

Women

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[0 : 0 0] So, women, we're going back to this subject this evening. Truly terrifying subject for a guy to preach from, actually, believe it or not, I take no pleasure in preaching from this.

Well I do actually, I will. But it is a huge subject and obviously we're only going to touch a very small part of that subject this evening from Proverbs particularly and laterally from Proverbs 31.

But I think it's important to put some things in context as we do so, particularly as we live and preach in Edinburgh, in a secular environment and we work and live among people who genuinely have a secular presuppositional mindset in their lives.

And I think we need to acknowledge from the very beginning that God's gift of gender and the biblical emphasis of gender in His word is increasingly at odds with what society views gender as being.

Increasingly and very rapidly that is happening and that is the case. But right from the outset we recognize and we must recognize that in all of our discussions about gender sin and the brokenness of sin has entered and has distorted what God intended for us so that male domination and female subjugation is wrong and is brutal and should be opposed at every turn by Christians.

[1 : 5 9] But it is naive to think that the brokenness of sin in this world hasn't affected gender and gender issues, of course it has, and massively so in the society in which we live today.

And I think sometimes, for us, there's two opposite extremes that we need to stay very far clear from in our interpretation of Scripture and our understanding of the Bible.

And at one extreme we need to be careful of rejecting or ignoring or manipulating what God's word says to such a degree that it has, in other words, nothing to say to us that is maybe either transformational or challenging to the philosophical mindset of the world in which we live, where we are driven by and we find our authority from the current views of society and we try and twist and turn and mold Scripture into these views.

Or we simply reject what the Bible says as being irrelevant, out of date and maybe culturally bound. The danger at that extreme is that we're picking and choosing the bits of God's truth, either that we like or that is unchallenging for us or unchallenging to the society and its thinking in which we live.

We need to be, and I mentioned this this morning in preparing these two sermons, which were the hardest two sermons I've ever had to prepare, let me tell you.

[3 : 4 4] As I mentioned this morning, it's important that we use our brains when we consider what the Bible has to say on any matter, whether it be in creation or beginnings or gender or whatever it happens to be.

We can't just ignore what truth says, even if for us sometimes it's unpalatable. We need to not allow ourselves an easy, slapstick or spineless attitude towards our faith and towards God's living Word and His authority of living Word in our lives.

That's one extreme. The other extreme, and this is maybe particularly relevant in this area, is misunderstanding and abusing God's Word to justify or to condone inequality, racism, misogyny or gender oppression to bring about, in other words, where we use the Bible to justify positions that extremes in society or comfortable positions for us, maybe particularly as men, want to take that I would allow, for example, a philosophy of male domination.

That can be a hugely damaging, simplistic, thoughtless and culturally driven interpretation of the Bible.

I think as men, we have to acknowledge that there are many things that we need forgiven for in regard to our attitude to women and the way we treat women and have treated women for a long time in the Christian church.

[5 : 39] And as men and as Christians, we should recognize that there is a great deal about women's rights that as Christians and as Christian men, we should support and defend wholeheartedly.

Use and ugly male domination has no place in the Christian church and should be categorically condemned by us.

Should never be passively condoned and above all, it should never be justified biblically with warped theology.

So these are two opposite dangers that we need to be aware of. Now thinking briefly about today's reality, we must, I think, put it in context. God generally speaking in the academy and generally in the places where thought and society is being driven, there is an atheistic naturalism.

There's that deep presupposition that there is no God and there's a great antagonism towards His authority, towards His word and towards His moral order.

[6 : 57] Now there is a movement always, I think, towards gender equality in the society in which we live. But it would go further, much further than what I believe in, I'll go on to say, is the unique biblical position of gender equality, where the general equality in society allows for no role distinction whatsoever between men and women or any role distinction based on gender, which is moving towards and leading towards gender neutrality, a non-binary understanding of gender.

And interestingly, that is a move, paradoxically, it's a movement towards uniformity. It's a movement away from diversity and away from distinctiveness and difference and seeing these things as social constructs towards homogeneity, towards everyone being able to be the same, whatever gender they may be born with, there is that movement towards no difference between the sexes and an interchangeableness between them that is neither biblical nor rational or practical.

So the challenge, and we looked at this when we looked at creation and Corrie looked at it last week, so it's kind of been, it's been a triple whammy. We've looked at in the last three weeks, we've recognized and seen that there is in God's order a gender distinction.

It's a gender distinction and a gender reality that is broken, we recognize that and we see that within which there is dysphoria, but we see that we are created by Him and for Him with distinctiveness as men and women, and that has been accepted both biblically and in society over millennia, even though it is tainted and broken by sin.

So that's kind of the world we're living in, I think to some degree, made us agree with that. But what's God's reality then in terms of gender for us, and particularly in terms of going to speak about women, and obviously it's a huge area, I'm just going to touch the surface of it here and I apologize for that if you want me, wanted to get something a bit more thoughtful and deeper, but I would hope that encourages some thought and debate and prayer and discussion.

[9 : 30] So I would say that there is distinction within equality, there's equality within distinction, equality of the sexes. Genesis 1, 27, which we looked at last Sunday, God created man His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them, and there's that implicit recognition of equality in that image bearing reality.

In Galatians 3 verse 28 which Cori read from, said, in Christ there's neither dune or Greek, there's neither slave nor free, there's no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So, fundamental equality is restated in the New Testament and it's restated as significant and important within the Bible.

Within the image of God we recognise there is absolute and complete equality between men and women, and that is reflected in the equality within the trinity of which we are image bearer, same in substance, equal in power and glory.

There's not different modes within the trinity, there is not subordination within the trinity eternally, but there is this recognition of equality, distinct, equal, eternal beings within that order of the trinity.

[10 : 51] But in the incarnation we see Jesus willingly and lovingly subordinating Himself to the will of the Father without damaging the equality, the inherent ontological equality He has with the Father.

And that unique distinctiveness within equality is played out in the Bible in the relationship of men and women, made in God's image reflecting that same equality.

But as it were, incarnationally recognising a role where there is familial headship within the family, within the human family and within the church family, within the family of the church, there is headship of man, unique understanding where there is equality but a difference of roles within these contexts of the Bible, within marriage and within leadership of the church.

There is this position where because of man's first creation, man being created first, there is headship, there is that position within the Bible delegated to man.

And that is of course a nuclear bomb today, an absolute nuclear bomb because all other subordination will be on the basis of gifts or talents or abilities rather than gender.

[12 : 32] But it's the teaching of Scripture, it's the teaching of the Bible, it's rooted in creation and it reflects the relationship between the Incarnate Christ and His church, Corinthians 11 verse 3, tells us that if that is on the screen.

Hello? Yep, great stuff. But 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. So within that pattern, within that model, that is the basis for which we recognise that and of course there's a huge area of submissive servant leadership for men to consider within that.

So we recognise within that model that Christ is crucial and He needs to be the lens through which we see everything, through which we understand leadership and through which we are willing to yield to that leadership that He reflects and gives in the Bible Ephesians 5, 22, also speaks of why submit to your husbands as to the Lord for the husband is head of the wife even as Christ is head of the church His body and is Himself a Savior.

It's a hugely challenging, a hugely, the model that we're given both for men and women is hugely challenging for a servant leadership and a willing, loving submission and partnership and recognising God's order and God's position.

Now I think within that language is a real problem for us because if you go to any dictionary today, either a paper one or an online one, you will find that all the connotations of submission are really negative.

[14 : 32] It has become a very pejorative term today, almost entirely negative connotations like passive, plying, subservient, servile, differential.

And none of these definitions parallel or match the position of Christ with the Father and His willing submission so that on the cross He would say, not my will but yours be done in that act in His human perfect will of submitting to the will of the Father and the role of the Father in that.

There aren't really any current definitions. In fact, there's not even a word that we could probably use that reflects the truth behind the role relationship between men and women as it is reflected in the relationship between Christ, the Son and Christ the Father in His incarnation.

So there is that reality of role difference, role separation and role uniqueness and God given role in the word.

Now biblical womanhood in Proverbs, this last chapter, we're only going to look at this last section of Proverbs. There's quite a lot of different bits in Proverbs that speak about quarrelsome wives and dripping and nagging things.

[15 : 56] I'm not going to deal with them at all because that doesn't affect anyone here at all in any way whatsoever. But let's look at this last passage of Proverbs and remember the context of the book generally as we've been looking at that book.

It's a book written to young men, to boys, young men from their father in a position of royalty and they're being given advice and they're being shown about how to become men and yet we've seen that there's a broader application of all of the pastries in Proverbs to all of us.

But here the mother of King Lemuel is speaking about the kind of woman that he should look for as a life partner and she is modeling here a wife of nobility, a wife who would be within the royal household generally speaking.

Certainly a woman of considerable means and privilege and there's an aspirational aspect to this chapter clearly but also a spiritual reality that is attainable for women and for men as well in many ways.

But and there are great principles to make up the word that I often make up as principal and there are great truths for us to take from it. So for a moment let's look at it.

[17 : 30] What is the foundation of this woman's life? What makes her someone that is significant and someone that God honors and God models here in this passage?

Well verse 26 really is the key I think to this passage. She opens her mouth with wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

And that fits in with all that we've been saying all the way through Proverbs about the importance of wisdom and the importance of faith or grace. The teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

The teaching of grace is on her tongue. Yes that great Old Testament word, loving kindness, a great word that describes the grace of the living God primarily in Jesus Christ is a grace that is at the very heart of her life.

She understands herself in the light of God's redemption of her life. Now that applies to all of us as Christians that the foundation of her life, everything that we see, the perspective that we have comes from the grace that we have received and her priorities, her loves, her submission to the truth, her love for the family and others is based on this kindness, is based on this grace that she has received that she knows and that comes clearly out in her life.

[18 : 54] It's a grace that's fused with wisdom. It's the same verse but also in verse 30, a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. And in Proverbs we've seen that that goes back to the woman and the men and all who fear the Lord in that respectful, submissive, salvation love are those who have found wisdom, boys becoming men.

As we saw last week, we're going to wisdom personified as a woman and all that that had to say to us.

And it's the whole foundation, isn't it? Not just of this chapter but the book, that trust and that faith and that grace. That is where, if I can veer into manhood for a moment, that's where your beauty lies as a man.

That's where manliness lies. That's where your courage and strength and your ability to be a man, sorry, I'm going to end your territory, Corey, but also a woman, it's absolutely the same.

It's having that foundation of grace. That is, as we see in this chapter in verse 25, strength and dignity is her clothing.

[20 : 08] She laughs at the time to come. Wisdom gives you as a woman, grace gives you as a woman strength. We hear a lot about the strength of women.

Women are strong, but they're at their strongest when they have the vulnerability of grace at the very core of their lives.

That's where their beauty lies. That's where their dignity lies. And that's what gives them a positive perspective that enables them to laugh at the future. It's a great phrase, isn't it?

That she's able to laugh at the future at the time to come because her foundation is in the right place. And that is true for us all, that grace remains where our identity must be.

As if you're a woman, that is the foundational identity that will make you a woman, that will make you a unique woman, that will make you a free woman, that will make you a beautiful woman as you have that grace and that wisdom that comes from God.

[21 : 12] That's her foundation that God is alluding here, and it's the foundation that sets women in their greatness apart.

Now, what's her focus here? What's her focus? Now, I will confess that some of the women may howl when I say this, that her focus is here as a homemaker.

Okay? Now, I'm going to go on and explain a little bit more. Let me finish. Okay? I want to say several things. The first is the context is because that's the context.

It's envisioning a wife, a wife of considerable resources as we've seen, who in her context and in her culture would have found homemaking as the greatest opportunity and as it were, career move for her.

And it is what this chapter is envisaging. I know it's a very different society we live in. I'll say a little bit more about that in a moment, but for her, for anyone in that position, home was security, home was ambition, home was where she would be freest.

[22 : 29] There weren't the opportunities and the paths open to women today as there are now, there wasn't then. So she is here a homemaker.

I would say a homemaker with a difference. And I think sometimes the danger is for us that we have devalued that entirely in our society and the value of homemaking in our society.

Motherhood may be particularly seen as secondary, a second rate and as not something to be aspired to.

And yet having seen, and many of you will have seen and I have seen, that motherhood and homemaking can have the greatest of all influences in society.

Creating a home as a mother and as a wife can both be the most challenging, fulfilling, gifted, stimulating and powerfully influential work on the planet.

[23 : 32] It can be. So does this get nothing to say to any other women? Absolutely not. What about single women? It doesn't speak about single women here.

I certainly would not patronize any single woman here by assuming that God has given you the gift of singleness. I'm not sure if preachers should say too much about the gift of singleness to women or to men who are in that position, I think we leave that between God and the individual.

Or is their pursuit of a career secondary to the pursuit of homemaking or marriage? Not so, is following a career secondary or unbiblical if homemaking is so significant here?

Absolutely not. Is following a career within marriage unbiblical? No. We apply all the wisdom of God's word to all the different situations we find ourselves in and it may well be that the principles that we will finish with looking at here of this woman apply broadly within the context of life and of careers and of singleness and of marriage that we are aware of around us.

Or maybe there's a deep pain of wanting this, wanting this position, wanting marriage, either in guys or in girls and longing for the intimacy that is reflected in that.

[25 : 21] And we seek to support and love and pray for and embrace everyone within the congregation of whatever situation they find themselves in.

But the encouragement is not to make an idol of that position but recognize and seek God's wisdom and God's grace to be a godly woman or a godly man in the situation that God has you in today.

And maybe for some of the, if I may, in my old age and I've spent a weekend embarrassing people, it's okay, I did it last night in Aberdeen and I'll do it again today.

But can I just say a very brief word to some of the single men here that, can I just encourage you to open your eyes?

Because there's some absolutely spiritually beautiful women here, or physically beautiful as well, but spiritually beautiful women here that really should blow you away.

[26 : 26] Get in among them. I say no more in that particular subject and I will leave quickly at the end. But within that whole different context of different scenarios, different situations, different cultures, different expectations before finishing with the characteristics, we need to remember the brokenness of the world in which we live and also the reality for many women.

And I finish at this point with single mums in a very different position to what we find here and I simply salute them in a broken world, the battle that they face.

That we as a church should be absolutely supportive and in a sense replace the failed and absent father in their lives by the support and love that we can show them.

Because they of all women in my estimation reflect the strength and courage and perseverance that is lacking in so many men.

But let's finish with the characteristics here that apply beyond the circumstances of being a homemaker or being a wife and that God lords as great characteristics and I think it revealed us a little bit of the mind of God with respect to women.

[27 : 54] Just say a few things here very quickly. One is she inspires confidence versus 10 and 11. The heart of her husband trusts in her and he will have no lack of gain.

There's this great sense that those closest to her, those around her are inspired by her. There's great love, there's great goodness, they're not suspicious and there's not jealousy.

She has the great ability to bring out the best in her husband or others who are in her sphere of influence whether she's married or not. She inspires confidence.

The best of women inspire confidence in those around them and God's grace enables us to do that, enables you to do that. She's also clearly in this passage hard working and practical 12 to 14 speaks about doing good, working hard, seeking wool and flax, working with her hands and then in verse 19 she puts her hand to the distaff and her hands to the spindle.

The great woman that God is modelling here for is a hard working person and all of us in ministry know that nearly all of it, 100% of our churches would collapse in a moment.

[29 : 12] But it not for the hard working women and grace filled women that inhabit the churches and do so much of the work in the churches and in the home.

And that is acknowledged by God and it's lauded by God and it's praised by God. It may not be noticed by belligerent, careless, lazy, fat men, but it's acknowledged and seen and recognized by God and I hope it's recognized by us also here.

It seeks the good, she seeks the good, the best for those around them. Verse 15, she rises while it's still night, she provides food for her household and portions for her servant girls, her maidens, her servant girls.

So that gives you the idea of the kind of woman that's been spoken of, a woman who employed people in her house and she seeks their best.

She's a great employer, she's a great person to be responsible, she looks after her children and her employees and those under her care.

[30 : 20] Absolutely believe that can apply to a business woman in a business context or a woman in any other context. Clearly she's someone who God gifts with leadership ability and with influence and she has these gifts and she uses these gifts in the home and among those who she is influenced by showing them grace and love and provision and care, great attitude of a giver of a servant of people.

And she's also within the context here, clearly entrepreneurial. This is 16 to 18, tells us that she considers a field and she buys it with the fruit of her hands, she plants a vineyard and it goes on in verse 24 to speak of her making linen and selling them, she delivers sashes to the merchants.

This is an entrepreneurial woman, a business woman. There's no shackling here of scripture. There's no kind of submissive woman in the corner just making the teas all the time.

That's not the picture we get here. There is someone here who understands commerce and business and profit and the right use of profit who's successful and God blesses this woman and blesses her gifts and her abilities as she uses them for others.

There's nothing selfish about her. There's nothing self-seeking about her gifts and her use of gifts and the way she spends her time. There's a great submission to her role and also to her freedom in Christ, in God.

[32 : 02] It's entrepreneurial. And she's also generous and influential. 20 to 23 talks about helping the poor, reaching out to those who are needy.

She's not afraid for her household because she has already clothed them. And in verse 28, her children rise up and call her blessed, her husband also, he praises her.

So there's a generosity in her life that makes her influential in all she does. Those in need and her family, those around her gain respect because of her.

Isn't that interesting? They gain respect because of her, because of what she does, because of the way she lives. The people around her, kind of, they're sunbathing in her light, as it were.

There's reflected glory on others because of the kind of grace-filled life that she is living. She's blessed by those closest to her. In this case, the children bless her for what she is and for what she's done.

[33 : 16] And that is true of wider relationships for you as a woman in your life, making and sharing and living with a servant heart, whether it's in the home or as a wife or as a single person or in your career, whatever it happens to be.

And many of these characteristics can also be striven for by men, of course. But I think this is a releasing chapter within Scripture for our understanding of what God, the freedom and the gifting and the influence and the significance that women ought to have in their lives and often do have in their lives.

So the temptation for women, possibly, and certainly for men much more, is to look for beauty that is skin-deep.

That's a real man problem. But I think increasingly as, maybe this is not accurate, and the women will tell me here later on if this is not accurate, but maybe as the gender distinctions are blurred more and more, I think paradoxically it's also a temptation for women to only be concerned about their skin-deep beauty, which is not insignificant.

But God is looking for something that is far deeper than that. Freedom is deceitful and beauty is vain or fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

[35 : 09] And so there's this whole significance of the beauty of grace. Did I ask, did I put, no, I didn't, I don't think I did ask for 1 Peter, I didn't, no, okay, let's see if I can find this just at the close.

1 Peter chapter 3 and verse 4, do not let your adorning be external, the braiding of hair and the putting on gold jewelry, the clothing you wear, but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit which in God's sight is very precious.

It's not saying that we're not to be concerned about our outward beauty, but it's to say that our deep-seated beauty comes from our heart, from kindness, the kindness of grace, of knowing Jesus and knowing the difference Jesus makes in our lives with others and finding our identity as women, not in our physical beauty, not even in our identity within society, not primarily within our identity as Christ, in Christ.

And I would finish and give the same advice to the women as Cori gave to the men last week, plagiarizing the great Cori.

A life of repentance, you look for the two characteristics in a godly woman, a good, godly woman is in a good, godly, mature man, a daily life of repentance and being a spiritual athlete.

[36 : 48] That is living in such a way that is self-controlled and disciplined because we value the prize of knowing and serving and loving Jesus Christ.

That's transformative and makes our outward beauty so much more significant because it is matched by an inner beauty that Christ alone can give and enables us to be this superwoman, you to be these superwomen of Proverbs 31, which is a kind, wise, sacrificial life for the glory of God.

Amen. Let's pray briefly. Lord God, we ask and pray that you would help us to understand who you are.

Give us when we try and make you in our own image, in our own broken image, either as men we do that so often and also the temptation is for women to do so also.

When we pray that we would see the value of where you have us, the people we are, the gender we are, we ask that we would be gentle and compassionate with those who have gendered issues, who have sexuality issues, who are struggling in ways that we might never be able to fully understand.

[38 : 34] Help us a great love and a patience and a gentleness and a kindness with them and help us not to be bullshay or arrogant or dismissive of either sex in our lives.

We as men not given to the temptations of abusing our position, abusing strength or abusing our attitudes in ways that are ungodly or especially un-Christlike.

We pray that you would forgive us when that has been the case, either institutionally or individually in our lives. Lord God bless all the women who are here and all the women in the church who rejoice and give thanks for the phenomenal work of leadership, of pastoral care, of giftings of one way or another and of sacrificial service without which this church would certainly collapse.

We pray for them and give thanks for them and ask that they would be blessed in their day-to-day living. And may Christ have the honour and the praise and the glory in our lives for Jesus' sake.

Amen.