

Godly faithfulness

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[0 : 00] Well, folks, this evening's sermon is going to be focused much more on the women in our congregation than on the men. These verses are focused on widows, aren't they?

Hopefully you spotted that as we went through, so that's where the emphasis as we consider these verses together will lie. So guys, I guess you're free to doze off, just settle back.

No, here's the thing. Guys, this means you're going to have to work a bit harder this evening. I suggest you want to have a couple of questions in the back of your mind as you're listening to the sermon this evening.

Number one, if this is what godliness looks like for women, what might be the parallels for me? So what does and doesn't translate across for me into my situation?

And second question to have in the back of your mind, how can I best support and encourage the women around me, wives, mothers, daughters, sisters in Christ around us?

[1 : 04] How can I, as a man, help these women to be godly women as we consider some of what that looks like? Alternatively, for women here thinking, well, I'm not a widow.

Well, as we're going to see as we go through, much of this concerns how women should have been behaving before becoming widows rather than their behavior after the fact.

So it should be well worth taking note of just now as well. So hopefully that covers pretty much everybody. You will all need to pay attention.

So as we look again at verses 3 to 16 of this chapter, these verses principally concerned with the proper support of widows in the church and who should and shouldn't be eligible for enrollment for official church support.

And last week we considered that first distinction that Paul draws in verse 4, that the widow with other family around her should be primarily supported by them so that the church can preserve its resources for those without other support.

[2 : 08] But as I mentioned last week, that's not the full picture. It's not that straightforward. And as we look through these verses, there are a number of other criteria that are to be met before support would be offered officially by the church.

And what Paul seems to be laying out is kind of a broad picture of who these widows, who in verse 3 he describes as really in need or true widows more literally, of what these women are like.

And he contrasts these godly widows who are to be supported. He contrasts them against the younger widows who we explicitly encounter in verse 11 and onwards.

So he talks about these two different groups and he does so in terms that seem quite polarized and quite there are these group and these group. But as we kind of dig into the details, what we see is that they can't be kind of two completely never overlapping groups that don't share any characteristics.

If that were true, if they were hard and fast separations, then we end up with a theory that there's no such thing as a godly widow under the age of 60 and no such thing as an ungodly elderly woman.

[3 : 21] Now clearly that cannot be the case. So it's not a kind of hard and fast dichotomy, but still Paul is using these categories. And one of the things to bear in mind is that Paul is not writing these verses first and foremost to Covenant Church in 2018.

He isn't writing a general manual for churches throughout all time. No, Paul is addressing this particular church in a particular situation at a particular time in their history.

So Paul is writing into the context of a church that is embattled with false teaching. Paul is writing to Timothy. Paul is writing to the man who is going to have to go and deal with these individuals and equipping with him with what he needs in that context of false teaching.

He's writing that these younger widows who he's so dismissive of are perhaps particularly involved with that false teaching. So he characterizes these two different groups and he offers advice to each of them.

There are the godly older widows and there are the faithless younger widows. So let's take a look at each in turn. The godly older widows.

[4 : 33] These are those who in verse 5 are characterized as having put all their hope in God. And as continuing in prayer night and day asking God for help.

And what we see here as we meet this woman, as we meet this godly widow, we see that at least on one level she's not anything that special. By which I mean that the characteristics that is used to describe her, both here and the later ones, are really things that should characterize all believers, aren't they?

Shouldn't it be true of all of us that our hope is in God? Should we not all be characterized by prayer at all times? Should we not all turn to God for help first and foremost?

So yes, this should be true of all believers. And in fact as Paul presents it in this verse, it comes across as almost inevitable, doesn't it? Because she's in the situation, that is what she does, almost inevitably.

And that should be the case, shouldn't it? That seeing that you, humanly speaking, have no means of support, that recognizing that naturally inclines you to depend on God for support.

[5 : 55] But the reality we often know is that that isn't what naturally happens, is it? Because we've all seen people who as things fall away around them, rather than turning in greater dependence to God, instead rail against God.

They get angry with him. We've seen people whose response is to reject God rather than to depend on him. We've seen people who are angry with God for taking away their husband, for leaving them without support.

We've seen people who refuse to see the provision that God is making for them, and instead are angry that it isn't something different. So we know that it is not inevitable that we would turn to God in trust.

And so, because it's not inevitable, it is right and proper that this godly widow is commended for the fact that she is turning to God in dependence. Now, verse 6 introduces a contrast between her and this other widow, but we'll come back to that in a few minutes.

Let's stick with the godly widow for now, and follow down with me to verse 9, where we learn a few more things about her. Paul turns here to explicitly consider, to enumerate, if you like, who should receive the support of the church in an official capacity.

[7 : 35] And here at this point, there's a couple of different ways of potentially understanding the verses that follow. Certainly there seems to be some kind of an official list, the list of widows there in verse 9.

A formal group of widows who are enrolled as such. These are the widows that the church officially commits itself to support, and it would seem commits itself to support indefinitely until such a time as this woman passes on to glory.

And the question that divides commentators on these verses is whether this list of characteristics in these two verses, whether that's the criteria for entry into the list, or whether this is a list of what these women are expected to do once they've been enrolled.

Because it seems that at least by the second century, these verses were being used to support kind of having an official order of widows whose job was to go and do these things.

So the church had people being appointed to at least three different offices. You have the elders, you have the deacons, and you have the widows. That happened in the history of the church.

There's also some potential support for that view in verse 12, but again, we'll come to that later on.

[8 : 57] For now, let me say, I'm pretty convinced that, yes, Paul is talking about an official list of widows. You know, written down, these are the true widows.

But the purpose of that list is to enumerate, to list who will be provided with support. The purpose of that list is not, these are the people who have jobs to do.

So the list of characteristics in verses 9 and 10, that list is criteria for being put on the list, not tasks to be done by those receiving support.

Why do I think this? Number one, the verbs in this list are past tense. These are things that have happened. If these were being presented as what the widow should be currently doing, they'd be in

the present tense or even the future tense, what they will do once enrolled.

But these are past tense. This is what these women have done. And secondly, the first two things on the list are nonsensical as duties, aren't they? Being over 60 is not a task to be accomplished.

[10:01] And faithfulness to her husband is not an ongoing thing for a widow. She should certainly be chaste in her new situation. But to see this clause about faithfulness to her husband, primarily in terms of present abstention, that would be a linguistic stretch, to say the least.

So we have a list of criteria for what a woman should be in order to be added to the list of widows to receive this formal perpetual church support.

We'll come back to the age requirements in a few moments. But as for the other requirements, well, if these are things which should already be characteristics of this woman before she is enrolled, that means she should have been doing them before she became a widow.

So, ladies, it's no good thinking I will do those things later. They are for now. So here we go.

Number one, she must have been faithful to her husband.

Interestingly, the wording here is the inverse of the wording required for elders and deacons. They are to be one-woman men. The widow is to have been a one-man woman.

[11:14] And as we considered when we looked at those lists, that doesn't necessarily preclude the possibility of somebody who's been married more than once one after the other. If those who've been married twice are ineligible for support, then for Paul to advise younger widows to remarry in verse 14 would seem rather cruel, wouldn't it?

No, the NIV rightly captures the sense here with the phrase faithful to her husband. Again, the Bible is unashamed to call people to a life of faithfulness, of sexual purity, of godly living.

Why is this specifically a requirement to receive the financial support of the church? Maybe this is intended to scare the women into keeping in line, lest they be deprived of support later in life.

Well, I think Paul would be okay with that as a fringe benefit. The Bible's quite happy to present to us negative consequences of sin as disincentive.

But more than that, Paul's concern here seems to be, again as in other places in the letter, notably verse 8 just above, his concern seems to be for the reputation of the church, for how it will be seen from the outside, for the church to support a woman who is known for her immorality would not give a good impression to the outsiders.

[12:36] For the record, I also don't think that this would necessarily exclude the penitent adulteress. The woman who has repented is not necessarily here excluded.

Paul has not forgotten grace. He hasn't moved away from the idea that sins can be washed clean. Now, sins being forgiven doesn't always mean that there are no consequences to them here in this life.

But I don't think it would be right for us to use these verses to say that a church should never support a woman now widowed who has, after a brief indiscretion, reconciled to her husband some 20 years before he then later died.

That is not Paul's intent here. Paul understands grace, I think. Nevertheless, this is a clear call to faithfulness. Secondly, she should be well known for her good deeds.

That serves as something of a catch-all, doesn't it? And it's repeated again at the end of verse 10.

And these two clauses, I think, should caution us against seeing this list as an exhaustive list.

[13:48] These are all the things that she must have done. Or as a prescriptive list. She must have done every single thing on this list. No, we have these general terms beginning and end.

And it's also worth noting that the term widow here, the primary meaning of that Greek word is the same as the English word widow. But it did also have a kind of broader, more metaphorical sense of being used to refer to a woman who, for whatever reason, has been deprived of means of support.

So the same criteria could be applied to the never married woman who was being supported by other family members who've now died. Or to the woman who has been supporting herself but now cannot do so.

Or to the woman who has been abandoned by her husband. We don't need a kind of legalistic definition of widow here. We could legitimately apply these things more broadly.

And again, the phrasing well known for good deeds, I think that again suggests that concern for the perception of the church outside. Who is the church to support?

[14 : 59] They have to support those who the world will look on and think, of course, of course, she deserves the help of the church. She is exactly the kind of woman we would expect.

And then, kind of moving into examples of good deeds, Paul offers the bringing up of children. The raising of children, providing for them materially and spiritually, this takes effort.

It takes sacrifice, doesn't it? And unfortunately, in our world today, it's often the case that women are seen as not being fulfilled fulfilled or not living up to their potential unless they are at work outside of the home.

And women who just stay at home and raise their children are often looked down on by the world around us. But in the Bible, godly women are those whose first priority is the rearing of their children.

Now, I am not saying that you cannot be a godly woman whilst working outside the home, but what I am saying, mums, is that I think the Bible expects of you that your children, that your family, are right up there at the top of your list of priorities.

[16 : 17] Whatever that looks like in practice, it is clear that they are to be a priority. So that might mean not living up to your potential in the eyes of your friends or your parents.

It might mean giving up the promotion because you can't expect to get the promotion while you're working part-time. It might mean sacrificing your career because raising your children is important in God's eyes.

Again, let me say I don't think this is an exhaustive list of requirements. And so, just as we said a few weeks ago with a similar requirement for elders and for deacons to be managing their household to have obedient children, we're not saying this is an absolute requirement that there must be children.

More that this is the default case as it were. If the widow has children, she is here being expected to have brought them up well or perhaps even have contributed to the upbringing of other children.

But surely this cannot exclude the widow who never had children because remember this is the woman who needs the support of the church because she doesn't have children and grandchildren to look after her.

[17 : 29] So to exclude someone who never had children would be kind of counterproductive. So that is not the idea. This doesn't exclude the childless widow.

Not a requirement to have had children but it is a requirement to have been devoted to any that she does have. Requirement number four showing hospitality.

Folks, I don't want to dig into this one today. We don't have time to go into all of these in detail.

We've touched on hospitality in other places and I'm sure we'll be back there again. But let's note that it is here again in a list of what godliness looks like.

You might ask yourself whether your home truly is a hospitable place. Number five, washing the feet of the Lord's people. Okay.

Why is this here? I think this is here because it's a mark of humility. I think in the same way as Jesus took this dirty, smelly, unpleasant job for himself, so his people are called to a similar life of sacrificial service for one another.

[18 : 43] Guys, this is not a glamorous task. This is not a pleasant task. But it is a job that needed doing. And it is a job that if it was not beneath Jesus is not beneath any of us.

That doesn't mean we all need to go and wash one another's feet. It's not quite as useful a contribution to community life now as it was then, perhaps. But if the washing up needs doing and the notice sheets need folding and the chairs need putting away, well then a humble life of service is willing to serve the Lord's people in the ways that don't get noticed.

Does the toilet need cleaning and the drains need unclogging? Well, humble service says that we get on with the smelly and unpleasant jobs. God's people are called to humility.

A godly woman is willing to serve in humility. And so a godly widow will be marked by the humility of her past service. Folks, we're being called to serve in these ways not because we aren't capable of anything else.

not because we can't do something better, because we can't do something more important. No, we're called to serve in these ways because they have to be done and because nothing is to be beneath us.

[20 : 04] Number six, helping those in trouble. The godly woman is committed to other people. In some ways this is of a piece with the washing of the feet, isn't it? The godly woman is one for whom

nothing is too much trouble when it comes to helping one another.

Philippians chapter two, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of the others.

Friends, this is the picture of the kind of woman to whom it is right and proper that the church commits themselves. this is the kind of person who is worthy of support.

And verse four that we looked at last week, it talks about children and grandchildren repaying their parents and grandparents by supporting them as widows because this is pleasing to God.

And as we come with this paradigm of church as family that these verses sit within, I wonder if part of that same idea is at work here.

[21 : 14] Is it fair to say that Paul is painting a picture of how this woman has served the church, has served the family in a manner like a mother serving her children?

And thus, it is similarly deserving of repayment from her spiritual children in the support of the church. So, ladies, I ask you whether you wish to be known in later life as a godly woman.

Do you wish to be one to whom the church can point and say, we gladly support this woman because she is a true believer, because she has lived out her faith and we honour her for it.

If that is what you wish for your future, then this is how to live now. That is what the godly older widows in Ephesus were like.

Not so the young widows. Paul has some pretty harsh negative words for these younger women in Ephesus. Clearly, these women are not living the kind of godly lives that the older women are.

[22 : 21] Paul implicitly holds the older women up as examples of what these younger women should be, whether widowed or not, I suspect. Because there is a really strong contrast here, isn't there?

Where the godly widow prays night and day, verse 5, these women, verse 6, live for pleasure and are dead even whilst they live.

These are strong words, aren't they? These are women who instead of treating widowhood as an opportunity for a new kind of service, a new commitment to prayer, instead of that, these kinds of widows have seized on it as an opportunity for a sensual lifestyle.

Living for pleasure here, this is a strong term. It suggests that kind of wasteful, extravagant kind of life. It suggests immoral relationships. Obviously, this person does not warrant the church's support.

This widow may think she's alive, she may be living it up, but the reality is she is dead. This is not the sort of true widow who should be provided for by the church.

[23 : 37] Verse 11 continues that picture of this woman, and it doesn't get any better. These women should not be enrolled because when their sensual desires overcome them, they want to remarry and they break their first pledge.

Verse 12. Now, this verse, verse 12, that talks about this pledge, this is the main verse where people hang support for that idea of the official order of widows with duties and so on, and as part of that, a pledge of celibacy for the rest of their lives, and hence you shouldn't enroll the younger women.

That's kind of where one of the things that's brought in support of that. But I don't think that is what Paul is talking about here, but that leaves us with another question.

What pledge, then, are these younger women breaking if and when they remarry? Verse 12 says she's broken her pledge, her first pledge.

Well, two pointers help us out here. Firstly, that word translated pledge can also be translated, in fact, more commonly be translated faith.

[24 : 49] Both options reasonable linguistically, but every other time Paul uses the word in 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and in Titus, every other time he seems to mean the Christian faith when he uses the word here translated pledge.

And secondly, verse 11 has this idea of being overcome by sensual desires and therefore wanting to marry. Now, Paul cannot think that it is a problem in and of itself for young widows to remarry, can he?

Because in verse 14 he says, go and get married. So what is he saying? The problem then seems to be not so much remarriage in itself, but rather self-indulgence and immorality that comes from it.

Verse 15 goes so far as to say that they are following Satan, which is strong terminology, and reminiscent of how Paul has talked about the Ephesian false teaching, and suggests a complete

abandonment of faith, does it not?

So what seems to be envisaged here is a remarriage that includes abandoning her faith in Christ, abandoning that pledge, abandoning that first faith.

[26 : 05] It seems that for these women their sensual desires are more important than their faith in Christ, and more important to the point that she is willing to go and marry an unbeliever in order to fulfill those desires.

You might say then, well, why not just repeat his warnings about not marrying those who don't believe? But actually, I think effectively that is what he is doing, because he does advise them to marry, and he does say, don't do it in a way that abandons Jesus.

And don't forget that the angle he's starting with here is, should they be enrolled for official support from the church? Answer, no. Because again, they might bring the church into disrepute.

It seems that the widows in Ephesus most definitely were. So the church should not sign themselves up to something long-term where they will be promoting immorality.

And verse 13 fleshes that out. These widows who don't need to spend their time caring for a household and for a husband and for children have instead got into the habit of being idle busybodies.

[27 : 22] This, verse 14, is giving the enemy opportunities for slander. Their misconduct, their idle gossip, perhaps their spreading of the false teaching, likely their sexual immorality, at the very least their squandering of their time, is leading the world outside to view the church in a poor light.

They have opened the church to slander. Now this is not Paul saying that every young widow is like this, but he is saying that this is characteristic of the situation in Ephesus.

But what we can note more broadly is that sloth is a sin. Laziness is wrong. That we are responsible before God for how we use the time that he has given to us.

The context here is of the church being advised not to support a lifestyle of laziness, but there is of course an implicit rebuke to the women themselves as well. They ought not to be dishonoring the gospel in their idleness, and more so they ought not to be turning away after Satan in their sensual desires.

To be frank, I think it is those sensual desires that have led him to put in the age restriction back in verse 9. So these younger widows, what ought they to do with their sensuality?

[28 : 50] Verse 14 advises them to channel it into the proper course. Just as in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says, it is better to marry than to burn with passion. These women have too much time on their hands, let them fill it with children and with managing a new household.

That's the specific advice for Ephesus. It's worth bearing in mind that it's not Paul's only advice for those who are in a single state. 1 Corinthians is much more positive about remaining single for the sake of gospel work.

And even here in Ephesus, I don't think he's being 100% prescriptive, but he is describing the norm, if you like. So if you're asking, well, could a younger widow who, apart from age, fits the description of the godly widow, fits the description of the older widow, this woman who perhaps can be provided for without being an unreasonable burden to family or to church, well, should she consider remaining single for the sake of the gospel work that she could accomplish, per 1 Corinthians 7? Sure, by all means, why not? But Paul's central concern in these verses isn't really whether or not these women get married again. The problem is that they are giving themselves over to a self-indulgent lifestyle.

The issue is they're following after Satan. Okay. So what do we do with this advice to younger widows then?

[30 : 20] A couple of implications to draw out, I think. Number one, it is not wrong to want to be married. It is not wrong to seek remarriage after your spouse has died. It is not wrong to seek remarriage following from a just divorce, for that matter.

It is not wrong to want to be married the first time around. Paul here recognizes the reality of sexual desire, doesn't he? And he sees that it is a significant force in people's lives.

And he recognizes the genuine danger that it could pull us away in the wrong direction. Now the strength of sexual desire could pull us into an unwise marriage, into the kind of marriage that will draw us away from Christ and the kind of marriage that is dishonoring to God.

So it is not wrong to seek remarriage. It should be the norm for a younger widow. But there is still a caution that it is entered into with right motivations. Second implication, idleness is bad.

Being a busybody who talks nonsense, verse 13, is not honoring to God. We are all of us responsible for how we use our time.

[31 : 33] And for most of us, the biggest claim on our time is going to be either our working lives or our home lives. And Paul commends those things. The younger widow should remarry, raise her children and manage her home.

But for some of us, that won't be the case. Because there are still these godly older widows who are not being given this same advice. What would Paul have them be doing or others who similarly have that kind of time available?

Well, that list in verses 9 and 10 may not be the tasks for an official order of widows, but if they were good things to be doing before, then are they not still good things to be doing now?

These women can still have a role in bringing up children, even if not their own. They can still show hospitality. They can wash the feet of the Lord's people. And they can still help those who are in trouble and devote themselves to all kinds of good deeds.

Where these younger widows are learning to be idle. The godly woman is employing her time to great effect, isn't she? She might be going from house to house just like the younger widow, but she's not talking nonsense as she does it, is she?

[32 : 44] No, this woman is the older woman who teaches the younger women, Titus chapter 2. She's the one who cares for the Lord's people. She's the one who goes around seeking to be of service, seeking to lend a hand, not to be a distraction from the tasks of the day, seeking to be an encourager in the Lord.

May God bless our church with these kind of women. Amen.