

Gender Roles in the Church: 1 Timothy 2:11-15
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This morning we come to an extremely controversial passage of Scripture. It is a passage of Scripture that may infuriate some of you. As I read it you may wonder how anything so sexist could be written in the Bible, and you may wonder if you could ever embrace what this text is teaching. For this very reason many have tried to reinterpret this passage or simply ignore it. Others of you will simply be confused by this text. Maybe you'll be confused by the verses as a whole, or confused by certain portions of it. I'll tell you right here at the outset that I do not fully understand every aspect of these verses. But I am convinced that the main point is clear, and that it applies to us today and that it is our duty and our joy to submit to God's instruction concerning gender roles in the church. Our passage is 1 Timothy 2:11-15, but before we go there I first want to read from Ephesians 5. We will be talking about gender roles in the church, but I want to set that in the context of gender roles in the home, which is what Ephesians 5 speaks to.

The important thing to notice in Ephesians 5:22-33 is the way that a husband's relationship with his wife is designed to reflect the relationship of Christ to His church. Verse 25, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . ." What a glorious statement that is! That is the Gospel, that Christ loved His church in such a profound way that He sacrificially laid down His life for her. He died for His bride, the church. It is the church's sheer delight, then, to respond to this sacrificial love, to submit to Christ's leadership, to trust Him and follow Him. This is the relationship between Christ and His church. And one of the beautiful ways God designed for this Good News to be displayed is in the relationship of a husband and a wife. The way a husband relates to his wife, and the way a wife relates to her husband, is to emulate the way that Christ and the church relate to one another. This is God's design and intent in establishing the institution of marriage. This is why God created us male and female, and ordained marriage to be a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman. He did it to display the glory of the Gospel. It happens in this way, as Paul clearly explains in these verses. First the wife's role parallels the role of the church. The wife is to submit to her husband, just as the church submits to Christ (verse 24). And secondly, the husband's role parallels the role of Christ. He is to love his wife as Christ sacrificially loved the church (verse 25). This is a beautiful dynamic, and it rules out any kind of domination on the part of the husband or manipulation on the part of the wife.

It is a husband demonstrating sacrificial loving leadership toward his wife and a wife demonstrating godly, intelligent, joyful submission to her husband. This is God's intention and instruction for gender roles in the home.

When we move into the life of the church, which is our extended spiritual family, we find that similar principles apply. The principle of male leadership is to be a pattern in the church family just as it is in marriage. For in the church family godly men must humbly and sacrificially and lovingly lead and teach the congregation. And while the ministry opportunities available to women are literally endless, women are not to assume the role of leading or teaching over men, for that would violate the specific gender roles God has ordained for the home and the church.

When my wife, Stacy, was in college, and she had just become a Christian, she remembers being confused and infuriated by this passage. She was being influenced by feminist writers and professors, and she wondered how the Bible could say something that seemed so offensive and degrading to women. Maybe you find yourself asking the same questions this morning. My hope is to clarify some of the statements in these verses so that we can have a better grasp of what exactly is being taught, and then I want to commend to you this vision of manhood and womanhood, this vision of gender roles in the home and in the church. Because it is my deep conviction that God has designed us as men and women in a particular way for His glory and for our joy. And when we allow worldly ideologies to govern what the Bible is allowed to say and what it is not allowed to say, then we are going to dishonor God and we are going to miss out on a very good gift that He has given to His people, namely, the complementarity of the sexes. As Stacy and I have studied these things over the years, we have come to see what a wonderful gift it is to apply these various instructions to our lives rather than try to reason them away. God knows what He's talking about! He made us, and He has given us His Word to show us how to live according to how He made us. Therefore, when His instructions seem to be diametrically opposed to our presuppositions, we need to first question our presuppositions rather than questioning His Word. And that's my challenge to each of us this morning. You may be tempted to immediately reject this passage of Scripture because it conflicts with your preconceived notions of gender equality. But I challenge you to consider the possibility that it's actually your assumptions that are off-base, and the Word of God is absolutely true and helpful and good.

To understand this passage better, let's ask three questions. First, what does it mean to be quiet? Second, what exactly is being prohibited? And then thirdly, why? What is the reason given for

these prohibitions? Finally, we'll deal with the difficulty of interpreting verse 15.

What does it mean to be quiet?

Notice that quietness is mentioned twice in these verses. In verse 11 Paul says, "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness." Then verse 12 concludes with the instruction that a woman "is to remain quiet." It's helpful to see that the word is used in verse 2 as well: "that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." And it's used similarly in 2 Thessalonians 3:12, "Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living." Paul is not intending in any of these verses to say that these people must be silent. He is referring to a kind of peaceful contentment that is connected to godliness. It's not as though we go to work and remain silent. That's not the point. But we are to be peaceful and godly and dignified. Similarly, the command for women to remain quiet is not a command to be silent. But it's connected to submissiveness and will be explained further in the prohibitions against teaching or having authority over men which is rooted in God's design for manhood and womanhood.

It's significant that Paul says women are to *learn* quietly with all submissiveness. Unlike some in his day, Paul affirms that women are to learn. Indeed, he commands them to learn. Women and men are both to learn from God's Word and constantly be growing in their understanding of the Gospel as it is revealed throughout the Bible. This is not a task that is limited to men, but something that we are all responsible to do and to take very seriously. We must all be students of the Book. We must all study it in our private devotions. We must all sit under the proclamation of the Word in our weekly worship services. Both men and women ought to be learning.

And women are to do so in a particular way, which is in accord with the gender roles that Paul explained in Ephesians 5. There is a certain submissiveness that wives are to demonstrate toward their husbands, and there's also a submissiveness that women should demonstrate in the church. "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness." She is to defer to the male leadership of the church. That's how the design that is explained in Ephesians 5 translates into the life of the church family. The principle of male leadership plays itself out in the relationship of husband and wife, and it also plays itself out in the leadership structure of the church.

So the use of the word quiet in verses 11-12 does not mean that women can't talk in church. It's referring, rather, to the

distinct gender roles that God has ordained, which apply both in marriage and in the church family. Women should be submissive to the male leaders in the church and should not seek to teach or exercise authority over a man. That's the specific instruction of verse 12, and I think that shows us what Paul has in mind when he uses the word "quiet." Women are to be quiet in this sense, that they are submissive by refraining from teaching or exercising authority over a man.

What is Paul prohibiting?

Next, we need to clarify what exactly Paul is prohibiting here. What does it mean for a woman not to teach or exercise authority over a man? It's important to recognize the qualifier there at the end of the statement—"over a man." This is not an absolute prohibition against women teaching or exercising authority. It is simply prohibiting women from teaching or exercising authority over a man, for that would undermine the specific roles God has assigned to men and women in the home and in the church. Women are wonderful teachers, and they can exercise authority and oversight over significant ministries. For instance, in Titus 2 Paul gives instructions to older women. He says, "Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled." Don't be mistaken. Women are to teach! In this passage, we see that older women are to teach younger women. Women are also to teach their children. We see an example of that in Timothy's life, for his mother and grandmother were both responsible for teaching him the Scriptures during his childhood (see 2 Timothy 3:14-15; 2 Timothy 1:5).

Let's just ponder for a moment the significance of these roles. First of all, women teaching and mentoring other women is such an important and powerful ministry in the life of the church. And we have to realize that it's only appropriate for women to lead that kind of ministry. Of course, there's a general sense in which the preaching and teaching of God's Word instructs all of us. Last week I preached on modesty from verses 9-10—verses that have particular application for women. But only a woman can effectively and appropriately mentor other women in the specific questions that might come up in a discussion of modesty. Only a woman, by her experiences in life and her maturity in the Lord, can mentor other women in the matters of biblical femininity. This is an example of how the complementary roles of men and women both serve to edify the church.

Also in the training up of children in the home, women are uniquely gifted to care for and instruct young children. Women have a caring, sensitive, motherly instinct that men just don't have. And children need to have both godly women and godly men in their lives, but the point is that women play a very important role in the spiritual development of young kids. Mothers, the spiritual training you are providing for your children throughout the week is of eternal importance. And the teaching that goes on in our children's Sunday School classes and Praise Factory and Vacation Bible School, is all eternally significant. These are not second-class ministries. These are some of the most important things we do as a church, and it's mainly women who are teaching and leading in those settings.

Women *can* teach. Women *must* teach. For we would be imbalanced and severely lacking in many ways as a church if it were not for the eternally significant ministries of women, as you teach and lead in so many ways that do not violate the instruction of this verse.

Another important observation from this verse is the connection between teaching and exercising authority. The kind of teaching that is prohibited to women in the life of the church is authoritative teaching over men. We've already looked at the qualifier "over men." Women are not permitted to teach over men. But it seems to be further qualified and explained by the phrase "to exercise authority." The kind of teaching Paul has in mind here is authoritative Bible teaching in the church. Thus he is not prohibiting the kind of thing that happened in Acts 18:25-26 where Aquila, along with his wife Priscilla, instructed Apollos. It says, "[Apollos] had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately." This shows us that women are not restricted from ever offering instruction to men. The prohibition is against authoritative teaching, but there are many ways in which women can (and should) contribute their insights in small group settings and various other conversations. God gives all of us understanding of His Word as we study it and pray over it, and we should not be shy to share those things with others and even to instruct and admonish others in appropriate ways.

Verse 12, then, does not restrict women from teaching in an absolute sense. It prohibits women from teaching or exercising authority over men. In other words, women are not to do what I'm doing right now. Women are not to teach or exercise authority over the congregation. A simple way to put it would be to say that

women are not to serve as elders. For two of the duties that are assigned to elders are teaching and exercising authority. We see in 3:2 that elders must be “able to teach,” a qualification that is not required of deacons, but only of elders. And we also see in 5:17 the roles of oversight and teaching. It says, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” One of the responsibilities of elders is to rule or govern, to provide oversight for the congregation. And another responsibility is to preach and teach. It is the group of elders who must lead the church in these ways. And those who step into the role of elder must be men. Women are not to teach or exercise authority over the congregation, for the congregation includes men and that would violate the principle of male headship.

Why?

The third question we have to ask is, “Why?” Why is it that women cannot teach or exercise authority over men? Why is it that only men can be elders? Paul gives a very clear answer to this question. He begins verse 13 with the word “For.” This is the ground and the basis for the command. The reason women must not teach or exercise authority over men is because Adam was formed first, then Eve. You see, this design goes all the way back to creation. It is not something Paul made up or something he imbibed from his culture. It is part of God’s original design for men and women, and God made this design evident in the very order of creation. He created the man first, and then the woman.

Paul cites the same thing in 1 Corinthians 11, where again the issue is the proper roles of men and women in the church. In that passage, he starts by saying, “I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (11:3). That is a very insightful verse, and before we move on to the argument from creation order in that passage, I want to comment on the insight we glean from this statement. Do you see what that verse is saying about headship? He is giving three relationships in which one person is the head over another. First of all, Christ is the head over every man. Second, a husband is the head over his wife, which is the same thing we saw in Ephesians 5. Then, thirdly, God is the head over Christ. God the Father is the head over His Son, Jesus Christ. Here’s what is so helpful in this statement. God the Father and God the Son are equals. The Father is not a higher God and the Son a lesser God. That would be heresy. The Father and the Son are equally God. They share the same essence. And yet they have distinct roles. The Father is the head over the Son such that the Son submits to the Father’s will. This is not a contradiction in the

Godhead, nor is it a contradiction in the relationship of men and women. The Father and the Son are equal in essence and distinct in role, and similarly a husband and wife are equal in essence and distinct in role. That's a point that I want to be very clear in this discussion of manhood and womanhood. The reality of male headship does not imply in any way that women are inferior to men, just as the Father's headship over Christ does not imply in any way that Christ is inferior.

A few verses later, as Paul continues to instruct concerning the roles of men and women and how that ought to affect the way that men and women dress, he writes in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9, "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man." The pattern of creation exhibits God's intention for the roles of men and women.

God created men and women with an essential equality as creatures made in His image. Genesis 1:27, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." And He also created us with distinct roles, shown in the fact that He created Adam first and then created Eve after him, from him, to be a helper for him. This is the beautiful complementarity of man and woman. It is the way God made us, and it affects not only the marriage relationship but also the leadership structure within the church. That's the point of 1 Timothy 2:13.

In 1 Timothy 2:14 Paul moves from Genesis 2 to Genesis 3. Genesis 2 records the creation of man then woman. Genesis 3 records the Fall of woman then man. So Paul says, "and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." At first reading, this may seem to place the blame primarily on Eve and to let Adam off the hook. But that can't be Paul's meaning because we know both from the Genesis account and from Romans 5 that Adam was the one who was held accountable for the Fall. In the garden, "the Lord God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9). He didn't approach the woman but the man—not that the woman was innocent, but Adam, as the head, was primarily responsible and culpable. And Paul acknowledges this in Romans 5:12-14, that "sin came into the world through one man," referring to Adam (also see 1 Corinthians 15:21-22). So in our passage when it says that "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor," we cannot read it to mean that Adam was less at fault. In fact, when we look closely at the Genesis account, we see that Paul is emphasizing just the opposite. The point is not that Adam is less culpable, but more culpable. For he knew better than Eve what was going on, and he ate the fruit nonetheless. God had commanded Adam, "You may surely eat of every tree of the

garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” That was in Genesis 2:15, before God created the woman. It was Adam’s responsibility to lead and protect the wife God had given him, and yet in chapter 3 we find him doing just the opposite. In Genesis 3 we see that the serpent, cunning as he is, approached the woman instead of the man. He approached the helper rather than the head. He sought to turn God’s design upside down by attacking Eve rather than Adam, who was to be the leader and protector. And the sad reality of the Fall is that Adam abdicated his leadership responsibility and failed to protect his wife from the deception and manipulation of the serpent. Genesis 3:6 says, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband *who was with her*, and he ate.” Have you ever noticed that before, that Adam was with her? He was standing by passively, watching all of this happen, and he didn’t step in to rebuke the serpent or admonish his wife. He went along with the tragic event that was playing out before him, and he sinned consciously and deliberately, with his eyes wide open.

So Paul’s reference to this event in no way removes Adam’s blame, but it adds to his blame. For he was not deceived in the same sense that Eve was. He knew better. He had received those commands directly from God, and was supposed to be the leader and protector. The other thing that we learn from Paul’s reference to Genesis 3, which I’ve already alluded to, is the fact that the serpent approached the woman rather than the man. He subverted God’s design by seeking to deceive the helper rather than the head.

In this way verses 13-14 give us the Scriptural foundation for gender roles. The reason a woman must not teach or exercise authority over a man is because of God’s specific design for manhood and womanhood that was established in creation and distorted in the Fall.

The difficulty of interpreting verse 15

Finally, we come to verse 15, which is a very difficult verse to interpret. “Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.” In contrast to the previous verse, and specifically the comment that “the woman was deceived and became a transgressor,” Paul now paints for us a picture of biblical womanhood in a positive light. He speaks of salvation that comes to those who continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. The difficulty comes in the reference to salvation “through childbearing.” There have been

many different interpretations of what this could be referring to, and I'm not going to attempt any kind of definitive resolution to this verse this morning. Let me just outline two possible interpretations.

First, it's possible that this is a reference to the birth of Christ. In Genesis 3, which Paul has just been alluding to, God says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). This first Gospel promise looks forward to the Messiah, the offspring of the woman, who would bruise the head of the serpent. Thus, the subject of 1 Timothy 2:15, "she," could be Mary the mother of Jesus, and the childbearing (the Greek includes the article) would be the birth of Christ. To show how this interpretation fits into the flow of thought in the passage, let me read you a few sentences from John Stott, who takes this position. He writes, "even if certain roles are not open to women, and even if they are tempted to resent their position, they and we must never forget what we owe to a woman. If Mary had not given birth to the Christ-child, there would have been no salvation for anybody. No greater honour has ever been given to woman than in the calling of Mary to be the mother of the Saviour of the world" (*Guard the Truth*, 87-88).

Another interpretation sees the childbearing as representative of what is unique to femininity. In this way, women are saved as they embrace the unique roles which God has ordained for them. To avoid misunderstanding, Paul quickly adds, "if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control." This is not to say that women earn salvation by childbearing (or by continuing in faith and love and holiness and self-control), but rather all of this is part of the enduring evidence of their salvation. Nor is it to say that all women must bear children, for we know that many women do not. But on this interpretation, Paul's point would be to affirm the unique privilege of women to bear children, and Paul wants to admonish women to embrace this role rather than reject it. There were false teachers who were forbidding marriage (1 Timothy 4:3), and Paul would have been responding to that by affirming the goodness of marriage and childbearing. Tom Schreiner, one of my mentors, argues for this interpretation. He says, "Paul selected childbearing because of the emphasis of the false teachers who denigrated marriage and the maternal role of women. Other virtues are added in the conditional clause to prevent misunderstanding. Salvation is not evidenced by childbirth alone. But the genuineness of salvation is indicated by a woman living a godly life and conforming to her God-ordained

role. These good works are one indication that one belongs to the redeemed community” (*Women in the Church*, 2nd ed., 119-120).

I’ll leave you with those thoughts to ponder as you wrestle with the meaning of verse 15. I’m not confident enough to say that one or the other of those interpretations is correct, or possibly a different interpretation altogether. But I think this much is clear: We should all open our eyes to recognize and delight in the differences between men and women. Our culture’s attempt to erase all gender differences is not a beautiful thing. It is unnatural and unhealthy and slips into all kinds of perversions. As Christians we must look into God’s Word and marvel at His wonderful design, established in creation, distorted in the Fall, but gradually being restored in the lives of those who are being changed by His grace. Christ died to overcome the effects of the Fall, and as the power of the cross impacts our lives, we will become men and women who glorify Him in the way we embrace our respective roles in the home and in the church. My prayer for all of us this morning is that this would not be an issue of controversy or of frustration, but an opportunity to praise God for His wonderful creation. May we delight in God’s design and the beautiful complementary roles he has given to us.