

## **What Needs To Be Done**

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Romans 16:1-7

I often balk at efforts to stereotype men and women, boys and girls by a particular gender role that comes along with pre-determined responsibilities and expectations.

However, on Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day people often do this in churches throughout the country. And they do it with very good intentions to honor people.

On Mother's Day, people praise mothers for how wonderfully they take care of kids, and how tirelessly they work to prepare meals and clean the house.

Then on Fathers' Day, they talk about how fathers work to provide financially for the family, how they do manly stuff like mow the lawn, swing a hammer to build useful stuff in the garage, and fix things around the house.

Now, there is no problem honoring people for doing these things. In fact, I think it is important to recognize how hard people work to do important tasks. God knows

that we need parents who are committed to taking care of their families, keeping them healthy, well adjusted, and faithful.

It is important to honor our mothers for how they have helped to shape us as children and human beings. That is why we have this wonderful display here in the sanctuary this morning of pictures of our mothers, grandmothers, and mother figures. Leona assembled some great pictures of mothers from our church archives as well. Please take a look before you leave this morning.

However, I also think that we must be careful to understand that not all mothers fit what might be considered the "traditional role" of mothers. I actually think that the fact some don't fit the mold is not a sad commentary, but a hopeful one to celebrate.

I think we need to be aware when we lump all mothers into a stereotyped role, because there will be some who say that it simply doesn't fit them. It can leave these women feeling isolated, embarrassed and even guilty because they do not fit what is expected. The reality very well may be that they don't fit for good reason, and what they actually do can be recognized and celebrated.

What about the single mother who mows the lawn, fixes the plumbing and works full-time, while her oldest son makes many meals, and other kids take turns doing laundry and cleaning the house? This mother does what needs to be done to help her family find a balance and this makes life simply work for them.

This can be celebrated!

What about the families like my friends, we'll call them Jim and Ann, where Ann has the edge on earning power so she works more hours while Jim stays home, preparing most meals and helping the kids with their homework?

Jim does what needs to be done to make the family work.

And what about the families made up of two female parents who have a house, jobs and children, just like heterosexual couples? Who takes what roles and responsibilities? It's negotiated to find a balance that works based on their skills, preferences and simply what makes sense in their situation.

Especially in today's world in this country, each mother, along with her family needs to sort out what role they play in the family.

In my family, it was no different. When I was growing up, my mom started in a very traditional role, but adjusted as time presented new needs.

She stayed home with my brother and me until we were in school, then she worked during the school day to help support the family financially.

When I was 12, my sister was born and I remember my mom loading up a playpen in the car and taking my sister with her to work. It was wonderful that her job was flexible enough, and that allowed her to do what our family needed at that point.

I admire my mom for her creativity to do whatever was needed to make life work. I imagine you or your mother got creative to do similar things — doing what needs to be done is often what it means to be a mother.

So, I applaud you!

Others of you might have maintained a more traditional role of raising kids, cooking meals and keeping the house clean while your husband dedicated himself to work so that he could financially support the family.

I also applaud you, because those responsibilities can be both exhausting and incredibly important in order to make life work for your family.

The reality is that many women and mothers need to do a whole range of things to make ends meet or to simply make life work.

The long and short of it is that there are a lot of ways of being a responsible mother that I am sure God would honor.

Scripture lifts up many examples of God using women and mothers to do wonderful things. Grace read earlier about Deborah who was a powerful leader among the Hebrews people.

We take a side journey from Acts into Romans today.

### **Read Romans 16:1-7**

Paul, the main character in the second half of Acts here is giving some personal greetings to friends and co-ministers in Rome.

The list extends past where I stopped, but notice how many of the people he mentions are women. There is Phoebe, who very likely delivered this letter from

Paul to the churches in Rome. There was also Prisca (or Priscilla), Mary, and Junia (or perhaps called Julia). Of the first seven people mentioned, four of them are women!

Paul is not only mentioning them, he is lifting them up as examples of great ministers, pastors, and servants of Jesus. Some have risked their lives to support Paul and even served time with him in prison for the sake of the ministry to which they were called.

The place of women in first century Palestine was difficult for women, so it is remarkable that so many women were working alongside the men in the ministry in this new faith movement around Jesus

Jewish tradition actually suppressed women. Rabbi's didn't want women to learn alongside men or be around too much, so they were often excluded from religious training and leadership.

In fact, most rabbis only mentioned women or talked about them in relation to purity laws, and worked to support the traditional practice of keeping them separate both in the home and in places of worship.

In general, rabbis were men who encouraged women to stay out of the way of men and be seen as little as possible in public. They were considered subservient, little more than a house servant. This was the norm.

On the financial side, women could not own property. Unless they were the few in the upper class of society, they literally could not survive on their own unless someone were to financially help them. So they stayed with their parents until being married, at which point the new husband could then financially take care of her.

As a side note, thankfully the paternal grip among Jews has softened at least some today. In a few weeks on the Sunday morning of June 10, I am excited for you to hear from a friend of mine named Dorit, who is a Jewish rabbi, a woman and mother!

We talked last week about how important it was to care for Gentile widows who had left their blood relatives to become a part of the family of believers in Jesus. There was typically no way for them to financially care for themselves — they were marginalized and their power was stripped from them.

It is very interesting that in the Gospels we read of Jesus elevating women as equals among the men. This became a pattern for the early church described in Acts and Romans.

Jesus, included and honored women as equals among the men in their ministry roles, education, and life. Together men and women would travel with him from town to town.

Among the other revolutionary things he did in first century Palestine, how Jesus elevated women was truly startling!

Jesus certainly broke the mold for rabbis.

Jesus and the early disciples encouraged women to use whatever gifts God had given them for the benefit of the community. They were doing all variety of work including work as apostles, being pastoral leaders of congregations, and serving as deacons.

They were simply doing what needed to be done.

Jesus shifted the expectations for women and this spread through the faith communities that Paul and others established. Unfortunately, it

only took a couple of hundred years at best before the church succumbed to the pressures of the world and reverted to paternalism.

It is now the work of the church to return to the way that Jesus and Paul taught where women are fully included and honored for their gifts alongside men.

I am very happy that this congregation is open to women and mothers holding any variety of positions and have welcomed women to preach in this pulpit. I can also tell you that our Pastor Search Team carry that spirit with openness to women candidates.

Something that has saddened me is the number of American Baptist churches as well as congregations from other denominations who are not open to the gifts God has given to very capable women.

As I went through seminary in Detroit, I sat next to and learned alongside women and mothers who were as smart or smarter than me, as committed in their faith and as solid in their sense of calling to the ministry as I am. And these women have had a very rough time finding congregations to not only call them as their pastor, but even consider them as a serious candidates.

It is sad and frustrating when women are called by God, and we get in the way of that call due to stereotypes and discrimination.

Jesus did not limit a woman's work, involvement in ministry or in life, but instead lifted them up and empowered them to use what God had given them to do what needed to be done.

May we continue to do likewise as we celebrate mothers who use what God has given them to do the work that needs to be done.