

Necessary Negatives for Positive Mission

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn to our Bible reading this morning now, and we're continuing our studies in Paul's first letter to Timothy. We come to chapter 5, which if you have one of the church visitors' Bibles is page 992.

And last week we saw Paul in chapter 4 urging Timothy to be an example to all the leaders, indeed to all the members of the churches, the Christians in these house churches in Ephesus, have had to be good servants of Christ Jesus, verse 6, trained in the words of the faith and in good doctrine. He's to show an example by his way of life also about how to live truly as a believer and how to lead the church and manage the household of God. And so we come to these last two chapters where some particular problems that are really causing great trouble in the churches in Ephesus are addressed.

And in a way on a solemn day like today, this is really a very solemn chapter. It may not seem so at first, but it's quite a stern rebuke from the Apostle Paul to the church and to the leaders there at Ephesus.

So here's how he charges Timothy. Do not rebuke sharply or violently an older man, but encourage, exhort him as you would a father.

[1 : 29] Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, and younger women like 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 and is left all alone and 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 or namely for members of his household, he has denied the faith.

He's worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than 60 years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works.

[2 : 38] She brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, cared for the afflicted, has devoted herself to every good work, but refused to enroll younger widows.

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.

Perhaps that's household to household, household church, church to church. And not only idlers, but also gossips, talking falsely, 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 really widows.

[3 : 45] Amen. And may God bless to us his word, and help us to understand his command for us today. I'll turn with me, if you would, to 1st Timothy 5, page 992 in the church Bibles, to a passage which is all about necessary negatives, if the church is to have a positive mission.

Where the true gospel is leading and ruling in a church, then you will find Christians and churches who are filled with the hope of eternity and filled with a heart for evangelism.

That is, they're forward-looking, they're striving, they're investing in the everlasting treasure of Christ's eternal kingdom in the world to come. And at the same time, they're outward-looking, they're striving and investing in the evangelistic task of kingdom mission in the world out there.

But the marks of false teaching and bad leadership in the church are almost always the opposite. Churches are turned inwards on themselves, taken up with their worship, their interests, their traditions, and so on.

And that almost always leads to an elitist and often an escapist Christianity. And you find Christians who are becoming indulgent. They're taken up with their material lives.

[5 : 11] Whether that might be material gain now, or it might be what they misunderstand to be spiritual gain and advancement now. And the result of that is that the church's witness is compromised, and Christian lives are corrupted.

And that was the situation in first century Ephesus in these house churches. We've already seen that Paul's focus is turning the church back to a healthy message, to outward evangelism to the world, and to a healthy manner.

To be living with an eye always to the outsider, so as to bring not condemnation for the gospel, but commendation for the gospel by the church's life.

But now as we come to chapters 5 and 6 of the letter, of course he's still very concerned that the church should live without reproach, chapter 5 verse 7, that the gospel should not be reviled by outsiders, chapter 6 verse 1.

But Paul turns very particularly to emphasize especially the true gospel as an eternal hope. Last time in chapter 4 verse 10, we saw that that's where the focus must always be.

[6 : 23] He says we're always toiling and striving for our hope that is set on the living God, and for our salvation that is still fully to come in the future, at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

But of course these false teachers have made the church lose sight of that. And so the Christians in Ephesus were no longer focused on the eternal, but on the ephemeral, on this passing world.

Not on their true home, the place of eternal life, that which is truly life, but merely their current lives now. And Paul wanted to turn them back to the true faith, so that they would see this present life in the light of the overwhelming importance of the life that is still to come, of eternity.

And therefore he needs to see their priorities in life, and especially their priorities for their organized church life, as being focused on clearly toiling and striving for everything that is of lasting value.

Because it is striving for that eternal kingdom. And he wants them all, whatever their situation in life is, he wants them all to be, what he says in verse 10 here, devoted to every good work.

[7 : 37] And that is serving Christ and his church. It's the good works that verse 25 of chapter 5 tell us will not remain hidden forever. They can't because they are of everlasting value.

And he wants everyone in the church to be devoted to being rich in those kinds of good works. He says in chapter 6 verse 18, these are the sorts of things that store up treasure for the future.

Because these are the things which are doing good not just for this life, but for that which is truly life. That's how you take a hold of the eternal calling to which you've been called.

It's very important that we see that these good works, that is such a focus of this letter, indeed all the pastoral letters, that they're good, not just because they're good in and of themselves, but they're good because above all they serve the great enduring work of our Christian calling, which is the eternal kingdom of Christ.

It's that work, isn't it? It's that labor that Paul says to the Corinthians is never in vain, not just any old works. He says to the Corinthians, you are God's fellow workers.

[8 : 45] And so we must make sure that our work is that of gold and silver and of precious stones, things that will last forever, not the wood and the hay and the stubble, the things that will just be burnt up one day.

There'll be nothing left. That's where your work is to be focused. It's a real challenge, isn't it, for any Christian, for any church? What will be left from our life's work when this passing world is done?

And it was a necessary challenge for the church in Ephesus. Hence these last two chapters in 1 Timothy. It's a strong challenge for the church's manner of life to show that priority and to show real godliness by striving above all and investing above all in the everlasting kingdom.

And showing that it is this true gospel hope that the church is actually clinging to. And if that is so, then everyone, men and women, young and old, will be striving side by side for the faith of that eternal kingdom of hope.

They'll be living, won't they, to bless the ministry of the church, not to burden it. As it must not be burdened merely by the things of this world. And certainly not betraying the church among the people of this world.

[10:02] But you see, in Ephesus, things were not as they should be like that. The church's reputation was being betrayed by some of the women and some of the men, even some of the leaders. And the church's resources were being burdened wrongly by going to support some of these men and women, some of these leaders who shouldn't be leaders, some of these who should not be supported.

And so part of Timothy's good work for the eternal kingdom was to fight the good fight and wage the good warfare against that mistaken thinking.

In order to rebuke, in order to reverse what was wrong and restore, once again, healthy priorities for the church to live for eternity as they should be living.

And so, friends, that meant some stern talk. It meant some severe action was going to be necessary. Some necessary negatives were going to have to be enforced in order to restore the church's positive witness.

And Timothy was to be an example to these leaders of how to manage properly the household of God. Remember, that was one of the key qualities in Christian leadership. To show how to bring back proper order and discipline where it had been lost.

[11:22] And clearly it had been lost in Ephesus. Some things had got very, very slack in the church there. There was a real danger of slippage. And that slippage would lead to total wreckage to a church on the rocks, is how Paul put it.

And stern correction was going to be needed then. Some necessary negatives had to be enforced. And, you see, friends, Christian leadership sometimes means saying no. And that's hard, isn't it? Because nobody likes to be told no. None of us like to be told no. None of us like to think we're not going to get things the way we want them to be. That's human nature, isn't it? Sinful human nature. But as Paul says later on in his second letter to Timothy, it is when people don't want correction, it's when people will not tolerate it, that the Christian leaders must step in and say it and do it. That's why he says you have to be prepared to endure the suffering that that sort of thing will inevitably bring. Well, here in Ephesus, some of the brothers were disrespecting others they worked for.

[12:27] The beginning of chapter 6 tells us they were taking liberties against Christian bosses just because they were Christian. Some elders, some of the senior men of the congregation, some of them leaders, they were persisting in sinful behavior and needing rebuking.

And some of the women, both the older women and the younger widows, in particular seemed to be behaving badly. And the result of all of it was that the church's resources were being burdened and the church's reputation was being betrayed in the world.

So, of course, stern words were needed to both the older men and the younger men, to both older women and younger women. And that wasn't going to be easy for Timothy, was it? He was younger than some of these senior men.

Nor was it going to be easy for those who had to take the rebuke and the correction. So it had to happen. There couldn't be any sentimentality. But it had to happen with sensitivity.

That's why verses 1 and 2 are here, if you look at them. Some of these older men would need rebuking, as verse 20 clearly says. But that must not be done harshly or violently or sharply.

[13:34] That's what this word in verse 1 means. Not violently. Remember chapter 3, verse 3. The leader's not to be violent. But he's to give appropriate respect and honor.

And like you do, he says, if you had to rebuke or admonish, your own father. Think about that. And similarly, he says, with the older women. You had to treat them like mothers.

In other words, he's saying, there's to be no inappropriate, violent scolding of your seniors. Nor is there to be any inappropriate superiority over younger men, he says to Timothy.

They're just your brothers. Treat them as brothers. You're not superior to them. No pomposity. And in the same way, he says, there's to be nothing inappropriate sexually among the younger women. You're to treat them as you would your sister. No sexual abuse to get your way. No sexual allure to get your way. He's saying there should be no need ever for the Me Too movement in the Christian church.

[14:33] That's right, isn't it? There should be proper behavior all around. Encouraging all, he says. That word means exhort or urge or admonish.

It includes correcting, but recognize the appropriate respect that's due to each of these groups. I think in our culture here today, we've become very sloppy at that, very poor at that, haven't we?

We think that you just treat everybody the same way. Men and women, just the same. Old and young, just the same. You can treat children as though they were adults. Oh, darling, what do you think we should do today? Instead of get in the car, this is where we're going.

I mean, we've become ridiculous, haven't we? And older people sometimes find it very difficult to be just addressed by their first name in hospital or something like that when it seems disrespectful to them.

Well, we must be careful in the church. And also, we've got to take responsibility for what is appropriate for our age and stage and for our own lives when we have to take responsibility before other people.

[15 : 36] And nowhere is that more important than in the church of Jesus Christ because Paul says we are to be a pillar and buttress of truth in a world that is confused and corrupted. And all of this is not just a matter of morality.

Paul is very clear. This is a vital matter for the church's mission. That's a key point. The church will never guard and promote its true mission of bringing people to the knowledge of the truth of eternal salvation if that mission is being burdened by indiscriminate welfare or if it's being betrayed by intolerable waywardness or wickedness among those who profess to belong to the church.

But that's what was happening in Ephesus. They were burdened by the support of all of these widows, some of whom should have been supported by others, their own relatives, and some of them should have been supporting themselves.

Some of the families were neglecting their care of others because they were being self-indulgent themselves, just living for today, for their own wants, their own needs. In fact, Paul's clear, some of the widows themselves were just living self-indulgent lives in the present, verse 6.

Not for the hope of glory. And not only that, the church was financially supporting both widows and, as we'll see next time, some of the senior men, some of the senior leaders whose teaching and whose lives were clearly anti-gospel, opposed to the church's message.

[17 : 06] They were just living for present gain. They were seeking reputation, seeking riches, some of them, from themselves out of their ministries. And so, Paul's charge to Timothy, and indeed the whole church, is clear. He says, put a stop to all of that, to this indiscriminate welfare and to this intolerable waywardness in the churches.

Stop it before the church's mission is totally destroyed. Now, we'll come next time to some of these leading men who needed to be rebuked, who needed to be removed, some of them.

But here, in verses 3 to 16, Paul is tackling a particular problem there seemed to be among widows. Now, clearly, it was a particular problem among certain women in Ephesus because, well, you don't read in other letters of Paul, do you?

Great long chapters all about widows and things. It's not normal. It seems likely, from 2 Timothy chapter 3, that some of these widows had probably, wealthy ones, had probably given financial support and backing to some of these false teachers.

They'd come into their household, wormed their way in, and got their support, and perhaps taken over the churches that met in their households. But whatever it was, it was an urgent problem.

[18 : 24] That's why Paul has to deal with it so sharply here. This is not a chapter giving us some sort of general teaching about how the church should think about widows.

In fact, it's quite the reverse of that. Look at verses 3 to 10, and also verse 16. Firstly, you see, Paul is telling us very clearly the church must not be burdened by indiscriminate welfare.

The church's generosity here was being abused by professing Christians who were refusing to take responsibility that belonged to them personally, to look after and to care for their own households.

Now, you might be surprised that this chapter is not, as so many commentaries ahead this section, is not about widows who are to be supported. It's about widows who are not to be supported by the church.

Look, this is not, it's not, it's not about the church being condemned for rolling out too much welfare.

[19 : 30] It's about the church being condemned because it hasn't reined in the welfare. It's not the church's parsimony that Paul is getting at. He's condemning them for profligacy, for being indiscriminate.

The word honor there, you see, in verse 3, almost certainly means financial support and help. Verse 16, it's clear, isn't it, it's about caring for widows. It's used in the same way in verse 17.

But the care, look at verse 16, the care, the financial support that was being given was overwhelming the church. So Paul has to say, let not the church be burdened. Clearly it was being burdened by far too many so-called widows who had all jumped on the church's gravy train. And so Paul's concern is to say, no, you're to honor widows only the ones who are truly widows.

Says it again in verse 5, she who is truly a widow. And again there in verse 16, he sums it up, care for those who really are widows. In other words, not for all the rest of them.

[20 : 33] Stop putting that burden on the church. Now verse 9 tells us that there was some kind of an official list of widows who were enrolled for the church to give that sort of financial provision for.

But Paul is saying that list has got far too big. And you need to get people off it. Because it's financially unsustainable. And it's resulting in those who are in most genuine need not being cared for adequately.

That's clearly implied in verse 16. But not only that, Paul is saying it's morally and it's spiritually indefensible. Because it was allowing and indeed it was encouraging professing Christians to neglect their basic human duty to care for their own household.

Never mind their clear Christian duty to show a better way to the world than the pagans round about them. Not to disgrace themselves in front of the pagan world. Look at verse 8. That's what was happening.

If anyone doesn't provide for his relatives, the members of his household, he's denied the faith. He's worse than an unbeliever. That is what this indiscriminate welfare was encouraging. And no Christian church in the first century needed to be told it had to look after widows.

[21 : 47] Any church with the Bible knew that that was axiomatic. The Old Testament's full of commands to care for the widow, the fatherless, the outcast, and so on. That's why as early on as in Acts chapter 6 there's a whole big issue about looking after widows, isn't there?

But remember, that passage tells us very clearly, doesn't it, that those welfare issues had potential to totally derail the entire mission of the gospel for the church?

And the whole provision in Acts chapter 6 is to make sure that does not happen. That is what Paul is doing here as well. Things had got absolutely out of hand and he is saying you must stop this indiscriminate abuse of welfare.

And of course we know, don't we, that's what always happens. Because human nature is so sinful and selfish. Whatever is given freely gets taken more and more and more freely.

Whatever begins as a privilege that is gratefully received with great contentment and cherished very, very quickly becomes a right, doesn't it, that's demanded with more and more discontent.

That's the welfarism that has so mushroomed in our whole Western world today and our own country and so many other nations.

[22 : 59] An Australian pastor told me recently and he looked at our National Health Service and said, you seem to have purposely put in place a situation that will eventually, ultimately bankrupt your entire country.

And of course he's absolutely right, that's what we're beginning to see, isn't it? The desire, the urge to take these services up is insatiable. But where you have indiscriminate welfare you see in a democracy, it becomes impossible ever to rein it in.

Politicians know that, no one will vote for them if they say we're going to stop giving things to some of these people but get voted out. That's why it goes on and on and on.

But you see, mercifully, the church is not a democracy. And Christian people must, says Paul, think much more responsibly. Must heed God's command to us to think more responsibly.

This has to stop, says Paul. Because what's at stake here is far, far more than just a nation's coffers. What is at stake here is the church's whole mission of salvation to this world.

[24 : 06] And so that's why Paul in this passage is redefining for the church in Ephesus what a widow, a widow really is and isn't. So verse 4, you are not a real widow, says Paul, if you've got relatives.

Children and grandchildren, he says, owe it to their relatives to care for them. But Paul's just simply saying that like charity, godliness begins at home. So do it.

There was no welfare state in those days, but actually widows were cared for in a way by law. The sort of normal system was a diary system when a woman got married. If her husband died, she would be supported then from that diary.

If she had old enough children, an older son perhaps who took over the household, well, he would administer that for her care. If they were too young or if she had no children, perhaps she would go back under the care of her father's household.

That was the law. But never mind the law. You're a Christian. You're under God's law, Paul says. Honoring your father and mother, the fifth commandment.

[25 : 11] Paul quoted that commandment to the Ephesian church in his previous letter, by the way, in Ephesians chapter 6. The only other place where he seems to use this word honor that he uses here. And he says it here.

You know that's pleasing to God. And the implication is it's displeasing to God if you're not doing that. And if you're in any doubt, just read verse 8 again.

If you don't care for your own dependence and other people have to, then you're worse than your pagan unbelieving neighbors. It's pretty damning for you and in fact, it's a disgrace for the gospel, isn't it?

Because your pagan neighbors aren't blind. They're not stupid. They see and they frown on it. Imagine a conversation. Poor old Mrs. Trophimus says one lady to one of her neighbors in the market.

Her family never come near her, you know. She seems to live off food parcels that come from that nice lady Phoebe who I think is a servant of the church. You know, her garden's a terrible mess. It's a jungle.

[26 : 09] Her house is so filthy. Last time I went in she was smelly. She was unkempt and horrible. It's so, so sad. And it's another disgrace, isn't it? What are her family thinking?

Those three grown sons who work in the professions in the city and all their money. You know they're Christians, that lot. May our goddess Diana protect me and anyone in my family from ever becoming a Christian lest I be left like that.

Not very evangelistic, is it? Of course, our world is different in many ways. And to some degree, of course, many of these things are provided collectively through our texts, through health and social care and so on.

But nevertheless, it is a challenge, isn't it? What does the world see from us as Christians by way of our care and devotion to those of our households, especially the elderly, especially the vulnerable, those that we have personal responsibility for?

It'd be terrible, wouldn't it, if what the world saw in us as Christian people was less than the world took us standard themselves? But sometimes that's so, isn't it?

[27 : 21] And of course, verse 8 isn't just restricted to widows. It's talking about all in your household, everyone you've got responsibility for. John Stott points out in his book, he says this, this is a plain biblical warrant for a life assurance policy, which is just a self-imposed savings plan for the benefit of our dependents.

Now, all normal, decent people do that, don't they? So that if you die, your children are not left destitute and dependent on others. But I know Christians, I've met Christians who think it's far more pious to trust God and not do such things.

Listen to Paul. It's not pious, it's pagan. In fact, it's worse than pagan. So wake up. The truth is, actually, sometimes it's just self-indulgence and selfishness, isn't it?

Because you say, oh, well, I'd love to do that, but I can't afford it. Well, have a couple of less cakes and a couple of less coffees in the week, and you'll find you can pay that premium five times over. There's a lot to chew on, isn't there, if we take verse 8 seriously.

But Paul's main point is absolutely plain. The church is not to be burdened by the negligence of its members who are dodging who are dodging their clear duty as decent human beings, never mind as professing Christians.

[28 : 42] Who then are truly widows that the church should be supporting financially? Well, Paul is clear. Look at verse 5. It's not just those who don't have a family to help them.

The church isn't even to support all of these, he says. Yes, she must be truly needy, but she must be truly godly as well if she's going to be considered a widow.

Her human circumstances, yes, they have to require genuine help. She's left all alone. But her Christian confession also reveals genuine holiness.

She set her hope on God. She continues in prayers and supplications night and day. That is, she's still fully part of the church's corporate life of worship and service. She's still living for the hope of

Christ's eternal kingdom.

She's a real gospel woman. She's a spiritual woman, not, verse 6, a self-indulgent one who's just living it up for this world. And that was a real problem in Ephesus as we'll see in a moment in verses 11 to 15, especially among some of these younger so-called widows.

[29 : 52] And that's why in verses 9 and 10, Paul is clear. There's no place for sentimentality. No, look, you have to enroll for church support only, he says, first of all, the elderly.

Notice they're 60 was regarded as the age perhaps which you couldn't work beyond, you weren't able or you weren't able to get married again. And so you were in genuine need. There was a visible need.

But also, look, there was a visible history of real Christian service. She's a faithful wife. A woman of one man and a woman who had had a reputation for a life that was devoted to the good works of the kingdom with her own family, her own children, but hospitality to other believers, washing the feet of the saints.

That's probably just a term that means somebody who serves the Lord's people at every opportunity. And so as she had served, now it's right that she should be served.

She's been herself devoted to the good work of Christ and his kingdom. And so it's right that the church should now be devoted to keeping her and caring for her.

[31 : 01] And also, isn't it true that helping a woman like that is also going to bless the church because it's highly unlikely, isn't it, that somebody who has spent their whole life in clear service of the Lord's people like that is suddenly going to flip and spend all the money that you give her on parties and booze and pampering herself and all the rest of it.

Of course not. The best indicator of future behavior is past behavior, isn't it? And so the church is almost certainly going to be blessed by supporting this kind of woman.

The support to her is going to help her go on doing all those kind of things that have served the kingdom of Christ already all through her life. That's all Paul's saying here. There are some who take verses 9 and 10 differently.

They think this refers to some sort of special order of widows, of female church workers. And that this is a sort of job description for them. There doesn't seem to really be any evidence of that.

In any way, it's very odd, isn't it, to make the first mark of criteria for employment for full-time church workers being over 60. And certainly in verse 10, what's being described here is what's in the past.

[32 : 06] It's the past life. What Paul is saying, let's be clear, is that there are some who deserve the help of the church and there are some who do not deserve that help.

He's saying there's a moral dimension to this welfare from the church. Now some of us might bridle at that today, perhaps many of us, because we're so conditioned, aren't we, by our modern rights culture.

And the very word discrimination today is the dirty word. But friends, Paul is saying here the church must discriminate. It must use discernment properly.

Because above all, we are people, he says, who know the truth. And knowing the truth means we know the truth about the human heart, which is full of sinfulness and corruption and natural self-indulgence. And Paul says in verse 6, that self-indulgence is a living death.

He says that is what dehumanizes people. And how decent people today, they know that sort of thing, don't they, deep down.

[33 : 12] And decent pagans back then certainly knew that sort of thing. They could see it clearly. And if they saw Christians who were not supporting those they should be supporting and supporting all sorts of people they should never have been supporting, well, they could see that that was wrong as well as stupid.

That's why Paul is emphatic in verse 7, command these things too, so that everyone is without reproach in the world. So that they're seen not to be neglecting the care of people they should be helping and not indulging people who should never be indulged in that way.

Because sometimes it's dangerous, sometimes it is really damaging to support people financially who should be supporting themselves. And indeed, who should be caring for others in their responsibilities.

Overindulgent Christian welfare, Paul is saying, will lead to self-indulgent Christian wickedness and waywardness. And that is exactly what was going on in these churches.

Look at verses 11 to 15. Here's the second thing he's saying so clearly. The church must not be betrayed by intolerable waywardness and wickedness. The church's gospel was being abused by professing Christians who were being supported by the church but whose behavior and whose talk was betraying the church, was contradicting, was damaging the church's mission in the world.

[34 : 39] And that's why Paul says in verse 11, refuse to enroll these younger widows. Because, first of all, he says, well look, they'll often marry so they'll no longer be widows.

And secondly, he says in verse 13, others of them will become wayward and they will not be true widows by the criteria he's just told us. Instead of being good servants of Christ Jesus, look what he says in verse 15, they've become those who have strayed after Satan himself.

Now we can't be sure exactly all the things that were going on but some things seem very clear. Verses 11 and 12 indicate that some of these women were remarrying and abandoning the faith. Abandoning their former faith. I think that's the best translation. The NIV has it a little differently. It talks about a pledge. There are some who think that it means there was a pledge of celibacy in order to get support as widows.

But I think it makes more sense to read it as just abandoning their true Christian faith. That's what the word means everywhere else in the letter. And verse 15 seems very clear.

[35 : 48] Some of them were going after Satan. That is certainly abandoning Christ. So it seems like these women were marrying outside the church to pagan men and reverting back to paganism.

And maybe that was because the false teachers were denying marriage. And their desire for marriage meant that they had to go outside the church in order to find that. So you're left with a ludicrous position of the church financially supporting with pensions women who no longer were in the church had renounced the church and had become pagans again and were outside and being supported by their new husband as well.

And perhaps the condemnation mentioned in verse 12 there was from the pagan world who was mocking the church for its sentimentality and stupidity. But notice he says it's a strong passion for things of this world that drew these women away from the greater hope of Christ's eternal kingdom. They're the very opposite aren't they of the widow in verse 5 whose hope is fully set on that eternal kingdom of Christ. The godly woman there was able to put the future reward of Christ above present passing gain but not these women.

And so they were turned away from Christ verse 11 by these greater loves. And friends these are real temptations not just for widows but perhaps for somebody who's a divorcee or perhaps somebody who's a single woman today who's very very keen to be married.

[37 : 22] And some people do put their desire for marriage at any cost above their desire for Christ. And when people do seek that union outside of Christ very very often it leads to great trouble and more often than people are willing to recognize it does lead to ruin it does lead to abandonment of the faith.

But these things are hard that's why Paul is so realistic in verse 14. Young widows like this he says should get married wherever possible within the church of course.

They should ignore that nonsense of the false teachers who forbid marriage who forbid certain foods who tell us we don't need these good gifts of God. And they should get married he says and they should get busy again with family life with family business working hard in the household and overseeing the household.

He's not just talking about domestic chores at the kitchen sink he's talking about managing the household business and being busy with work. And that busyness at work is really important because the second problem very clearly here in Ephesus was that there were some women who were causing a lot of trouble because they had far too much time on their hands.

Verse 13 These widows who were being supported financially and not having to work were able to be idlers gossips busybodies they had time to flit about house church to house church causing all kinds of damage.

[38 : 49] The word gossip there is translated in 3 John verse 10 as talking wicked nonsense. That's what they were doing. They were spreading the myths and the falsehood of these rival leaders.

They were doing great damage to the church because they had too much time on their hands. And the devil loves idle hands. And some people these women included they couldn't cope with having too much time on their hands.

And there are some Christian women who when they're busy with children and family life and other things all is well in their Christian service but perhaps when the nest is flown and they find that they have devoted themselves only to these things then they have lots of time on their hands. And sometimes they can become idlers gossips busybodies causing damage in the churches. There are others too who serve the church very well when they have the rest of their life to keep them in check.

They have busyness and families and work and so on but then they do become fully supported by the church and go full time working for the church and then there comes a problem because actually they're not serving they're coasting.

[40 : 03] And they can find time for idle chat and busyboding and talking nonsense and they call it ministry. But in fact it becomes a minister to the church. And the last thing the churches should be doing says Paul is encouraging that sort of thing.

Don't promote that with the church's money. You've got to prevent that. You've got to rein it in. You've got to cut the church's support from these kinds of people.

people. Now can you imagine the uproar in the churches in Ephesus when Timothy starts doing that? I wonder now whether what Paul says later on in the chapter about Timothy taking a bit of wine along with his water isn't related to that because he probably thought he needed a stiff drink before he was going to deal with that kind of church meeting.

But make no mistake that is what Paul is saying. There would be outrage. You can hear it, can't you? Where's the compassion, Timothy? You're hurting the most vulnerable people, Timothy. But no, says Paul, that is not so. What you have been doing is not compassionate. It is corrupting these people. It's stopping them from being responsible in looking after their own.

[41 : 18] It's stopping them from being restrained in their own conduct. Indeed, it is risking their very salvation. Your so-called support is what is sending them running after Satan.

Is that what you want? You call them vulnerable women. In fact, Paul says they are very voluble women. They're talking wicked nonsense.

They're vexatious. They're spreading virulent danger. And indeed, he's saying they are venomous women. They're infecting others with the poison of Satan himself, the great serpent.

And you have to charge them to stop all of that, is what Paul says to Timothy. That's how he began the letter, wasn't it?

Charge people to stop speaking wrong things and doing wrong things. And this is part of that. What Paul is saying is no responsible church leader and no responsible church can avoid these kind of necessary negatives.

[42 : 16] if the true faith and its true mission is going to survive against the opposition of the world and the flesh and the devil himself. Let the church not be betrayed by intolerable waywardness and wickedness.

By allowing situations to exist where people are drawn away from Christ and after Satan to abandon the faith with the financial backing of the church. And let the church not be burdened by indiscriminate welfare which discourages responsibility among some and discourages restraint among others and altogether does nothing but bring reproach on the church's reputation and at the same time reduce and restrict the church's resources for its mission.

Paul's words are a great reality check, aren't they? They are necessary negatives that if a church is to have a positive mission in the world and be able to do what only it can do, it has to pay attention to.

Only the church of Jesus Christ can be a pillar and buttress of the truth about eternal salvation in this world. If we do not do it, no one else can. So let me finish just with some implications for today. As I've said, Paul is dealing with specific issues that were particular to the church in Ephesus. But I hope we can see that the underlying issues are eternally pertinent to the church in every age and in every place.

[43 : 48] So two things as we close very briefly. First, Paul is telling us the church cannot survive, never mind expand its mission to the world, if it is burdened by merely material concerns.

Whether that is indiscriminate welfarism, endless social care and concerns, which in any case, if it is indiscriminate, corrupt people and will inevitably constrict the gospel mission of the church, or it can't be taken up with endless conservation, propping up ancient buildings, spending vast sums just to keep the national heritage people in historic Scotland and others happy, that will not build the

eternal kingdom of Christ.

Far less if the church is supporting financially those who profess Christ, but in fact, I'm absolutely betraying the gospel and the true church. That's the situation in so many of our mainline denominations in our country still today.

It's what used to happen to us. Vast sums of gospel money siphoned off to subsidize either hopeless ministries or more often than not, heretical ministries destroying the true gospel of Christ. Doing what verse 13 says expressly here, talking wicked nonsense, leading people away from Christ and into the path of Satan. No, says Paul.

[45 : 15] He wrote to the very same church in Ephesus in his earlier letter to the Ephesians, didn't he, in Ephesians 5 verse 11, take no part, do not partner with the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

We need Paul's necessary negatives in all these areas if we're going to ensure that the church is not driven to sink beneath the waves of these sorts of unsupportable burdens.

And secondly, the clear message is that the church must not be betrayed by having a soft and sentimental attitude, to be lured into supporting all and sundry who might seem to have a call on the finite resources of the church, but clearly do not.

Not all widows are truly widows, says Paul, even if they are materially needy. Some are self-indulgent. Some are not real faithful servants of Christ, and the church must not sink itself by supporting all of these.

Not every widow is a widow. Not every asylum seeker is an asylum seeker. Not every needy person is deserving of the church's help.

[46 : 35] So we've got to be careful, haven't we, that what we want to think of as compassion is not in fact just corrupting other people. And so bringing reproach on the church and bringing ruin on those so-called professing Christians themselves.

themselves. And not everyone supported by the church in full-time so-called ministry is truly a full-time minister.

Some who take support and a stipend from the church either in full-time ministry here or even more spiritually as a full-time missionary, not all are doing a good job and should be supported.

Some are, as Paul says, highly qualified idlers and busybodies who talk wicked nonsense. Who are saying what they shouldn't say. And if you go on supporting those, you will bring reproach on the church and ruin to those people themselves.

The church has only got so much, hasn't it, by way of resources, so much time, so much money, so many talents. And if these things are to be maximized for gospel fruitfulness in this world, Paul is saying they simply cannot be squandered on the feckless or on the feeble, far less on the faithless.

[48 : 00] That's a hard dose of gospel realism, isn't it, from Christ's apostle. But if the church is not to be distracted from every good work that it is called to, for the eternal kingdom of Christ, Christ, then we have to listen.

Necessary negatives are essential for the church's positive gospel mission. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we find ourselves squirming with discomfort at Paul's words to us this morning.

And we ask that you would help us to examine our own hearts and for all of us, as your people here as the church, to be willing to examine our collective heart as we think of the calling that you truly have called us to.

And to think whether we ourselves are shirking our responsibilities to others in some places, or indeed whether we are foolishly indulging others, and in the name of doing them good or actually doing them harm, and worse, damaging the witness of your gospel in this world.

[49 : 24] So give us wisdom, we pray. Give us humility. And help us to learn from your holy word. For we ask it for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.