**Class 5: Biblical Femininity Defined (Pt. 2)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**I. Introduction & Review**

In her 1991 book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler advanced the argument that gender isn’t something you *are*, it’s something you *do*. She said there is nothing essential to masculinity or femininity; rather, gender is *“real only to the extent that it is performed.”* You *act* in ways that correspond to society’s constructed ideal of a particular gender identity. This idea has caught fire in our culture today. It’s now common to hear people proclaim that there is nothing inherent, natural, or essential in men and women that distinguishes them in how they behave socially.

And yet. There’s a tension here. Because people actually talk and behave as if men and women really *are* different, deep down in the fabric of our natural inclinations. Particularly when we come to today’s topic of femininity, how commonly do we hear statements such as “there’s nothing like a mother’s love,” or “she brought a woman’s touch to that situation?” Recently the ride-sharing company Uber has been in the news because of allegations of sexual harassment throughout the management chain. They’ve admitted that they have too much of a macho, competitive work culture. What’s the solution? They want to get more **women** in leadership. Business experts are telling them they need more “emotional intelligence” and “humanity” in the company, and the assumption is that **women** are the ones who can bring these qualities.[[2]](#footnote-2) So when the rubber hits the road, it seems that folks actually think the differences between men and women aren’t just real, but good and helpful to embrace.

But that begs the question: what *is* really distinct, deep down, about women? And if there is such a thing as femininity, should women aspire to it? Should men honor and treasure it? We’re going to keep studying God’s Word to answer these questions. And in case you’re wondering why a man is teaching this class, that gets right to the very idea we’ve been explaining over these last five weeks, that God has created women and men equally in his image, with equal dignity and worth. But he has given us different dispositions, and different roles to play in certain contexts. The New Testament is clear that in the context of formal teaching for the gathered church, men are to exercise leadership by giving that teaching. Thus why I’m up here today for the teaching portion of our class. But it also says that we have much to learn from women informally as they give testimony to what God has done in their lives, and so at the end of the class today I’ll be interviewing a couple of ladies so we *can* learn about their experience in seeking to live out God’s design for femininity.

**II. Summary Statement**

Last week we studied Genesis 1-3 and Proverbs 31. Today, we’re going to start with a summary statement that you’ll see there on your handout, and spend our time unpacking it by looking at several other scripture passages.

***The essence of biblical femininity is a gracious disposition to cultivate life, to help others flourish, and to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in particular contexts prescribed by God’s Word.***

Notice, from that first phrase, that we’re summarizing femininity here, trying to capture its “essence.” There’s more that could be said. As we’ve stressed in past weeks, what’s most important about both men and women is that we’re created in the image of God – Genesis 1. And we are co-heirs of redemption – in Christ, there is no male or female, as Galatians 3 says. Neither gender is superior or more spiritually worthy. Still, we are distinct. So this definition is highlighting what is distinct about women. And we’re saying that femininity involves a “gracious disposition,” designed and given by God. Women should feel this “disposition,” or inclination, or propensity, to express their femininity in these ways. We’re calling it a gracious disposition because when women live within God’s design, they become fountains of grace to others – they shower others with blessing and beautify the world God has created.[[3]](#footnote-3)

So, what does this gracious disposition involve? We’re going to look at 3 things.

**III.** First, it’s a disposition to **cultivate life.**

Blake touched on this last week, but let’s make sure we’re clear. Look at Gen 3:20, “The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.” The name Eve is related to the Hebrew word for **life**. You’ll recall that when God created the world, the first 3 days were days of forming the basic elements of creation, while days 4-6 were days of filling that creation with multiplying creatures. We saw that there is some rich parallelism between this and the different inclinations God gave the first man and the first woman. Adam was created from the ground, called to work and keep the Garden, and when he sinned, the ground was cursed. Eve was created from the man, was called to be a helper to the man so that they could be fruitful and multiply, and when she sinned, child-bearing was cursed. In other words, Adam’s design corresponded more uniquely to God’s work of **forming**, while Eve’s design corresponded more uniquely to God’s work of **filling.** We said from this that while both genders are called to work, and both are involved with relationships, men are more characterized by a **working disposition** while women are more characterized by a **relational disposition.**

Now, this proclivity to cultivate life is most uniquely seen in child-bearing. God made only Eve able to do that, not Adam. But remember, Eve’s name doesn’t mean “birth;” it means “life.” The impulse to cultivate life in others is a universal feminine trait, not restricted to biological mothers. Recall the woman in Proverbs 31. She gives life not only to her children, but to others around her – she feeds the poor, she speaks words of wisdom to whoever hears, she strengthens her husband. Or, Titus 2, Paul calls older women to the life-giving work of training younger women in godly living. Or listen to in 1 Tim 5:10, where Paul gives the qualifications for widows to receive support from the church. They include things like: she has “shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.” In other-words, she has given life to the saints and to her neighbors. This holds true whether a woman is young or old, single or married.

I praise God for the women of this church who consistently and selflessly cultivate life in others. How many women have I talked to who have said “I grew so much as a Christian when Claire Kennedy discipled me” or “when Jenn Fedor discipled me.” How many hungry missionaries and visiting pastors have been sustained by the hospitality and cooking of Jessica Sandle or Sherry Sadai? How many sermons have been powerful precisely because Maxine prayed for the preacher? How many date nights have I been able to enjoy with Erica because women like Emily Stewart have offered their time and effort to be a spiritual “aunt” to our daughter, and help cultivate spiritual life in her. This can take many forms. If you’re a woman, how wonderful and beautiful that God has designed you to be a life-giver in any number of ways consistent with your personality, your gifts, and your season of life.

**IV.** Closely related to this is our next point: femininity involves a gracious disposition **to help others flourish.** Turn to Gen 2:18. *Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a* ***helper*** *fit for him.”* Let’s talk about what this **does** mean, and clarify what it **doesn’t** mean. It does mean, for starters, that the woman was designed to image **God,** who is often described as the helper and sustainer of his people. Psalm 54:4, “Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.” When women strengthen, comfort, minister to, serve, uplift, encourage, renew, nurture, and revive others, they are displaying nothing other than the character of our helping God.

This inclination to help others flourish *does not* mean in any way that women are inferior to men or that what women do in the home, the church, or the world is of lesser value. This also doesn’t mean that all women help others in the same ways. It’s on this point that the distinction we’ve been making between the Bible’s *prescriptive* commands and its *descriptive* teaching can be very useful. In Gen 2, Eve was called to be Adam’s helper in a prescriptive, formal sense. God gave him authority in their marriage and called Eve to gladly follow Adam’s lead and provide the *help* he desperately needed in order to fulfill God’s mandate. So we can call this kind of helping “***helping with a capital H***.” In marriage, this feminine helping disposition becomes **formalized** in a relationship of joyful submission to a husband’s leadership.

But, speaking **descriptively and informally**, we shouldn’t be surprised to find that women express this helping inclination – **with a lowercase “h”** – in all sorts of other settings and contexts. It will vary from woman to woman and culture to culture, but this proclivity to provide helpful, supportive, uplifting care to others isn’t a switch that gets flipped only when a gal puts on a wedding ring. God has designed women to express this, informally, in various ways. Think of Rahab and the help she offered the Hebrew spies in Joshua 2. Think of Esther, who boldly risked her own life to help fulfill Mordecai’s plan to undo a plot of genocide against the Jews. Think of the women listed in Luke 8:3 – Mary, Joanna, Susanna, and many others (in Greek the “others” is feminine, meaning other women) – who provided for Jesus’ physical and financial needs. In other words, women in the Bible don’t just cook meals or heal bruises or provide emotional care – they are savvy and give money to help the gospel advance. Think of Phoebe in Rom 16:1, who Paul describes as a “patron of many and of myself as well.”

What we’re seeing here is that **helping others flourish** has nothing to do with weakness. This is actually a way of summarizing feminine **strength**. The women that I’ve just listed could be described not just as godly or beautiful in character, but also tough, persistent, shrewd, and radically committed to God’s glory and the good of others.

Here’s how Abigail Dodds writes about the uniqueness of women at the website Desiring God, which I think gives good flesh to the bones of this idea of helping others flourish. “The unique influence of a godly woman is in transforming things…. In this transformative role, whether single or married, a woman mimics her Savior. Like him, she submits to [God’s] will and, also like him, God uses her to take what was useless on its own and shape it into glory. Dirty things clean; chaos turned to order; an empty kitchen overflowing with life and food; children in want of knowledge and truth and a mother eager to teach; a [husband] in need of help and counsel and a [wife] fit to give it; friends and neighbors with a thirst for the truth and a woman opening her home and heart to share it with them…. A woman is a prism that takes in light and turns it into an array of greater, fuller glory, so that those around her now see the rainbow that was contained in the beam. She constantly radiates reminders of God’s faithfulness.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

**QUESTIONS?**

**V.** Let’s turn to the final section of our summary: ***to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in particular contexts prescribed by God’s Word.***

The contexts we’re thinking of are marriage and the church. We’ll be looking at passages about the church in later weeks; let’s consider a couple of passages on marriage.

First, **Eph 5:22-24, 33.** *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. … 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.*

In these verses we see that wives are called to submit to and respect their husbands. Now, to some, this sounds like an archaic command to have military-like compliance to a man regardless of what he says. As we’ll see, that’s not at all what the Bible intends.

The word “submit” means to “place oneself under another’s authority.” In marriage, this means that a wife recognizes that God has placed her husband over her as her spiritual head or leader. She’s called to trust her husband as the one whom God has commanded to lead, guide, protect and provide for her. A husband’s authority isn’t ultimate. It’s delegated. It’s partial. He answers to God. So, when a woman follows her husband’s leadership, she’s following Jesus. This isn’t easy – because her husband’s not perfect like Jesus is! That means if you’re a wife, one of your regular acts of worship is to submit to God by following the husband He has placed over you. This is an act of faith that honors God and shows that you trust Him to be sovereign, even over the fallen man who is leading you.

But a wife isn’t just called to submit. The woman in Proverbs 31 isn’t primarily celebrated for being submissive – that’s just assumed. Rather, what’s notable is how she complements her husband and **makes him better** while blessing their family. That’s why we’re using this phrase, “Affirm, receive, and nurture strength and leadership.” Expressing femininity in marriage means leveraging whom God has made you *as a woman* to build up, strengthen, encourage, and help your husband grow in maturity. He likely isn’t perfect! One of the main ways God will make him grow, including in expressing his own manhood, is through *your* feminine influence. I see this in my marriage all the time. I will be selfishly dropping the ball, forgetting or failing to love my family in how we approach our schedule or our finances, and Erica will kindly yet firmly remind me that she would love to see me *lead!*

But one of the questions that comes up when talking about femininity in marriage is, how is a woman supposed to “affirm, receive and nurture” her husband’s leadership when he’s not *respectable or isn’t leading well…does the wife still have to submit to him?* What should such “submission” look like? To answer that, let’s turn to **1 Peter 3:1-2:** *“Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, 2 when they see your respectful and pure conduct.*

So… should a wife submit to a husband that isn’t leading well? The answer is: usually, yes. Peter says, “*if some do not obey the word*.” So this husband is either disobedient in some way, or most likely Peter is saying that he hasn’t obeyed the word of the gospel – he’s not a Christian. I’m not going sugar-coat it: That’s a very difficult situation to endure. He’s not regenerate, yet the woman has the responsibility to trust God and seek to win her husband to obedience and faith in Christ by relating to him in submissive trust and love. Even though his leadership is imperfect, she will express her femininity by seeking to affirm, receive, and nurture whatever is good about the way he leads the family. And she will seek to win him to the Lord through love, respect, and service, and persistent prayer!

However, I do want to note that there are situations when a husband steps over the line and a wife should *not* submit. That’s why our definition specifies “worthy men.” So for instance, no woman should *ever* follow her husband into sin. She must join the apostles in the book of Acts when they said, “*We must obey God rather than men*” (**Acts 5:29**). And if a husband becomes abusive and misuses his authority in harmful ways, **the godly thing to do is not subject herself to that, but to seek help immediately**. Hear me clearly: the Bible does not condone men who use their authority to harm. It condemns them. It calls them to stop, and to repent. That’s one reason the church has elders—to help women in such difficult times discern what would be best to do, and to stand in and protect women if necessary.

So, we’ve seen that this feminine disposition to affirm the leadership of a worthy man is crucial in the marriage relationship. It will also take place as women gladly follow the leadership of men who are elders in the local church as well. But what about in other contexts? Even in areas where submission is not *prescribed*, we shouldn’t be surprised to find that women express their femininity by encouraging the men around them to exercise their masculine responsibility to provide for and protect others. Similar to our “helping with a lowercase ‘h’” that we talked about earlier, women will use their relational disposition to encourage men in motherly or sisterly ways. So, a woman who’s not my wife should *not* submit to me; but she *can* encourage me, exhort me, pray for me, and even offer me advice on how I can do a better job as a man seeking godliness. It would be crazy for me not to welcome that from her!

So, for example, it’s appropriate and feminine **when single women in our church** show trust and respect for the men here. This could be done by allowing those men to walk you home or serve you in practical ways. It could be done by providing guys with the relational and emotional perspective that men sometimes lack – coming alongside them in uniquely sisterly ways to help them grow.

**QUESTIONS?**

**VI.** With our remaining time, we want to hear two women in different stages of life **share** about how they have sought to display these aspects of femininity in their own lives.

*[I won’t have time for all these questions, but will try for as many as we can get to]*

1. Can you describe a challenge you have faced when it comes to embracing this biblical summary of femininity? Are there aspects of what we covered today that were harder for you at first? How did God help you to grow in appreciating and valuing his design?

2. Jan, for you as a single woman, what are some ways you have sought to cultivate life in others and help them flourish?

3. Carreen, for you as a wife, what are some things you practically do to “affirm, receive, and nurture strength and leadership” in Bill?

4. What would you say to men at CHBC who want to grow in serving, treasuring, and valuing women? What do we tend to misunderstand about women and how can we best encourage you to pursue the kind of femininity that we’ve talked about today in this class?

**QUESTIONS?**

1. Assembly Introduction: What does it mean to be a woman? We live in a culture that proclaims that the differences between men and women are mere social conventions, and that anyone of any gender should be able to assume whatever identity he or she wants. But at the same time, whether you look at cheap women’s magazines or radical feminist manifestos, it seems that our culture really does embrace some values and expectations about what the ideal woman looks like. The question is, are they the right values? We’ll be discussing femininity in our class on gender right here in the Main Hall, and I’ll be closing the class by interviewing a couple women from our church to get their perspective as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/03/24/521319706/can-arianna-huffington-save-uber [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Removed to save time (repeated idea from previous week): Now, some women may *feel* this disposition more or less strongly than others – that’s consistent with how the fall has distorted our created design in various ways. But this design is real nonetheless. And God delights to uphold us with mercy and strength when we seek to live with the grain of the gender that he has given us. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-beauty-of-womanhood [↑](#footnote-ref-4)