It’s obvious that our world is growing more and more hostile to the truth of God’s Word and the testimony of His church. Lest believers think this is unjust and respond with incredulity, it’s worth reminding ourselves of the world in which the New Testament was written, and the persecution the first-century church had to endure.

In the Roman culture, Christians were outcasts. Their faith was widely misunderstood and mischaracterized. Some people believed Christianity was a cult with cannibalistic tendencies (the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was particularly confounding to pagan outsiders). Christians faced constant opposition from both the pagan Romans and the Jewish religious leaders.

Most aspects of daily Roman life were tied to pagan gods and practices, so coming to repentance and faith in Christ meant comprehensive changes to your lifestyle. It meant a radical break from society, and often resulted in the loss of jobs, social status, and even homes and property.

And that’s all before you consider the physical persecution. Imagine a world where your church was forced to meet in secret; where, because of your faith, you were arrested on trumped-up charges; where believers were routinely beaten, tortured, crucified, burned alive, or thrown to bloodthirsty animals for sport.

That was everyday life for believers in New Testament times, and it needs to inform how we understand the Bible’s instructions for living in a hostile environment. In Titus 2, Paul didn’t exhort the Cretan believers to assert their political voice and mobilize against their godless government. He exhorted them to live lives that magnified and adorned the testimony of God’s Word.

As we consider how to biblically respond to a world that is increasingly hostile to us and to the truth of Scripture, we’re looking at Paul’s teaching to the believers in Crete. Last time we examined his exhortation to older men. Today we will see how he shifts the focus to older women in the church. He wrote, “Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women” (Titus 2:3-4).

Again, Paul highlights a group that has been largely shoved aside by the trend-chasing modern church. His emphasis on their role in the life of the body is a sharp contrast to the way older women are routinely overlooked in many churches today. As John MacArthur explains in his Titus Commentary on this passage, that is largely to the detriment of the church.

Such godly older women are a rich spiritual resource in the church and deserve special esteem and consideration. Paul therefore declared that a Christian widow more than 60 years old who had no family to support her and who “has fixed her hope on God, and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day,” who was a faithful and godly wife and mother, and who “has shown hospitality to strangers, . . . washed the saints’ feet, . . . assisted those in distress, and . . . devoted herself to

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Reverent Women
Scripture: 1 Timothy 2:9–11; Titus 2:3–4
Code: B150713
every good work” not only should be honored by the church but financially supported as well (1 Timothy 5:3–10).

In New Testament times, older women served the church in numerous ways. As Paul mentions later in the present passage [Titus 2:3-4], a key function of older women was to teach and encourage younger women in the things of the Lord. They also ministered to each other and to women in the church of any age, single, married, or widowed. They visited the sick and those in prison. They provided hospitality to Christian travelers, especially those in some form of ministry.

In towns that were strongly pagan, Christian women would go through the streets and marketplaces searching for abandoned newborns who were unwanted and had been left to die by their parents. Since abortion was both dangerous and expensive and birth control devices did not exist, an unwanted baby was simply abandoned at birth. Some male babies were raised to be slaves or gladiators, and some girls were trained for prostitution. Christian women who rescued these infants would give them to church families for adoption.[1] John MacArthur, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Titus (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 76-77.

Given the vital role women played in the church, Paul instructed them to cultivate some specific spiritual qualities—the first is reverence behavior. As John writes in his commentary on Titus, the Greek word translated "reverent" in Titus 2:3 has the root meaning of being priestlike and came to refer to that which is appropriate to holiness. Older women are to be godly examples of holiness. . . .

Women who are reverent in their behavior “adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness,” and they “quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness” (1 Timothy 2:9–11). They are women who, through the bearing of children, have removed the stigma of Eve’s sin and have lived “in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint” (1 Timothy 2:15).[2] 77.

Paul immediately contrasts that important character quality with an exhortation against the kind of behavior we often associate with older women. He commands them to “not [to be] malicious gossips” (Titus 2:3). In his commentary, John MacArthur elaborates on the kind of godly woman Paul describes.

They refuse to listen to, much less propagate, slanderous or demeaning words about others. Just as men are more inclined to abuse others physically, women are more inclined to abuse others verbally, which can be even more destructive.

Paul is not referring simply to unfavorable idle chatter about a person, bad as that is. “Malicious gossips” translates diabolos, which means “slanderer, or false accuser” and is used thirty-four times in the New Testament as a title of Satan, whom Jesus describes as “the father of lies” (John 8:44).[3] 77.

We know from James’s epistle the destructive wickedness we can unleash on one another simply through our tongues (James 3:1-12). You’ve likely seen how gossip and slander can drive wedges and create rifts within the Body of Christ. Imagine what that looks like to the unbelieving world—we preach love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice but undercut the truth of our transformed lives with the
careless, unloving way we talk to and about each other.

In their hostility to God and His Word, unbelievers will look for any ammunition to use against the testimony of the church. How much ammunition do you provide them simply in the way you talk?

Paul pairs another negative command with his prohibition against gossip—he instructs the older women to not be “enslaved to much wine” (Titus 2:3). John MacArthur explains why the apostle made that exhortation—which he applies elsewhere to the whole church (Ephesians 5:18)—specifically to older women in Titus 2.

Older women are not to be “enslaved to much wine,” a strong phrase that refers to drunkenness. As many of them have done throughout history, older people on Crete sometimes turned to drink as a stimulant and a means of ameliorating the pains, frustrations, and loneliness of old age. *Douloō* means literally to be enslaved, “to be held and controlled against one’s will,” and addiction to much wine becomes more a prison than a means of escape. Worse still, an older believer who becomes so addicted brings dishonor to the Lord’s name, sullies the reputation of the church, and, more often than not, leads others into following his or her ungodly example.[4] 77-78.

We know Paul was concerned about the example the older women were setting for their followers, because he mentions it explicitly. He wants them to be “teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women” (Titus 2:3-4a). John MacArthur explains what that looked like in practice.

*Kalodidaskalos* (teaching what is good) refers to instruction in that which is noble, excellent, and lofty. In this context, it includes the teaching of what is holy and godly. Having taught their own children well, older women now have the responsibility for teaching younger women in the church and encouraging them to also be righteous and godly wives and mothers (Titus 2:4–5). . . .

Older women are to teach and model godliness in order to “encourage the young women” in the church in the particular ways that Paul mentions here. *Sōphronizō* (to encourage) literally means “to cause someone to be of sound mind and to have self-control." . . .

Although women are forbidden to teach or have authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12), they do have the God-given responsibility to formally and informally teach children, especially their own, and younger women in the church. When godly Christian women do not infuse the younger generation with the things of God, the church comes to dire straits.[5] 78.

By chasing trends and making young, hip audiences the priority, many churches have cut their people off from the kind of godly examples Paul describes in Titus 2. The discipleship he’s talking about simply doesn’t happen when congregations are made up primarily of young, immature believers. Instead, churches need cultivate the kind of discipleship Paul is talking about by identifying and elevating older saints who can benefit younger believers.

Next time we’ll look at the fruit of that discipleship process for the younger women in the church.