

SERMON TITLE- "When Things Get Uncomfortable"

TEXT- 1 Timothy 2:8-15

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There are times when the Scriptures cause problems. Today's passage is one that I would far rather avoid and to be honest I seriously considered it.

Why would I rather avoid it? Because I find it genuinely difficult to explain.

Even more importantly, I don't see it as a practical issue in the life of our church. Women have preached here, women are on our leadership team and if a woman came and told me that God has called her to be a pastor, I would not treat her any differently than if a man approached me with that thought. My only question would be- is that person gifted to that calling.

And is one of Paul's controversial statements on the role of women.

But simply ignoring difficult passages is dishonest so we had better take a look at it since it is there right in the middle of our study in 1 Timothy.

Today I want to do 2 things with this sermon. I want to look at how we deal with difficult passages in the Scriptures. Then I want to look at what it says.

#1. How We Deal With Difficult Scriptures

First, we don't just avoid them. In fact, the difficult passages in the Scriptures are an important reminder to us that we don't have it all figured out. We remind ourselves again and again to be careful about being dogmatic about things that we don't understand.

Second, we observe and think even more carefully. The ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Romans and others understood far less about the nature of matter and how it works than we do- but they were keen observers of nature.

For example they noticed that when you put a stick in clear water, it appears to bend at the point of entry. They did not understand the diffraction of light that causes this and came up with all kinds of theories. In the end however, they observed so well and

applied their observations- and not their theories- to their assignments- that they were able to build things that are still marvels.

When we approach the Scriptures we need to apply that same observing discipline that the ancient builders practiced.

As Christians we have 2 things we apply those observation skills to-

1. the world we live in
2. the Scriptures

When the observations of these 2 seem to lead to different conclusions- we don't put one in opposition to the other- we study more carefully. I think this is a very important basic principle.

So let's look at this passage. We will read through it and then go back section by section.

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. 1 Timothy 2:8

I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. 1 Timothy 2:9-10

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. 1 Timothy 2:11-15

I think that most people can see why this would be a hard passage to preach on. So let's look at it.

The passage begins well enough-

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. 1 Timothy 2:8

Paul has begun with a discussion directed to men specifically, as we will see. This is an important point. Just because the Bible refers to men does not mean it is directing its comments to a gender. Just as in English, ancient Greek often used the pronouns and nouns to refer to men and women.

And this time Paul is referring to men.

We know this because he now switches to women-

I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. 1 Timothy 2:9-10

This comment too, is not problematic for most people and is a counterpoint, in this argument, to the comments made to men.

While the comments made to the men and women can easily be applied to both- they are directed to specific genders.

But then Paul does move into territory that makes most of us a little uncomfortable-

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. 1 Timothy 2:11-15

So what's the problem?

This passage seems to support and unequal treatment of women- restricting them from leadership when it involves men- and defining them as more prone to deception.

There are 2 challenges to reading this passage that way-

1. The Challenge Of Our World

This hits almost every hot button of political incorrectness that we can imagine.

“Political correctness,” however, is a challenge that we need to take seriously. Some people may find this a peculiar statement. Some Christians go into autopilot whenever something in the culture they live in- challenges what they feel their faith tells them. If the society they live in says something- they automatically assume that this is something to be struggled against.

This is the language of “culture wars.” A lot of Christian writers have capitalized on the idea of culture wars.

The NT is surprisingly silent, from that perspective, on culture wars. [You may note that I have used NT rather than Bible in this case. The OT is full of culture wars language. God's people were warned not to let the cultures of their world's mix with the culture of Israel.]

In the NT, however, we are specifically told that the world is a different kingdom than the Kingdom of God.

But we live in the world and mustn't pretend that it doesn't exist. Not only that- but often there are changes in culture that we should be thankful for. Our faith works itself out in our culture.

It is important to be reminded that almost everyone in our society agrees that the world of the Taliban is bad. In that world the rights of women are different from men. I don't know anyone who thinks that these are justified.

It is important to be reminded that in much of the NT world the culture that we associate with the Taliban was the norm.

And so when Paul seems to justify discrimination of women- and there is a challenge to that from society- we should not just write that off. We need to take the challenge of our times, seriously.

There are very good reasons for a lot of political correctness. One reason is that there are a lot of hurtful crude people out there. In the world of relationships between men and women meanness, brutality and abuse have been part of life. When our culture names that as evil- we do well to recognize and affirm that.

This is especially blatant when an abuser looks for selected Scriptures and uses that to justify evil behaviour.

There has been a tendency for people to use the Scriptures as a justification for the status quo- whatever the status quo is. This is easy to observe in history. This is a practice we are not to take on. We are not to go into default defensive mode when our world puts out a challenge.

And so when people read the Bible and say, “I don't agree with this!” we should actually listen carefully. There may actually be a valid point being made. We after all don't want to sound like we are supporting the Taliban treatment of women.

But there is another challenge to what seems to be an obvious reading of this passage. In some ways it is a more serious challenge.

2. The Challenge Of The Other Scriptures

In begins with Jesus' statement when talking about the resurrection to the Jewish teachers-

Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." Matthew 22:29-30

There are all kinds of barriers that Jesus broke down- and the barrier between men and women is specifically identified as one of them.

In keeping with this Paul fills out a much larger principle about the nature of the people of the Kingdom of God-

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

The NT and actually the whole Bible is radical in its statement of the absolute equality of men and women, in the Kingdom of God. This statement in Galatians spells out a deep principle- and it seems to run headlong into the 1 Timothy passage we are looking at today.

And this was not just theoretical. The practice of Jesus and Paul when it came to their treatment of women reflected this.

Jesus was famous for His dignified treatment of women. It was only dignified in that He treated them exactly the way He treated men. It is true that He only had male disciples but when He spoke of the followers He relied on- women were conspicuously among them. This was very radical.

Similarly Paul. Paul lists women among his leadership teams. This seems to conflict with what we see in 1 Timothy and other passages as well.

The challenge, from the Scriptures, and Paul's own writings is very important to note and study carefully.

To we have a problem on our hands. It is one thing when society challenges something we read- it is another thing entirely when there seems to be a conflict from within the Scriptures. This is something that tells us that careful observation and study will be needed.

The Scriptures are to Christians, what the material world is to a scientist. We study them carefully, systematically and from every possible angle.

Just as we don't mistrust the natural world when we observe a stick bending when it enters water- we don't mistrust the Scriptures when something is not making sense the way we think it should.

So how do we deal with the problem?

My solution-

#1. There Is A Context

This is always a fact that needs to be born in mind and when we face a difficult passage it becomes very important. Paul is writing a letter to Timothy about a very specific church and its struggles. In most cases we get far fewer clues about the situation than we like.

There are always people who are ready to fill you in about their ideas of the background. Listen very critically to these background scenarios. The big insight I gained from studies into the NT period was how many of the scenarios that are presented as facts have very little real basis in fact. The most detailed source on the background of the NT church is the NT itself and we have remarkable access to it.

We know very little about the situation in the church in Ephesus that isn't at our fingertips in the NT.

But we know that there is a context to which this letter was written and we know that some aspects of the letter are very specific to this.

When we read a letter like this we should always listen and interpret the way we would when we hear one side of a phone conversation.

What does this mean? A statement that sounds shocking may have a fuller explanation if we heard both sides. That doesn't discount what we are actually hearing- but it does mean we also remember other things we have heard and bring those to bear when we are shocked.

In this case I don't believe that Paul's statement- **"I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent"** is meant to stand alone. This is part of a situation that Timothy is dealing with in Ephesus. It is not of the same order as Paul's statement in Galatians.

On the other hand-

#2. The Bible Does Not Erase The Female/Male Distinction

We are all equal as children of God but men and women are different and have different responses to things.

This is not really controversial for most people. In fact a relatively recent book entitled, Men are From Mars and Women are From Venus, talks about this at great length.

In our culture this book came as something as a revelation. For several decades we had been told that the only difference between men and women is a matter of plumbing. I remember how many parents of my generation were genuinely shocked when our children exhibited gender roles. "Wow, there really are differences!"

By going back to Genesis Paul is making the point that there are some things about how men and women operate in this world that are part of the very design of who we are. There are good reasons for some instructions directed to women and some instructions directed towards men. This does not take away from the fact that there is no distinction in Christ.

If we would use the example of Jews and Greeks, slave and free, Paul also speaks to each of those groups individually because each has challenges unique to their position in life.

Paul is talking to the world he lives in. In the case of the reality of the differences between men and women- it is also the world we still live in. There are some things that go back to the very creation of mankind.

There are more than a few things that could be added here, but time does not permit. While in this case, Paul does focus on Eve's error- there are other places where he focuses on Adam's error. They were the same but different. Eve was the first person who ate the fruit. That's how the story goes. But Adam was not absolved.

Later God would judge Adam and Eve separately, each was addressed and told that a portion of their redemption would come from a place of suffering their gender would face.

These need to be understood to be generalizations. The fact that there are exceptions merely reminds us of that fact.

Generalizations are not laws- they are general principles that will have exceptions.

Men and women are different and this difference goes back to creations.

But something needs to be placed in juxtaposition to this. The dramatic nature of how Jesus and Paul see the sameness of men and

women needs to be understood. In the world of the NT the normal view of men and women was they are of a completely difference essence. Just look up Ancient Greco Roman misogyny and you will find horrific statements of the view of women. Some that equate women with animals, beings without souls, or agents of Satan designed to cause men to lose their true nature.

For Jesus and Paul to declare in unequivocal language that there is no difference between men and women was a shocking statement for many people.

This repeated NT fact must not be overlooked.

In this case I believe that-

The NT deals with men and women with remarkable equality. I think that church needs to reflect this.

As Anabaptists the principle was repeatedly put out there-

#3. We Must Always Try To Behave As Jesus Did

But there is one more conclusion that needs to be added

#4. We Won't Solve All The Problems

In the areas of church life- the church has to keep wrestling through the battles of the times vs the Scriptures. This is a battle that does not end.

In the end there are 2 things that I always try to keep in balance-

Fact #1. Sometimes We Have Problems Understanding but that is not an excuse to run away from those problems

Fact #2. The Scriptures Are The Scriptures