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The feast of Purim. Widows and elders.

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Transcript

Esther chapter 9. Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred. The Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm, and no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples.

All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. The Jews struck all their enemies with the

sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them.

In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men, and also killed Pashandetha and Dalphon and Aspetha and Poretha and Adalia and Aradetha and Palmashta and Arasei and Aradaei and Visetha, the ten sons of Haman the son of Hamadetha, the enemy of the Jews. But they laid no hand on the plunder. That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king, and the king said to Queen Esther, In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men, and also the ten sons of Haman.

What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled. And Esther said, If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict, and let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows.

So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they killed three hundred men in Susa, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them, but they laid no hand on the plunder. This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested, and made that a day of feasting and gladness. But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness.

Therefore the Jews of the villages, who lived in the rural towns, held the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another. And Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness, and from mourning into a holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another, and gifts to the poor. So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them.

Bahamun the Agagite, the son of Hamadatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is, cast lots, to crush and to destroy them. But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his son should be hanged on the gallows. Therefore they called these days Purim,

after the term Pur.

Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring, and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written, and at the time appointed every year, that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants. Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abahel, and Mordecai the Jew, gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting.

The command of Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing. Chapter 8 of Esther ends with a triumphal march, a feast, and a celebration, which might all seem rather premature, considering the fact that Haman's decree is still on the books. It is to be carried out in about eight months' time.

However, these were all part of Mordecai's plan. It was a purposeful spectacle designed to show that the strength of the Persian government was behind the Jews. Once the move in the king's support had become apparent, many others started to shift their allegiance.

Harbona already did this at the end of chapter 8, and by chapter 9 the shift in the weight of power is decisive. As people start to recognise which way the political winds are blowing, they start to join with the Jews. When the day of Haman's planned pogrom arrives, it is the Jews who achieve a victory of devastating scale.

The defeat executed upon the Jews' enemies needs to be crushing. Only with such a crushing defeat will they ensure that their enemies don't nurse realistic hopes of vengeance and rise again to attack them. The Jews kill 75,000 of their enemies, chief among them the ten sons of Haman.

In the process a great many more potential enemies are deterred. Yoram Hazoni observes that Mordecai is probably concerned also to send a signal to King Ahasuerus. He wants Ahasuerus to know that the Jews are a strong group, and that it is in his interest to tolerate and support them.

The king has already shown that he is not overly concerned about matters of justice, and that, save for possible reasons of political expediency, he probably would not be particularly troubled by the genocide of the Jews. The Jews don't take any spoil, even

though the decree of Mordecai permits them to do so. This is important to note because the decree of Mordecai should not be regarded just as an independent thing.

The purpose of the decree of Mordecai was to go toe to toe with the decree of Haman, to demonstrate that a decisive shift in the weight of the government's support had occurred. This would only be effective if the severity of Mordecai's decree was every bit as severe as Haman's. Anything less and it would still seem that Haman's decree was the primary one, with the other merely being a slight mitigation of it.

The severity of the judgment and the fact that they don't lay hands on any of the plunder also should recall the judgment upon the Amalekites. Haman was the Agagite. As an Agagite he was a descendant of King Agag.

The Benjaminite King Saul was rejected from the throne of Israel for his failure to kill King Agag and for taking plunder from the Amalekites. Now the Benjaminite Mordecai, another son of Kish, is going to rectify his ancestor's fault. Yoram Hazoni helpfully discusses the importance of power in such a situation.

Without the exertion of effective power justice cannot be exercised, the innocent and the vulnerable cannot be defended and the world belongs to powerful aggressors. While contemporary readers of the Book of Esther, living in peaceful modern societies, can have great difficulties with the description of the judgment on the enemies of the Jews delivered here, it is important to recognise that genocidal enemies cannot be effectively defeated with a mere slap on the wrist. Only, for instance, with the utter defeat of Nazi Germany could the security of the Jews be achieved after the horrors of the Holocaust.

A merely chastened Hitler might have licked his wounds and retaliated when he had built up his strength again. After the successful action of the Jews on the day formally planned for Haman's pogrom, King Ahasuerus approaches Esther to ask if there is anything else that she might want. Hazoni comments upon the shift here.

Previously Esther has had to approach the King with her requests. Now the King is approaching her, asking whether she has any request of him, and this time he mentions no upper bound up to half the kingdom. Esther's request is that the right of the Jews in Susa to attack their enemies also continue for the following day.

Perhaps there are reasons to fear reprisals at this point. It is important that the victory, particularly in the capital of Susa, be so decisive as to be uncontestable. The hanging of the ten sons of Haman serves as a further spectacle designed to prove that there is no hope for those who will oppose the Jews.

After the victory of the Jews in the provinces, they rest on the fourteenth day, and in Susa, after the extra day, on the fifteenth. The story of the Book of Esther is a story of six feasts. There's the initial feast of chapter one, where Vashti fails to come when

summoned.

There's the feast of Esther's installation in chapter two. In chapters five and seven we have Esther's first and second feasts, the turning points of the book. In chapter eight there is a feast as the Jews celebrate Mordecai's decree and his elevation.

And now, in chapter nine, there is a final feast, the Feast of Purim, a feast originally celebrated as a rest after the deliverance, and then continued as commemoration of what occurred. The institution of the Feast of Purim is surprising in many respects. This is the first great new annual feast that is instituted after the foundational feasts of the Book of Leviticus.

It's anomalous in other respects. The other feasts of the year are very much rooted in the life of Israel. This is a feast that is set in the Diaspora, with its focus not being Jerusalem and its temple, but Susa.

It's a feast that makes central Jews living outside of the land. It's a feast that the Jews voluntarily adopt, not just a feast that's imposed upon them by the Lord's command. In Esther chapter four, Mordecai's command to Esther plays upon the laws concerning the annulment of vows in chapter thirty of Numbers.

If Esther spoke up against the decree to her husband, she might be able to overthrow it, using Numbers chapter thirty as a model. If she did not speak up, she would be complicit. Verses twenty-four to twenty-six give the reason for the name of the Feast of Purim.

The feast, it seems, was named for the casting of lots. This is strange indeed. As Rabbi Foreman observes, the lots seem to play a fairly minor part within the story, and they are used by the enemy of the Jews, Haman, in setting up his plan.

Why did they give their name to the feast itself? Rabbi Foreman argues that we need to see the background of Numbers thirty to understand what is going on here. Pur is the word for lots, but it might also be a word for the annulment, the annulment that Esther brings to Haman's decree. He writes, on one plane of meaning it is called that because of Haman's pur, his lots, but on another plane of meaning it is called that because of Esther's pur, her annulment of Haman's decree.

If we look at the passage this way, here's how to read it. Haman tried to kill us, and to that end he cast lots, the pur, but, the Megillah suggests, that's not the whole story concerning how the holiday came to bear this name. For afterwards, Esther, with her back to the wall, managed to annul Haman's plotted genocide, and so the Megillah concludes that's why they call these days Purim, because of the pur.

In other words, the Megillah's explanation for the name Purim is deliciously ironic. In the end, that's why they call these days Purim, not because of Haman's lots, but because of

Esther's annulment. Haman had wanted the day to be known for his pur, for his instruments of chance, but instead the fate of the Jews was determined by something else, by another pur, namely by Esther's act, her annulment of the decree.

As such, that's why they call the day Purim, because of her pur, not his. The institution of a feast of Purim is an event in the life of the Jewish people that marks an important milestone. With the downfall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they had been scattered by the Assyrians, and they had lost their identity as a people.

Huge numbers of the Jewish people had just disappeared and assimilated into other nations. Earlier in the book of Esther, we see that the Jews of the second exile, the Jews scattered and exiled by Babylon, had not lost their identity in the same way. According to Haman's description, they were scattered among the peoples of the provinces, but they observed their own distinct customs.

In continuing to keep the law of the Lord in some way, even as a dispersed people, they retained something of their distinctiveness. Yet this distinctiveness had marked them out for this great Pogrom. The deliverance from the Pogrom then was a sign that the Lord would preserve them, even as a distinct people, dispersed among the nations.

It was a sign not just for that generation of the Jews, but for all of their generations. A number of Jewish commentators have recognized a parallel between the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Purim. Leviticus chapter 16, the law concerning the Day of Atonement, begins with recalling the death of the sons of Aaron, an event that occurred in the context of the consecration of the tabernacle, an event that has many similarities with the description of chapter 1 of Esther.

Nadab and Abihu had approached the tabernacle in the wrong way. In the book of Esther we see several recollections of the story of the consecration of the tabernacle, where the dangerous approach to the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle is comparable to the dangerous approach to the presence of Ahasuerus the king. If you come in when you are not called, you do so in peril of death.

Leviticus chapter 16 verse 2, And the Lord said to Moses, Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die, for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. There is only one specific day of the year that Aaron can approach, and not at any other time. Rabbi Foreman observes that Mordecai plays off this language in his charge to Esther in chapter 4 verse 14.

For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Esther is called to act at a decisive moment, at the one moment where approach will be possible. Esther's approach

to Ahasuerus is like the one propitious time at which Aaron is permitted to approach the presence of the Lord.

Esther's response to the charge is to instruct Mordecai and the Jews to have a fast. The one ordained fast of the festal calendar is that of the day of atonement. Much as Aaron has to approach the Lord wearing particular garments, so Esther must approach the king wearing royal robes.

Esther makes her dangerous approach to the inner court, much as Aaron has to approach the inner court of the holy of holies. In Esther chapter 5 verse 2, And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favour in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

Esther's touching of the tip of the scepter is in some ways like Aaron's application of blood to key parts of the tabernacle. Aaron the high priest then has to approach in a similar way. He has to intercede for himself as an individual, as the high priest, but he also has to intercede for the whole people.

As Rabbi Forman observes, Esther has to intercede to the king both for herself and for her people. The day of atonement also involves, of all things, a lottery between two paired goats, one of them being used as the sin offering and the other being sent away into the wilderness. The book of Esther is a story of divided pairs and divergent fates, of Vashti and Esther, of Esther and Zeresh, of Mordecai and Haman.

Furthermore, the words Yom Kippurim could be translated as a day like Purim and some Jewish commentators have long recognised the resonance between these two feasts, between Purim and the day of atonement. The day of atonement seems to deal with eschatological themes, with the approach to God's very presence, with definitive acts of atonement, with great events of division, with the one goat being brought near and the other goat being sent far away. The day of Purim might be seen as a sign resting upon something greater.

The Lord will provide atonement for his people, the Lord will allow for reproach for his people to his very presence and the Lord will divide his people from those who are not his people. In the feast of Purim we see this playing out on a different plane. The Lord will provide access for his people to the very thrones of the nations.

As they fast and turn to him, they will be delivered from their sins and he will vindicate them in the sphere of history. He will divide them from their enemies, casting their enemies out and raising his people up to positions of power. Stories that begin with mourning and death will end with joy and gladness and rejoicing.

A question to consider, how might we identify themes of exodus in the story of Esther

and how might these themes, along with others that we have identified, point forward to Christ? Esther 10 King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea, and all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honour of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people. Besides the fact that it is exceedingly short, the final chapter of the Book of Esther seems rather anticlimactic. After all of the personal and political drama of the book, it begins with King Ahasuerus imposing a tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea.

Why on earth would the drama of the book be arrested for this description of the king's tax policy? Besides being exceedingly boring, it seems rather irrelevant. David Alba has written a very perceptive article on this chapter and on this verse in particular. He points out that behind the whole story of the Book of Esther, there is this sub-plot of how the king is going to raise revenue.

Haman the Agagite, he argues, proposes that the king raise his revenue by plunder. In chapter 3 verse 9, If it please the king let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries. The financial character of the transaction is also raised by Esther in her appeal to the king in chapter 7 verse 4. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated.

If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king. Esther there raises the point that even selling the population of the Jews into slavery would be a better financial transaction than trying to raise money from them through genocide and plunder. In the preceding chapter, even though the Jews had been given the right by the decree of Mordecai to take plunder from their enemies, they did not avail themselves of it.

Presumably all of that money went to the king. What verse 1 represents then is an alternative way for King Ahasuerus to raise his revenue, not by genocide and plunder, not by selling whole populations into slavery, but by imposing a tax. By imposing a tax upon the Jews living within the land and its various provinces and by taxing the Jews in the Mediterranean trading cities, he would have a reliable but also a just source of revenue.

In this verse we see how the particular interests of Jews and their gentile rulers can align. They do not have to be at odds with each other. This would not be the last time that Jews appeal to this sort of principle.

It is reasonable to believe that this policy was suggested to King Ahasuerus by Mordecai. Mordecai is like the wise Joseph in Ahasuerus' court, the second in command and the one

who has administration over all of the affairs of the kingdom. By Mordecai's prudent regulation, the chaos of the realm of Ahasuerus under the oversight of his vizier Haman is overcome.

Like the hero Joseph, Mordecai achieves this by prudent tax policy. This all seems very pedestrian and boring, but it brings peace to the people. There is a deep partnership established between King Ahasuerus and Mordecai.

King Ahasuerus is praised for his acts of power and might, but also for his elevation of Mordecai, which enables him to achieve these things. As gentiles elevate and bless and show hospitality to Jews in their midst, they too will be blessed. Earlier in the book we noted resemblances between the characters of Mordecai and Esther and the characters of Abraham and Sarah.

The numbers 127 and 180 at the beginning of the book drew our minds back to Sarah, another woman hidden in a pagan king's court, and to Isaac, the threatened seed. In Joseph, a story of the great uncovering of identities, as Joseph reveals himself to people he had formerly hidden himself from, we find themes from the story of Abraham and Sarah coming to a full expression, whereas the mistreatment of Abraham and Sarah have brought judgement upon gentile rulers and their peoples. Through Joseph and his prudent tax policies, many gentiles were blessed and their lives preserved.

Mordecai is a new Joseph, a man who is joined with a gentile king, who elevates a gentile king by his wise counsel, and through his elevation, blesses his brothers. John Levinson writes, The scene with which the Masoretic Esther closes is one for which Jewish communities in the Diaspora have always longed. Jews living in harmony and mutual goodwill with the gentile majority, under Jewish leaders who are respected and admired by the rulers, yet who are openly identified with the Jewish community and unashamed to advance its interests and to speak out in its defence.

Levinson also notes that in contrast to the story of Joseph, where a pharaoh could arise that had forgotten Joseph, the deeds of Mordecai were not merely commemorated in the Feast of Purim, but were also written down so as not to be forgotten in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia. The figure of Mordecai reminds us of Joseph. He is also contrasted with the figure of Haman and his policies.

In this chapter then, we can see that the Book of Esther is not merely concerned with recording a special deliverance that the Jews experienced, or even just with instituting its commemoration. It also has a political vision to propound to people within the Diaspora, both Jews and Gentiles, a vision of how both parties can act in their own best interests and also for the interests of the other. The Book of Esther is shot through with themes of wisdom, with the wisdom of the plan of Esther and of Mordecai's plan.

Those plans were exercised from a position of weakness and vulnerability, but now there

is a plan exercised from a position of rule and authority, and it is no less wise. As in the story of Joseph, one of the greatest gifts that the Jews can give their Gentile rulers is the gift of their wisdom, not functioning as opponents, but as trustworthy and loyal counsellors. The theme of loyalty pervades the story of Joseph, and the theme of loyalty is playing throughout the Book of Esther too.

Throughout the book, Ahasuerus is troubled with a crisis of loyalty. Can he trust his closest servants, when Bikhtan and Teresh have risen against him? How can he find a queen to trust when his queen Bashti refuses to obey his command? What are the dangers of trusting too much in a man of questionable loyalties, as in the case of Haman? Like Joseph in Genesis chapter 39, where he seemed to be guilty of adultery with his master's wife, Mordecai initially appears to be guilty in his failure to bow to Haman at the king's command. However, as the story works out, it is proven that he is the true loyal servant.

He is the one that the king can depend upon, whereas Haman is proven to be untrustworthy, largely revealed as such by Esther's scheme. Along with their wisdom, in their unimpeachable loyalty the Jews will build up the authority of anyone who elevates them. All of this, then, is a fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, that in his seed all of the nations of the earth would be blessed.

A question to consider. David Dalber has argued that Mordecai is the primary hero of the book of Esther. Do you believe that he is justified in making this claim? If so, how? If we were to read the story of Esther as focused upon the character of Mordecai, what elements and themes of the book would come more to the surface? First Timothy chapter 5 Do not rebuke an older man, but encourage him as you would a father.

Younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity. Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household, and to make some return to their parents.

For this is pleasing in the sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God, and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.

Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works, if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry, and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander, for some have already strayed after Satan.

If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows. Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching.

For the scripture says, You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain, and the labourer deserves his wages. Do not admit a charge against an elder, except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

In the presence of God, and of Christ Jesus, and of the elect angels, I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.

No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not, cannot remain hidden.

In 1 Timothy chapter 5, Paul instructs Timothy concerning various groups within the congregation, various age groups, and then the widows and the elders. As Timothy addresses the various issues in the church in Ephesus, he needs to be mindful of the way that he interacts with different age and gender groups. The instructions in verses 1 and 2 relate with the teaching that follows concerning a specific group of older women, the widows, and a specific group of older men, the elders.

It also develops the portrayal of the church as the household of God, as in chapter 3. The church is like an extended family, and Timothy needs to deal with the members of the church accordingly. He compares older men to fathers, younger men to brothers, older women to mothers, and younger women to sisters. We should beware of reading this too much in terms of the modern nuclear family.

Rather we should think of the large extended family, with uncles and aunts, cousins, grandparents, nieces and nephews, and various other forms of relations. Elsewhere Paul also speaks of different groups within the church by age and gender, in Titus chapter 2 verses 1-6 for instance. But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behaviour, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

Likewise urge the younger men to be self-controlled. As the apostle Paul's emissary, Timothy has authority, but he needs to learn how to use it properly. He will, for instance, have to be dealing with the elders, as we see at the end of this chapter, and Paul's instruction concerning how to approach older men at the beginning of the chapter provides Timothy with direction about how he ought to go about dealing with those elders that have failed in some regard.

When dealing with older men, Timothy needs to moderate his authoritative approach with the deference that's due to father figures. Rather than rebuking such an older man, he needs to exhort and encourage him. Such an approach operates within the honour that is due to such a figure, while still allowing for correction to be heard.

Timothy will have more freedom when dealing with the younger men, men who are his peers in age and younger. As in the case of dealing with the older men, when he deals with the older women, Timothy needs to show them a proper honour, in this case treating them as he would a mother. Timothy needs to treat the women of his age and younger as sisters, and here it is particularly emphasised that he must act with purity towards them.

Given the household character of the church, Paul is concerned that Timothy perceive and operate within the structures of honour, authority and association that naturally exist in a society that's ordered by gender and age. Using the relations of the extended family as guides, Paul can give him a template within which to think about the way that he relates to different groups. The church does not float free of the generational and gendered character of communal life more generally.

This was one of the concerns of Paul in chapter 2 when dealing with men and women in the congregations. In the related passage in Titus chapter 1, we should note the gendered and generational character of the church is expressed in the orders of its teaching. The discipleship of the younger women is largely undertaken by older women, not by Titus himself.

Titus, however, plays that role relative to the younger men. There seem to have been problems in the Ephesian congregations around the issue of widows, and it is to this matter that Paul now turns in verses 3-16. Throughout the scripture the Lord expresses an especial concern for the widow, the fatherless and the stranger.

Isaiah chapter 1 verse 17 Learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice

to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. James chapter 1 verse 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and keep oneself unstained from the world. As a sort of extended family, the church would take responsibility for providing for needy persons in their midst.

We see this in Acts chapter 6 where there were structures of community provision for the widows in the congregation. The church is not merely a place of teaching, it is a household, and there needs to be provision of material assistance to its members. In Acts chapter 9 we also see another instance where widows are mentioned as a group, as those who had been helped by Dorcas.

The problem in Ephesus, however, is that the church's provision for widows seems to have been abused. Some young widows of marriageable age were depending upon the church's resources when they did not need to be. Some families seemed to have been neglecting their duty of support and handing it over to the church, expecting the church to pick up their slack.

Other widows enjoying the support of the church were engaging in community disrupting behaviours. Paul addresses this situation by providing criteria by which true widows could be supported and unworthy recipients of the church's support would be removed from the rosters. The widows who were enrolled for support by the church needed to be without family to support them.

If a widow had such family, it was not the duty of the church to look after her, but the duty of the family, and if the family was not prepared to do its duty, then any of the widow's family members shirking their responsibility should not be regarded as members of the community of faith. This was a rejection of the faith and the sort of Christian behaviour that ought to accompany it. Paul restricts the church's support to widows over the age of sixty who had a reputation and a long-standing record of godliness.

The widows to be supported by the church were expected to have been wives of one husband, faithful mothers, persons who had practised hospitality especially to the members of the church, and marked out by commitment to charity and the works of mercy. These were women who had given much of their lives and their resources to the service of the household of faith, and the household of faith had a corresponding duty to show them great honour. The statement with which Paul begins this section - honour widows who are truly widows - singles out this group for special respect and also the material provision and support that is a necessary component of such honour.

The faithful widows are contrasted with another group, a group of younger widows, perhaps examples of the new Roman women that some have seen in the background of the book of 1 Timothy and its situation in Ephesus. A number of these women, presumably more wealthy, were given to practices that were causing trouble in the community. Rather than devoting themselves to the works of mercy and charity, they

went from house to house, engaging in gossip, slander and the spread of false teaching.

Their commitment to the faith also seems to have been slight. A number of them, itching to remarry, seem to have sought new husbands from outside of the household of faith, abandoning Christ for a pagan spouse. This would greatly have unsettled the church and compromised its witness to the surrounding society.

Paul is concerned that women susceptible to such falling away are not enrolled in the company of widows that the church provides for. They can provide for themselves, many of them will have families that will be able to support them, and no small number of them will be able to remarry. While there are situations, as we see in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, where Paul can advise against remarriage, here he presents it as a prudent response to the young widow's condition.

The ideal was that such young women remarried and gave themselves to the activities of a wife and mother. We should also bear in mind the concept of managing their households would have been a very expansive activity within the first century context, far wider than what we often think about in terms of home making. The woman who managed her household was overseeing the children, but also the wider activity of the household as a site of production.

In many respects the household could be compared to a small business today, and much of the activity of production within a society occurred within its context. Many have wondered whether the widows described in this chapter were a particular class of appointed women within the church, with special ministry roles. This, it seems to me, is unlikely.

While the women in question were being honoured for their past service, they were selected not according to their aptitude for future ministry, but according to their need. Besides, as a group limited to women over sixty, many of the widows would not be able to perform any sort of active ministry. Given the degree to which the modern church has been abstracted from the context of the household, we are more likely to think of the church as an organisation that is perhaps similar to a business, with importance in the community being defined by official roles, titles and by positions on the payroll.

This was not the case in the early church, and I think we are misguided if we are looking for the prominence of women in the community by looking for official positions and titles. The widows that are honoured here, for instance, are women who had been serving the community for some time already prior to their being enrolled in the company of the widows. As the church functioned as a household, the church was not primarily defined by official titles and positions, rather it was the life of a community, and the ministries and works of service in the community mostly did not occur under the auspices of official titles and roles.

Women like those described here who were faithful in their service of the community were supposed to be treated with a special honour, for which material support and provision was essential. Elsewhere in Paul's letters and places like Romans 16, we see the great number of women who were active within particular communities. Churches in this context seemed to have numerous prominent women, even while the positions of official oversight of the communities were exclusive to men.

In modern Christian contexts where most of the ministry of churches occurs through churches as official organisations and structures, it may be difficult to recover the prominence that women enjoyed within a structure of the church as an organic household and an active community, most of whose life was carried out in informal contexts. However, it seems to me that pursuing such a challenge is absolutely essential if the church is to be what it ought to be. The less that the church functions like an extended family and household, the more that there will be a breach between word and life within its existence.

From the widows, Paul turns to another group that need to be accorded special honour, the elders. Alistair Campbell, in his book on the elders, argues that the group referred to here are the elders of the town churches rather than just the households. The elders of the house churches would not presumably have been paid for their labour in preaching and teaching.

It was only the overseers, the leaders of the town churches, that would need to give themselves completely to these tasks. As the fatherly guardians and instructors of the Christians within a given town, it was important that the office of these elders be shown a proper respect. This would involve paying them for their efforts.

To support his assertion here, Paul cites two statements, the first from Deuteronomy 25.4 concerning the ox threshing the grain, and then the second from Luke 10.7, words of our Lord, and remain in the same house eating and drinking what they provide, for the labourer deserves his wages. Elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 9.7-14, Paul also references the case law concerning the ox threshing out the grain. Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of its milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.

Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the ploughman should plough in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much that we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you

not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

There appear to have been issues with some of the elders in Ephesus. Certain elders seem to have been accused of sin, and some seem to have been clearly guilty. Part of Timothy's task in this situation is to exercise justice as Paul's representative.

To equip him in this task Paul references a number of Old Testament principles of justice. The first concerns proper evidence. Deuteronomy 19.15 A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offence that he has committed.

Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. Where repentance was not forthcoming, elders would have to be rebuked in the presence of everyone. When private and respectful appeal to them as fathers had failed, the company of the elders and Timothy would have to gather together and collectively enact justice in the situation.

A communally witnessed rebuke would also be a deterrent for any others. Deuteronomy 19.20 is another principle in the background here. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you.

The impenitent sinning elder is rebuked in the presence of the whole company of the church, and Paul charges Timothy in the presence of the entire heavenly council, of God, of Christ Jesus, and of the elect angels. Like Old Testament judges he is charged to exercise these rules without prejudice and without partiality. He needs to be very careful about appointing people to the office of an elder.

He must not take part in the sins of others, whether allowing people's abuses to continue without rebuke or by appointing people who are not worthy of the positions that they are entering. As an aside at this juncture, Paul speaks to Timothy's health and his need to drink wine. Perhaps Timothy was experiencing health issues, drinking unclean water while he was abstaining from alcohol.

Drinking wine in moderation would not be giving himself to drunkenness, but it would spare him from the health issues that he might experience otherwise. Paul has given Timothy a most solemn charge. However, Timothy, like any human being, is not up to the task of discerning other people's hearts.

People's hearts cannot be fully discerned, and Paul recognises this at the end of the chapter. Certain people's sins are conspicuous or can be recognised by the observant person. Other sins, however, are secret sins and only appear later over time, perhaps

through sudden scandalous exposure, or perhaps in the character that they produce in a person over many years.

Others may only be revealed on the Day of Judgment. On the other hand, there are people whose good works are obvious and plain to everyone around them, and others whose good deeds are not seen by others, but are largely hidden. However, even those good deeds that are not immediately obvious will be made apparent over time.

By their fruit you will know them, and people's habitual behaviours will be steadily revealed in their characters. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which modern churches can learn from Paul's teaching concerning the church as the household of God in the book of 1 Timothy?