**Class 4: Biblical Femininity Defined (Pt. 1)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**I. Introduction**

Our world has high expectations for women. Today’s “ideal woman” radiates both beauty and competence. She can handle the demands of the board room just as easily as she puts together wholesome, *organic* lunches for the kids. Look at her Instagram feed and you’ll see: she can balance a budget, run a marathon, and expertly roast a Thanksgiving turkey, all without smudging her mascara. And then some women are forced to think about the alternative: is the Bible’s teaching on femininity “outdated” and “behind the times”?

Before we answer that question, women should conscientiously agree and men should recognize from their own observation that being a woman is hard. It’s well-reported that in the arena of work, women often receive unequal wages even when they have comparable skills. [[2]](#footnote-2) If they request a more flexible schedule on the job to dedicate time to child-rearing, they risk being seen as less ambitious and not receiving a promotion. These issues are all the rage in our culture that proclaims equality for women and men; but many women suffer under even heavier burdens, such as abuse and sex trafficking.

Exalted expectations on the one hand; challenges and suffering on the other. Where can we go to think rightly about what it means to be a woman? Where can men learn how to treat women? As we’ve done each week in this class, we go to scripture. So what will we find? Here’s an overview (you can find this in your handout):

* Women have far greater dignity and worth than the world ascribes to them: they are created in the image of God to spread his glory throughout the universe.
* Women have a far greater problem than the world recognizes: the problem of sin and rebellion against God. But they also have a far greater Savior than the world offers: A Sinless Servant who was radical in the way he befriended women and offered them life.
* Women have been given instruction by this Savior in His Word on how they are to express their femininity.

Today we want to study a handful of key texts that will give us the building blocks for how to understand biblical femininity.

**II. Opening Considerations**

A couple of things to point out before we do that. We mentioned some of these considerations when we studied masculinity; now I want to use them to frame our study of femininity.

1) To live as a **godly** woman, on one level, simply seek **godliness**. When it comes to our Christian discipleship, there’s much **overlap** for women and men. We’re both heirs in Christ. The New Testament only occasionally gives the two genders different instructions. Rather, generally, we are all to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Salvifically, God is conforming both men AND woman into the image and character of Christ!

2) This class, though, is focused on the very specific question of what tends to be distinctive about being a godly **woman** in particular. As a woman, you’ll always express the fruit of the spirit ***as a woman***, not as a generic, genderless person. So our hope is to describe what are the “family resemblances” of dispositions that all women tend to have in common according to God’s created design.

3) Whenever we study God’s creation design, we need to remember that **creation is fallen.** This means some women may find that feminine tendencies *feel* less “natural” to them. The fall has made it difficult to perceive God’s design sometimes. The goal is simply this: seek to live with the grain of the gender God has made you to be. For some, that may be relatively straightforward; for others, that may require seeking considerable wisdom for your personality, your context and your culture.

4) Scripture **often describes femininity in the context of a marriage relationship.** This is because when the Scriptures were written, marriage was the most familiar context in which the virtues of femininity could be illustrated. This *doesn’t* mean that a woman has to be married to be feminine! It just means that single women would be wise to look at scriptures about marriage and derive implications and fundamental principles for how they express their femininity in the framework of singleness. We’ll try to do that as we go along today. And you can also look at Esther, Ruth, Mary and others in scripture to see exemplary single women and widows in scripture!

Now, just to point out the obvious… I don’t have any personal experience living out biblical womanhood. I’ll try my best to explain what scripture says! But to provide a more personal touch, in the final few minutes my wife Julie has graciously agreed to share some of her story about how she came to learn about femininity from a biblical perspective.

**III. Genesis 1-3**

Let’s begin by thinking about femininity in **Genesis 1-3**.

Remember that Gen 1:26-27 is foundational for our view of men and women. It teaches that man and woman are both created in God’s image. They have the same value, dignity, honor, and worth. Also recall God’s creation mandate that he gives **Gen 1**. He called humanity to “exercise dominion” over the earth and to “be fruitful and multiply.”

When we turn to **Genesis 2**, we see that God creates the man first, and in **verse 15** he receives his commission from God: “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*” So, man begins **exercising dominion** over the ground from which God created him. He names the animals. He works and guards the garden. But things aren’t yet “very good.” Then in **verse 18**: “*Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’”* AndIn **verses 23-24** we see that because the woman is bone of the man’s bones and flesh of his flesh, they can be united together as one flesh in marriage. The man was literally unable to **be fruitful and multiply** on his own. He needed Eve. So neither of them is more important than the other. God ordained to express his image in *two* sexes, male and female, and the couple would be unable to exercise God’s dominion and be fruitful without each other. With that said, the man does seem to have an inclination toward “working the ground” (**2:15**) and thus the “dominion” part of the creation mandate. The woman, on the other hand, is the one who bears children and thus “helps” (**2:18**) the couple fulfill the “be fruitful” part of the creation mandate in particular. They need each other, and they both fulfill the whole mandate together, but they have different strengths and tendencies with regard to that mandate.

That leads us to an important question: what is the woman’s role in this first marriage designed to be? She’s a “**helper**” to the man as he exercises his leadership over the garden. This is an exalted title. God is often called the “helper” of his people in the Old Testament; The Holy Spirit in the gospel of John is called “the Helper” – meaning that without his help, we’d be doomed. That is how desperately Adam needed Eve. Yes, the title “helper” also does confirm that the husband is called to exercise loving, sacrificial authority in the marriage relationship. As we’ve mentioned in previous weeks, the man was created first (cf. **1 Tim 2:13**), and God holds him accountable first for the couple’s sin in **chapter 3**. We’ll discuss this “helping” disposition in marriage more later. But suffice it to say, this *doesn’t* mean that Eve was created to make Adam breakfast in bed or fetch him the TV remote! God blesses the man with her to help him faithfully carry out God’s commission and commands. It wasn’t good for him to be alone, primarily because he was incompetent for his task of exercising dominion and especially being fruitful and multiplying without the woman! [However, this **isn’t** saying that a single man is “incompetent” until he is married! Being married doesn’t make a man “better” qualitatively in any way]. But a man is incompetent in fulfilling God’s creation mandate in the ***context marriage*** without his wife’s help. So yes, she submits to his leadership, but she is his partner who *complements* him. She improves his weaknesses and sharpens his strengths. She uses her wisdom, strength, perspective, insight, and creativity to ***help***him in ways that he crucially needs. And his calling is to love and protect her, sacrificially.

Matthew Henry has a famous quote that speaks to the beauty of God’s design here [2nd page of handout], **“***the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved*.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

What happened next, in the fall? Adam and Eve both sinned against God in a way that went against his design for their roles. Adam was supposed to lead and protect Eve; instead he ***follows*** her idea to eat the fruit. Eve was supposed to follow and help her husband; instead she is the one who ***leads***him into temptation.

And what happens to women as a result of sin? The curse given in **Genesis 3:16** shows that now women will bear children in pain, and there will be strife in her relationship with the man. While our first 3 weeks have established that masculinity lends itself to a “**working disposition**” (Adam’s relationship to TEND God’s creation), the Scriptures confirm that femininity tends to involve what I’m going to call a **relational disposition**. The man was created from the ground, was called to work the ground, and saw the ground cursed after sin. In contrast, the woman was created from the man, was called to help the man, and sees her role in childbearing and her relationship with the man cursed after sin. This confirms her *relational* orientation. But while the fall has made it harder to fulfill the gendered dispositions God has given us, it hasn’t eradicated those dispositions. Men and women both still bear the image of God. So, while men are of course called to care for others in life-giving relationships, women *in particula*r seem designed to be **relationally** oriented and to use their strength and energy to nurture and bring life to others.

We see this even after the fall, in **Gen 3:20**: “The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the **mother** of all living.” God ordained that part of Eve’s role would still involve bringing about life – in fact the Hebrew word “Eve” is related to the word for life. We should infer from this that femininity involves **nurturing life** in others – not only physical life through being a mother, which some women will do, but cultivating spiritual life, which all women should do. Without a doubt, the fall has made it bitterly hard for some women to bear children. The recurring barrenness that we see in the book of Genesis is a painful reminder that child-bearing is, in a very literal sense, cursed. Sadly, so many women today can testify to the deep anguish of that unmet longing. But you don’t need to be married or have kids to express life-giving, nurturing femininity. *All women* are designed by God to use your relational gifts and strength to foster fruit and growth and encouragement and godliness in others. Paul exhorts women in **Titus 2** to train other women in godliness precisely because it’s feminine to cultivate life in others. God will call some women to be physical mothers, but he calls all women to be mothers and sisters in a spiritual sense – nurturing spiritual life in others.

***ANY QUESTIONS?***

**IV.** Let’s turn next, not surprisingly, to **Proverbs 31:10-31,** which gives us a profile of a godly woman. (pew bibles – **552**) “*10 An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. 13 She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. 14 She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar. 15 She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. 16 She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. 17 She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. 18 She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. 19 She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. 20 She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. 21 She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. 22 She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. 23 Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. 24 She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant. 25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. 26 She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. 27 She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. 28 Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: 29 “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” 30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. 31 Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.”*

Let’s notice a few things about this model woman:

1. **She uses her strength selflessly and wisely.** In these verses we see a picture of feminine industry and ingenuity. She develops a textile business and burns the midnight oil so she can provide for her family and for others in need. Notice in **verse 17** that real femininity involves **strength**! This woman uses her strength to get solid work done and to care for the poor. And while her hands are busy in the embodied physical world, she blesses others with her spiritual counsel as well. **Verse 26**, she speaks wisdom and teaches about kindness. Her mouth’s not shut. Her words bless others and point them to God.
2. **Her endeavors bless her family and her community**. Remember what we said earlier about how femininity involves nurturing life? That’s exactly what this woman does, as she generously feeds the poor and clothes her own children. Even though she can do many things, her primary orientation as a married woman is **centered on being a helper to her husband and her children**. Notice that she has business endeavors outside the home, but they benefit her family primarily, not her own reputation or sense of ambition. But it’s worthy to note: The elders of the city (**v.23**) say her husband is a lucky guy – he’s married to a competent and loving helper like this!

**\*\*\*And this principle still applies to women who are single!** We have examples of women in the Bible that are noteworthy in their efforts to bless others. There’s Tabitha in **Acts 9:36**, that says she was “*full of good works and acts of charity*”. Or Phoebe in **Romans 16** that says she was “a servant of the church at Cenchrea” who had been *a patron of many*, including the Apostle Paul. And the women in **Luke 8** who followed Jesus in His public ministry, *providing* for Him and the disciples *out of their means*.

1. **She fears the Lord** (**verse 30**). In a day where external beauty is often noticed first, the Holy Spirit wants to remind us here that true beauty is found in a heart that has God at center. This woman knows that God is her judge and that God is the one whom she must love and serve above all else.
2. **Her example should be freeing, not discouraging.** Some women can feel weighed down when they read **Proverbs 31**. They know how far short they fall of this standard. So remember, the book of Proverbs is just that – *proverbial* wisdom for life. This woman is described in an **idealized** way. The author is highlighting her strengths, not her sins and weaknesses. It’s OK if you don’t sew like her, or if you feel less competent in certain areas. Don’t read **Proverbs 31** like a Pinterest page or Instagram feed from some domestic diva that you can’t live up to! This is a *poetic profile* – it leaves out the dirty laundry and the rebellious kids and the weariness with fighting sin and temptation. God’s given you your own gifts. And it’s OK if you’re tired or frustrated. If you feel like you don’t measure up to the **Proverbs 31** woman, **that’s the whole point**. This picture of godly femininity should beckon you to depend on the Lord. *He’s* your Savior. No woman can express biblical femininity on her own strength. All of us are saved by trusting in the ***offspring*** *of the woman* (**Genesis 3:15**), the promised Son who would descend from Eve’s line, Jesus.

Now, with that said, we do have at least one example of a Proverbs 31 woman here today… and her name is Julie Boylston. ☺ I want her to come and answer a few questions about how these teachings on femininity have played out in her own life. Just like me when it comes to biblical manhood, she’ll be the first to say that she’s still working these things out and growing in her femininity. But I thought it would be helpful especially for the ladies to hear a reflection on these topics from a woman’s perspective.

1. **What were you taught about femininity growing up?**
2. **When did you first encounter the Bible’s teaching on womanhood? What was challenging about this teaching for you at that time?**
3. **What is one challenge you’re experiencing in walking in the feminine virtues we’ve been discussing? What is one joy they have brought you?**

1. Assembly Introduction: What does it mean to be a woman? In a world where every magazine presents a certain vision of beauty, books present the key to career advancement, and blogs tell you all that you’re doing wrong as a mom, we want to see what scripture says about what it really means to be a woman. We’ll be meeting downstairs in Room 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A recent *Slate* article told the story of how a woman was hired for a job to teach at a major college, requested a higher starting salary, and promptly had the whole job offer revoked. She wondered, what would have happened if a man were to do the same thing? *Slate,* “Negotiating While Female: Sometimes It Does Hurt to Ask” March 17, 2014. Accessed online. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, section on Genesis 2:21-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)