

A Biblical Perspective on Women and Work

By Rebecca S. May

- *Is it okay for a woman to maintain a job outside the home?*
- *Is it okay for a woman to work outside the home if she has children at home?*
- *What is the role of a woman inside the home?*

According to the Census Bureau, there are 32 million mothers in the United States, and of those 73% work for pay. Mothers of preschool (before school age) children represent the fastest growing segment of the workforce. 63% more women with children under the age of 2 were working in 1995 than in 1980. The Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor predicts that women will make up 47 percent of the labor force by the year 2005.

Because of the large number of women in the workforce, it is becoming increasingly important to know what the Bible says about women and work. While it will be necessary to deal with some related topics, the focus of this brochure will be answering this question, Is it okay for a woman to maintain a job outside the home if she and her husband have children at home? [NOTE: This brochure in no way deals with single parents. I am addressing families which have two parents at home capable of working.]

Her Work

Consider these women who all held jobs outside their homes. Deborah worked as a Judge in Israel (Judges 4--5). Anna worked at the Temple (Luke 2:36-38). Tabitha worked in her community sewing clothes for the needy (Acts 9:36, 39). Phoebe worked as a deaconess (Romans 16:1-2). An unnamed woman in Abel was an effective negotiator speaking with Joab about exposing a traitor who was hiding out in her city (2 Samuel 20:16-22). And don't forget about Rahab.

Clearly women in the Bible were working both inside and outside the home. But what about women with children at home? There is not an overwhelming amount of evidence.

Lydia was a seller of purple fabrics who was baptized along with the members of her household. She most likely would have had children at home, but the Bible does not say for sure (Acts 16:14-15). The excellent wife of Proverbs 31 considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard (31:16). She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies belts to the tradesmen (31:24). Based on these passages it would be hard to argue that it is wrong for a woman to work outside the home, even if she has children at home.

But consider what Paul has to say on the subject. *Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips, nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, **workers at home**, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored* (Titus 2:3-5; emphasis mine).

A point I would like to emphasize is that the Bible does not say that it is a sin to work outside the home while your children are at home. However, that doesn't mean it's always a godly choice. Another point which needs to be made is this. Just because a mother chooses to stay home with her children doesn't mean she will be a godly mom. It is important that a mother understand her biblical responsibility before she makes a decision to go to work. But first a point must be made with respect to her children.

Her Children

Deuteronomy gives us a lot of detail to help us answer that question. While speaking to the heads of the tribes of Israel (5:23), God said with respect to the words which He was commanding them, *you [the elders] shall teach them diligently to*

your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up (6:7). Here are two important points we should notice from this verse:

(1) God seems to be emphasizing the fact that the teaching of the children be constant, not just when children are sitting, walking, lying and rising but continually as they grow and develop.

(2) The command is for the **elders** to teach the **sons** of Israel. This is not saying that the daughters are not to be taught (Psalm 144:12) but rather that it is the responsibility of the fathers of Israel to carry out the command.

Her Responsibility

The training of the child is primarily the father's responsibility but the mother is also involved (Proverbs 1:8-9, 6:20). In addition to teaching her children, Titus 2:3-5 says that she should love her children. With respect to her work, Proverbs 31 is helpful. An excellent wife, *brings food from afar and she gives food to her household* (31:4-5). *She is not afraid of snow for her household for all her household are clothed with scarlet* (31:21). *She looks well to the ways of her household* (31:27). According to Proverbs 31, you can summarize her responsibilities as "the household." Webster defines a household as, "all those living in one house; the home and its affairs." Proverbs 31 calls the household "hers" four times.

According to secular culture, it is the men who are responsible for house maintenance, and the women are responsible for the children. It should be no surprise that this is the exact opposite of how God views the responsibilities of the husband and wife.

Back to the original question, Is it okay for a woman to work if she has children at home? Well, we have determined that we cannot say it is wrong. However, the woman is responsible for the maintenance of the household, that is, the things pertaining to the house whether it's food, clothes, or children. If, therefore, any part of the household is neglected because of the woman's job, then she is not fulfilling her obligation as a wife and mother. Her responsibility as a wife and mother should come before any desire or need to have a job.

With respect to a "need" to work, we all should be very careful and honest with ourselves and God when answering this question, *Do you **need** to work or do you **want** to maintain a certain standard of living?*

Her Purpose

There is one more thing to consider. Why was woman created? According to Genesis 2:18 woman was created to be a helper to man. She should, therefore, consider her responsibility, with respect to their children, as that of a helper. In other words, while the husband is at work [remember, work is not optional for him (Genesis 3:17), so the father staying home being "Mr.Mom" and the mother supporting the family is not an option biblically], she should be dealing with the children in such a way that she is helping him with his job of teaching and training the children. The bottom line is that this is an issue which each individual family needs to work out. The question you need to answer is:

What is best for your family's spiritual welfare?

And remember, if a woman decides to work outside the home (or inside the home, for that matter) and her responsibilities as a wife and mother suffer, **she** will be held responsible. If a woman decides to work, or her husband pressures her to work (and they must find alternate care for their children) and as a result the children are not biblically trained, then **the husband** will be held responsible (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Here are a few questions for discussion:

- Should a mother go to work if staying home causes her to stumble (laziness, gossip, etc.)?
- Should women work in order to put their children through Christian school?
- Should women work if they are afraid their husbands might leave them?
- What do you think Paul is trying to communicate in Titus 2:3-5? How would you compare that with what is being said about the excellent wife in Proverbs 31:10-31?
- Why do you think most women work? Is it to serve their families or to establish an independence (a "career") from their family? Is it because of pressure from their husbands or pressure from peers?
- Is it okay to hire someone else to maintain the household, and/or care for the children if your wife is too busy with work?

Questions and Answers

Q: *Is it okay for a woman to maintain a job outside the home?*

A: There is no verse in the Bible which prohibits a woman from working outside the home and there are numerous examples of women who maintained jobs outside of their homes.

Q: *Is it okay for a woman to work outside the home if she has children at home?*

A: It may be okay, if she is fulfilling her responsibilities as a wife and mother. However, rather than asking, Is it okay?, we should be asking, What is closest to the heart of God? NOT, How can I justify what I want to do?

Q: *What is the role of a woman inside the home?*

A: As a mother, she should first be a helper to her husband (Genesis 2:18). She should also love her children (Titus 2:3-5), as well as maintain the household (Proverbs 31:10-31).