breaking promises to God and church really is. When we became members of this church you promised to uphold our constitution and that constitution gives us responsibilities of membership. Have you kept your promise concerning membership? Get the book out and read them again, for God holds us responsible for breaking our promises and vows before God.

b) Lack Of Maturity (vs. 13-15) – Such widow's lack a certain maturity of knowing how to handle the work of the Lord. Younger widows get into the habit of being lazy; they become gossips and nosey and then say things they ought not to say. Visits that should be carried out for the purpose of ministering to others can become an excuse for idleness. As they go from house to house, nothing constructive takes place and at best trivial activity occupies them.

They may also become gossips and nosey and begin to pass on things that ought not to be said. Of course Paul is generalising here but this must have been the case within the church at the time and it is of course always a real danger in every church. Every one who represents the church in some captivity has to be careful in this area.

If we are visiting someone on behalf of the church, then we need to make sure that those visits are profitable and are not just used to idle away the afternoon. We have to make sure that people trust us, so that we are not found being nosey, prying into other people's business is not our task and we must make sure that we do not pass on what we are told in our visiting. People have to be able to trust church workers otherwise their ministry will simply not be profitable.

Paul says that for these two reasons younger widows are not to be put on a list of church workers. So Paul gives advice to these younger widows. What are they to do with their lives? They are to get married have children and to look after their households (v 14). They are to occupy their life with the tasks that women are to do. They are to serve God by being a good godly wife, by raising children in a godly manner and by doing all the things necessary in being a good housekeeper. If they are doing that then they won't have the time, to be idle, or gossip or be nosey or to speak foolishly.

Its good sensible advice isn't it? Its certainly necessary advice for it is clear that some women in Ephesus didn't heed it for some had already turned from the Lord and were now following Satan (v 15). It's advice that every woman needs to hear today. Serve God by serving your family.

What will be the outcome? They will not give the enemy of the church an opportunity to slander these women, or the church or Christ himself. People will not be able to point the finger at this woman and say "you know since she lost their husband and became a church visitor she has become lazy. She is really nosey you know and don't tell her anything otherwise it will be all round the place." If young widows head Paul's advice, people will say "you know after she lost her husband she found a new one, and she has given herself wholeheartedly to raising her new family and to being a good Mother, wife and housekeeper." Such a widow will not leave the door open for the enemies of Christ to slander the church.

Amen