

PRINCIPLES BY WHICH TO LIVE

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We can no more do everything we need to do than our husbands can. We must determine the order of importance, or, as the catch phrase says, “get our priorities straight.” No doubt we would all agree that God must come first, before any earthly relationship: “If any hate not his father and mother...” (Luke 14:26).¹ Next would come husbands, and then children.

The widow of Zarepheth was preparing to bake her last morsel of bread, and fully expected then that she and her son would starve (1 Kin. 17:8–16). But when Elijah requested that she make him a little cake first, promising her that she and her son would be cared for, she obeyed. Jesus commended the widow who cast her two mites into the temple treasury (Luke 21:1–4) because, although the gift was infinitesimal, it was all that she had. For all she knew, she would starve to death. What great examples of faith and unselfishness!

Most of us (potentially all of us) will have a responsibility, commanded by God, to care for aging parents if the need arises (Lev. 1:2–3; Num. 7:12–17; Mat. 15:5; Mark 7:11). Jesus pronounced a scathing condemnation upon the Jewish leaders who would say “It is Corban,” that is, anything I might have given to you is dedicated to God.

And finally, we may think about ourselves and our own needs. It is not difficult to figure out that these various duties often conflict and clash with each other. Many homes are three-generational: aged parents, husband and wife, and children (by this time, often they are teenaged children, a situation that can really get sticky!). All of these may be competing for attention. Older people can be very childish sometimes, but they must still be treated with respect.

We are told (1 Tim. 5:3–10) that widows who have believing children should be cared for by those children and the church not be burdened. Remember how Ruth cared for her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 2:11–12). However, this care need not necessarily be in the children’s own home. We should be careful not to be too critical of people who place their parents in a nursing home. We cannot always know all the facts and reasons behind such a decision. I have known people (I am thinking particularly of one godly lady, the wife of an elder) who are physically unable to care for their parents beyond a certain point, to receive severe criticism and harsh judgment. And yet, I happened to know that the poor lady had cared for her mother for many years. She was herself getting up in years, and not in good health. She just reached the point where she could not do it (physically) any more. It is cruel,

unfair, and ungodly to make judgments when we are not qualified to do so. We had better consider ourselves, for we might find ourselves in the same situation some day.

For years my own father would periodically gather his children together and tell us emphatically, “If I become unable to care for myself, I do not want to live with any of you children! I want you to put me in a nursing home!” And he meant it. We never were sure if his concern was for us or for himself, but we promised him we would honor his wishes.

Sometimes putting God first may mean caring for our families. Sometimes our “church work” must be carried out in conjunction with our “homemakers’ work” (washing the saints’ feet [1 Tim. 5:10], Dorcas making clothes for the widows [Acts 9:36–41], Hannah making a little coat for Samuel [1 Sam. 2:19]). This work is a very important one, and the example we can set for our children is invaluable. Remember how Jesus commended Mary, who anointed him with precious ointment, and said “She hath done what she could; she hath anointed my body beforehand for the burial” (John 12:1–8). He promised that, wherever the Gospel is preached, this account of her good deed would be told and commended.

On the other hand, it is very good for a leader’s wife to make visits with her husband, and never more urgent than when he is visiting a woman who is alone. In the first place, his reputation can be damaged. In the second place, he can fall into temptation. Many such women are lonely, and are happy to have a shoulder to cry on. This can be flattering to a man, and the first thing you know the situation gets too cozy. If a woman should decide to accuse him falsely of improper advances, it becomes a matter of “her word against his.” As Potiphar believed his wife against Joseph (Gen. 39:1–20), just so many people—and not just spouses—are all too eager to believe such juicy stories.

Often there will be work which can be done only by a woman (caring for a sick woman, including bathing, etc.) or can be done much better by a woman. Each stage in the life of a church leader’s wife brings new challenges, duties, and opportunities. For instance, those whose children have left home generally have much more available time than do those with small children. Widows who are in good health have much free time which they can use in various ways to help others.

We must learn to weigh each opportunity and each duty that presents itself, and with many prayers, much thought, and study, make up our own minds what we can do and what we cannot do. Once we have done that, we must learn, without guilt, to say “no.” It is all too easy for a wife and mother, as well as a husband and father, to neglect her family in favor of “duty.” When we are young, we feel that we must do whatever anyone else asks us to do. As we grow older, we grow wiser (it is hoped!), and realize that we alone can make such

decisions of what we can and cannot do. These are questions between our Lord, and us and we have to try to avoid both extremes: making excuses for not doing what we should, or short-changing our families by trying to do everything.

Widows, mothers, and grandmothers of church leaders have continuing responsibilities, also. As mentioned earlier, widows sometimes have more time and freedom to work, all things (health and finances) being equal. If the mothers and grandmothers of church leaders have earned the respect of their sons and grandsons (Pro. 31), they can still use their influence—not to push, but to encourage and guide.

The list of “small” things we can do for others is endless. Jesus said that, if we so much as give a cup of cold water to someone in His name, with love, we will not lose our reward. We can help those who are old and/or shut in by visiting them, taking food to them, sending cards, offering to run errands or take them places, and telephoning them to chat or to check on their needs. For one who does not see well, we might read to her. A greatly appreciated service is tape-recording a tract, a book, or an article for those who can no longer read. When we send cards to such people, it is helpful to them if we use a Sharpie pen and write in large, bold letters. Teaching is not a small thing, but it is something we can do. We can teach Bible classes at the church building; we can form neighborhood Bible studies for women and/or children. We can study with and teach one woman at a time.

There could be no Bible lectureships without the hard work and long hours of service of the women of the congregation (usually behind the scenes, and often unnoticed), from teenagers to the older women. The committee coordinators are generally men, but their wives do a great deal of the work. The women and girls take care of children in the nursery. They bake refreshments to be served during the lectureship. They work in the kitchen to make sure the refreshments are ready when needed. They prepare and supervise the first aid room. They sit at the information table, helping speakers and other visitors who need assistance of one kind or another. They do much of the secretarial work. They put in many hours stuffing envelopes for mail-outs. They keep guests and speakers in their homes, serving breakfast, at the least, to them (some do more). Jesus said that if we so much as give a cup of cold water to someone in His name with love, we will not lose our reward.

In these days of computers and e-mail, letter writing has become a forgotten and abandoned skill. I use e-mail continually, but there is something about receiving a hand-written note or letter that cannot be duplicated by e-mail. My high school principal could be a stern disciplinarian. I did not like him at the time, even though he was a Christian and led singing in

the worship of the church. I was afraid of him, in fact. I sometimes resented his strictness, and felt he was too stern, hard, and unapproachable. This principal was not a “pal”!

But as my children got to the high school age, I began to realize just what this man had done for my peers and me, none of which we appreciated. In his school we had Bible reading, prayer, flag raising (with “To the Colors” played by trumpeters in lieu of buglers), and recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. There were no dances as long as he was in charge. There was no immodest dress—girls even had to wear jackets or boleros over their sundresses (which were not immodest alone by today’s standards), and were not allowed to wear jeans to school. He and he alone set the dress code. He expected the cooperation and backing of our parents and, except in rare instances, he got it. Disobedience or disrespect of any kind meant a trip to his office, and if the infraction were serious, it would result in a paddling. He had been a coach, and was a large, strong man. Even the big boys feared him, and would prefer to stay away from the business end of his paddle.

One day, when all three of our children had reached their teen years, I decided to write to him. The conditions in our public schools (and this was in the early seventies) were growing worse all the time, and government restriction on our freedom of religion was already closing in insidiously. I began to wonder what he would have done under the circumstances of that time. Would he have been able to govern as he did years ago? “Coach” was not getting any younger, and I felt, however belatedly, that I should express my appreciation to him. Little did I dream of the effect my letter would have on him. He said he was saving it to pass on to his grandchildren. You see, he had never before received such commendation, praise, and gratitude from any of his former students. I had not thought of what I had done as a “great thing,” but was simply giving him his due. I felt guilty that I had not done it sooner. Never think expressing gratitude—especially in writing—is insignificant or unappreciated, or that everyone else has already beaten us to it. I wrote a similar letter of appreciation to a Home Economics (I suppose she would be a “Domestic Science” teacher now?) teacher whom all of her students loved dearly and missed greatly. But my letter was the only one she got.

All of us can give attention and time to older people. They are usually lonely, and they love to talk about their past, their history, and their background. We would sometimes be amazed at what we can learn just by listening to them. Many of them have so much to offer, and many have a great sense of humor. If they seem to be whining or complaining, we need to remember that, given their set of experiences, pains, and griefs, we too might whine and complain. I received a poem through the Internet whose message was, to summarize, “Look at me! I was once young like you. I may be old, gray, stooped, decrepit, and wrinkled on the

outside, but I am still the same person on the inside. Get to know me. Don't judge me only by what you can see. Give me a chance!"

Older women who no longer have children at home might be able to give more time than they could in earlier years. There are so many ways to banish that "empty nest syndrome," none better than looking and listening for the hungers (figurative) of others. One need is that of encouraging young mothers. Sometimes life with two or three (or maybe even one!) babies or small children can be very wearing, discouraging, and trying. Instead of criticizing, try to remember what it was like when our own children were young. If we do offer suggestions, they are much more likely to be received if they are offered in a spirit of encouragement and love.

Many of us who are older can still drive. Many cannot, and they are stuck at home unless someone offers to take them somewhere. They don't like to ask. We can call them and offer a ride, or we can offer to shop for them. Sometimes they have trouble keeping up with their prescriptions, which can even be dangerous. It is a small matter for us to call in their refills on the automated phone service most pharmacies have, and then we can pick the prescriptions up and deliver them. Even a chatty phone call can brighten another's day.

In one congregation where we worked and worshiped, a family would periodically, for no reason, send us a lovely card expressing appreciation and encouragement. They will never know how much their thoughts and encouragement meant to us. Most of us fail to realize (until it happens to us) how difficult are special days such as birthdays, anniversaries, and death dates for those who have suffered a great loss, especially of a spouse or a child. We can at least send a "thinking of you" card, a hand-written note, or we could phone them. If possible, we could take such people out to eat, or take food to their houses and eat with them. These are small things, but they would mean so much to those who are depressed, sad, and alone with their memories. Some people would like to talk about their lost loved ones, and we should encourage them to do so rather than feeling uncomfortable about it. Give them opportunities to bring up memories, especially happy or funny ones.

Conclusion

"She hath done what she could" (Mark 14:8). May we so live that Jesus' commendation of Mary could be said of us. We may not be able to do great things, but we can do many "small" things, with results that would likely amaze us. I doubt that Mary realized that her "insignificant" good deed would be told, as a memorial to her, far and wide down through the years to come—just as Jesus said.

Endnote

1. All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise indicated.