

1 Timothy 2:11-15 – A Woman Should Learn Paul in Context – Part 2

Good morning church. It is an honor to open up God's Word for us today in **1 Timothy 2:11-15** – as it says in the bulletin – a **captivating** and **defining** text, if not a down-right **explosive**.

And let it be said, there is **so much** I would love to say today, but I will limit myself to a few introductory remarks, a brief recap of last time, and then we will give our complete attention to what Paul teaches in **1 Timothy 2:11-15 - in its context**.

And we're focusing **there** today because this passage is, undeniably, **the most referenced** text when it comes to grappling with what the Bible teaches about women in church leadership... For all the "**But what about this passage?**" conversations I've had over the years in reference to men and women in the church – **this is the text** that most often either **grounds** or **confounds** Bible-readers.

And I've had a lot of "**but what about this passage?**" conversations of late.

Which is good. Not easy, **but good.** Because it means that we are – many of us – not simply accepting whatever is being said to us (by the culture, our friends, the pastor, our tradition, our families, and even our own hearts), but **we are seeking to make sense of and truly honor God's revelation in Scripture.**

Based on a **shared conviction** that, as Paul says in his second letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:16) – "**All scripture is God-breathed.**" Which is to say, that it is our **primary**

and **ultimate Source** for understanding and discerning God's character, will, and ways – and at the heart of this, is the revelation of **Jesus** – who, as the letter to the Hebrews declares, **"is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of His being."**

Can we agree on this? **"All Scripture is God-breathed."** And Jesus is **"the exact representation of God's being"**.

And with that, we need to acknowledge, too, that **not all of OUR interpretations are God-breathed**, are they? **Only God knows perfectly...**

Which, as I said a few weeks back, rather than causing us to throw our hands up in the air and give up, simply calls us to lean in with **humility before God, one another and scripture** – and do **all we can to let Scripture speak – on its own terms.**

And by that I mean, taking seriously the context into which it is spoken, the people to which it is addressed, and reasons for its writing. For all our explicit devotion to scripture, if we are unwilling to seek to understand and interpret scripture **on its own terms** (in the light of its own context), then we clearly are not **taking scripture seriously enough...**

Case in point: Years ago, Leslie Newbigin, a British **missionary in India**, who spent much of his career as the Bishop of the Church of South India, spoke about encountering billboards in significant urban centers in India – billboards purchased by Western Christian ministries – billboards that declared **to the hindu masses**, the words of Jesus in **John 3:7 – "You must be born again."**

To which, every Hindu in India would respond – "*Absolutely. You must be born again – and again – and again.*" **It's so clear – and what Hinduism has always believed!**

And yet, we know, this is **NOT** at all what Jesus meant by these words. He was speaking to a Jew, who believed in one life and then judgement – and his words declared the great mystery of the gospel – that there is a **new birth** that God can bring in every one of our lives – and that this is how we come to experience life in God's kingdom. Jesus was not affirming *reincarnation with the goal of self-improvement*. Jesus was declaring *the necessity of salvation by the radical and gracious work of God*.

The point being: **Context Matters**. And not just understanding the context of scripture, but **our own as well** – being alert to the ways in which our context is **so far removed** from that of the New Testament (and the OT). Which, again, rather than shutting us down, simply invites us to the **humility** of studying **what Scripture says**, AND **the world into which it was spoken** – so that, as best we can, we can understand it **on its own terms – in its own context** – and then, and only then, discern its implications for us in ours...

And so, with that, I want to **pray** – actually, to share with you a prayer I've been praying these last few months as I've come to study Scripture for the sake of God's purposes among us – on this matter, and many others... Praying with gratitude that **God is All-Wise** – even when we are not sure how to make sense of things...

Sing: Wise God.

Wise God

(Capo 4)

Verse 1

You who spoke the world to life
And ordered all things far and wide
 You were Wise in the Beginning
You who know the future now
And understand the why and how
 You are Wise over the Ending

Verse 2

You who stilled the raging storm
Yet use the waves to see us formed
 You are Wise when all is shaking.
You who work in all things grace
Still let us choose the wand'ring place
 You are Wise through all our stumbling

Chorus:

Wise God, there is so much that confounds us
 Mysteries so far beyond us
 Knowledge that only You know
Wise God, grant us the courage to bow down
 The insight to listen to Jesus
 The wisdom to trust that You know.

Bridge: (G – Am7 – F)

So open up our minds to Your Word,
 And help us to hear Your Voice...

Alright, so we come now to Paul's instructions to Timothy, who is pastoring the church in Ephesus in the middle decades of the first century.

And without any comment, let's just hear what Paul says - **1 Timothy 2:11-15.**

"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."

As our friends in the Anglican tradition would say,

"The Word of the Lord."
"Thanks be to God."

And if you find that hard to say in the light of this text, I hope you'll stick with me through to the end – because I'm convinced Paul's purpose in all this is **far more empowering** that we've often perceived...

Now, if you were with us a few weeks back on Feb 2nd, you'll remember that we began this whole conversation by starting **not with Paul's teaching**, but with the **Story** of God's revelation in Scripture that formed Paul. A Story that begins in **Genesis 1** and carries all the way through to the Apostle Paul himself.

A Story – God's revelation in scripture – that declares, very early on, that God created humanity *"in His image"*, *"male and female He created them"* – and who **together are commanded and blessed to rule over God's world...**

That is where the Story begins...

A yet, very quickly, in Genesis 3, the Story was **hijacked by sin** – and, among other things, resulted in *the rule of one gender over the other...*

And yet a Story that points toward **the promise of Redemption** – New Creation and, with this, the undoing of the curse in all its forms.

And along the way, in the Old Testament, here and there we find God raising up, empowering and blessing a number of key *women to exercise leadership over the nation of Israel, to speak for God, to discern God's will and Word, and to guide nations back to repentance.*

A Story that ultimately leads us to **Jesus** – who, in so many ways, challenged the patriarchal norms of his day, and explicitly affirmed and empowered women as **equal partners** in His kingdom community... *welcoming them as disciples, empowering them as witnesses to the resurrection, and more...*

And in the **early church**, we see this continue and **grow** – women being empowered by the Spirit to prophecy in the gathering of the church, and to serve as deacons, as evangelists, and teachers...

And then we come to the **Apostle Paul**... And, in contrast to what many think of Paul's view of women, in so many ways, *the book of Acts and his own letters, reveal Paul celebrating and affirming women, again and again, as his co-laborers in Christ, and doing so in considerable roles of ministry, teaching, and leadership.*

Simply put, in his life and ministry, the Apostle Paul set a precedent of embracing and affirming women as equal partners in ministry and leadership.

[For more on any of this, I'll invite you to listen to the recording of the teaching from Feb 2nd.]

But I mentioned all this for us again because we need to keep this in mind as we turn to what Paul **writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:11-15**. Because 1 Timothy 2 is not the **first word** in Scripture, *or even in the life of Paul*, in regard to God's design and vision for women in church leadership.

But that said, neither is it an irrelevant word – one for us to ignore, dismiss, or suppress. And I hope our study of it today will help us both understand and embrace all that Paul is saying here – because I am convinced it is *for our good*.

And so, let me read it again for us, now with something of the larger biblical context in our minds... Paul writes – **1 Timothy 2:11-15**.

"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."

How are we to make sense of what Paul is saying here? Especially, in the light of Paul's own example of affirming and celebrating women as his co-laborers in Christ, many as leaders in the churches? And his explicit statements in 1 Corinthians 11 affirming women to pray and prophesy in the church?

And to those who would say, "**Well, it's simple. Paul is saying exactly what it sounds like he's saying**" – let me remind you of the billboards in India that declare to the hindu masses, "**You must be born again.**"

*Sometimes what sounds simple and clear **to us** isn't what God is trying to say...
Sometimes what seems plain isn't so plain.*

And the **undeniable clue** that points us toward this, as I mentioned a few weeks back, is Paul's explicit instruction at the end of these verses that "**women will be saved through childbearing**". That is the explicit, plain reading of the text, is it not?

And yet our knowledge of Paul's own teaching tells us that this can't be the case. Which **forces us** to acknowledge that **something must be going on here that we don't understand. Or that we have yet to understand. Some CONTEXT that we NEED** to grasp if we are to understand what Paul is saying here.

And thankfully, this context has not been lost.

In truth, we find evidence of it **within this very letter.**

So first, let's dig into **a few key words and phrases** in these verses – that begin to open up Paul's meaning to us.

And I need to say right away, that I'm hugely indebted to Darrell Johnson, who taught preaching and pastoral theology 20 years ago at Regent College – who first helped me understand some of this – which has forever helped me make sense of this text.

So, first, notice Paul's instruction that **"A woman should learn in quietness..."**

And then again at the end of **v.12**, he says – **"She must be quiet."**

The Greek word is **hesuchia**. And this isn't the first time we encounter **hesuchia** in this chapter. We find it in **v.2** – 1 Timothy 2:2 – where Paul calls for...

"petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving to be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and **quiet** lives in all godliness and holiness."

It's the same word – **hesuchia** – and notice here, it is something we are **all** called to... women **and men**. Something we are to pray for...

So, what does Paul mean?

"Does Paul mean that believers are to live silent lives? Do we pray for kings so that we can keep silent? No. He uses this word in 1 Thessalonians 4:11 where he calls believers to "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life..."

Not in the sense of **silent**, but **humble – teachable**. That's what this Greek word means. Something to which Paul calls **all of us**.

Let's not miss this, according to 1 Tim 2:2 **and 1 Thess 4:11**, this is Paul's instruction and desire **for all of us – women and men**.

All the more reason to think that something must be going on in the Ephesian church to make Paul emphasize this for women in **v.11-12**. *We'll come back to that.*

Second, notice the phrase **"A woman should learn..."** (1 Tim 2:11). Or as the ESV has it, **"Let a woman learn..."**

From our vantage point in history, this hardly gets our attention – other phrases grab us – but heard in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, or Uganda today, or in **Paul's world in his day** – this was *a surprising statement*.

And it's not just **a statement** in the greek, *it's a command!*

Again to quote my prof from years ago, (and pardon the dated movie reference)

"A woman should learn..." That was a **revolutionary** thing to say! Women were not given that privilege. If you saw the movie 'Yentel', you know that. Simply because she was a woman she was not allowed to study the Torah. She had to **sneak** to 'receive instruction'. But in Christ, women were freed to learn!"

Commanded even.

Third, and I mentioned this at the close of my teaching on Feb 2nd, notice Paul's emphatic statement, in v.12, that he does **not "permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man."**

Now many read this as reflecting a reality rooted in God's creational design – that men are called to lead and rule, and women to submit, as unto Christ.

And yet, the greek word – **authentein** – translated here as "assume authority" or "exercise authority" – didn't actually carry that meaning until the 3rd century.

Let me quote Darrell Johnson again explicitly on this. He explains,

Before the third century A.D., it did not have the meaning "exercise authority over."... The word meant "to thrust oneself", "to have full power over". It even meant "to commit murder". The nouns related to this verb mean "power" (*authentia*) and "master" (*authentic*).

[One Greek scholar] writes that this verb "clearly bears the nuance of using such absolute power in a destructive manner, describing the activity of a person who acts for

his or her own advantage apart from any consideration of the needs or interests of anyone else." It is that kind of authority which Paul prohibited women in Ephesus from exercising. He denied women the privilege to teach in the church with that spirit."

But note this – "**But he also denied such a privilege to men.** For Paul knew what Jesus said: (Mark 10:42-43) "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their high officials **exercise authority** over them. Not so with you..." Paul prohibits the exercise of a certain kind of authority—the kind that seeks dominance over the other. (Darrell Johnson)

Paul rebukes the women in Ephesus for seeking this kind of dominance, **just as Jesus rebukes his male disciples for aspiring to the same.**

Once again, in Paul's explicit instructions here, we find Paul naming **gospel-priorities** that he has, **not just for women, but for men as well.**

And yet, undeniably, in this part of Paul's letter to Timothy, Paul is directing his thoughts and concern on the women in Timothy's church – because something is going that is uniquely involving them.

So, what's going on? Do we know anything of what was going on in Timothy's church in Ephesus to which Paul is writing that would help us understand what he says here?

Well, thankfully, **we do!** In fact, we get tipped off to it right at the outset of the letter. **1 Timothy 1:3** – virtually Paul's **first words** to Timothy... He writes,

*"As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach **false doctrines** any longer, or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies..."*

And throughout this letter (as well as in 2 Timothy and Titus), we hear reference to this **heresy** or **false teaching** making its way into the church.

It's never fully explained (because it would have been well known to Timothy), but we are given *glimpses of what it involves...*

And so, first of all, it seems to involve **some early form of Gnosticism**.

We hear this explicitly in Paul's concluding plea to Timothy in **1 Timothy 6:20**,

*"Guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called **knowledge**, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith."*

Notice this reference to "**what is falsely called knowledge**". The Greek word is **gnosis** – and in the early centuries of the church, there were growing battles against this emerging spiritual philosophy we now call "Gnosticism".

And if you are unfamiliar with this, many of us encountered a form of it a few years back with the emergence of the self-help bestselling book called "**The Secret**". That's the essence of Gnosticism – this belief that there is a secret **knowledge (gnosis)** that leads to higher spiritual life. And often one that denies the physical in favor of the spiritual. *Which is what we see in these pastoral letters...*

In **2 Timothy 2:18** we're told that some were claiming that "*the resurrection had already taken place*"... And not that they'd missed out on it, but that they were already experiencing something of their heavenly existence.

Which links then to what we hear in **1 Timothy 4:3**, which says,

"They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."

Do you see how this is beginning to fit together? There are teachers around or among them – teaching that the heavenly existence has already begun, and the basic things of marriage, bearing children, and even enjoying food, **no longer matter**. They can already experience *something of the life of the angels...*

And not just that, but this heresy also encouraged **morally laxity** – because *the old rules no longer applied. What's the body anyways? Who cares who you sleep with?*

We see something of this, in **1 Timothy 5 and 2 Timothy 3**, where we're told that there were some who were now disregarding, even teaching against, the ethical implications of following Christ. Paul speaks of young widows in the Ephesian church having a reputation for being overcome by their sensual desires, abandoning marriage as an ideal, and with it, their faith.

And, according to both of Paul's letters to Timothy, this heresy was uniquely taking hold **among the women** (1 Tim 5:13; 2 Timothy 3:6-7) – **who, remember, in Paul's day, often lacked education.**

So, in truth, Paul's letter to Timothy gives us a significant picture of the heresy influencing the church or churches that Timothy is overseeing.

But, coupled with this, there is historical evidence that around the time that Paul wrote these pastoral epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) there was something of "a

gender and sexual revolution... observable in many of the major cities of the Roman Empire" (Scot McKnight).

In other words, Rome was having something of a "Sex in the City" moment – and the impact of this was spreading around to other urban centers.

Sounds a lot like today...

And there are a few features of this gender and sexual revolution that seem to shed some light on what Timothy was experiencing in his churches. *I'll mention three.*

First, "the New Roman Woman [as they are academically known] was expressing her newfound freedoms in *immodest, sexually provocative, and extravagant dress.*" (McKnight).

In a first-century Roman novel placed in Ephesus (written right around the time Paul wrote his letters to Timothy in Ephesus), there are explicit references to women dressing in elaborate and seductive ways, and doing so, not just as home with one's spouse, but in worship at the Temple of Artemis – a fertility cult famously located in the city of Ephesus. (*We'll come back to this*).

At this point, it's simply worth noting, that this was such a significant reality in the first century, that Caesar Augustus **passed laws** legislating what respectable women were to wear and how prostitutes and adulteresses were to dress. To disregard this was to open oneself up to being considered a prostitute or adulteress simply by the clothing a woman wore. Which could be considered **unfair**, and yet was the reality of

the time and culture. But **the new Roman women** were throwing this aside – in a scandalous way. And there was considerable social pressure on **common women** – including **Christian women** – to follow the trend of the new Roman women who were throwing aside these laws in the name of personal freedom and empowerment.

Although this could seem **trivial**, considering the perceived links this had to sexual promiscuity, *it is not surprising that Paul and Timothy cared about how younger women's dress impacted the reputation of the gospel.* This clearly has some implications not only for what Paul writes in 1 Timothy, but also in his letter to the Corinthians.

Second, "the new Roman woman was noted for *snatching the podium for public addresses and teaching*" (McKnight). I could elaborate on this, but it is simply this. Women who were formerly not invited into public discourse, were now **aggressively** seeking to **dominate** the public discourse.

Again, this seems to line up with something Paul was speaking to in 1 Timothy.

And third, (lastly), "especially in Ephesus, alongside the presence of the new Roman woman was *the Artemis religious fertility cult.*"

And this **can't be understated** – the Temple of Artemis (or Diana) was, by mid first-century, considered one of the **7 Wonders of the World**. Which means it had a **huge influence** on life in Ephesus and beyond. And, as Scot McKnight explains,

"This worship cult not only favored the freedom of women in public religion but it also surrounded these worshipers with eunuch (castrated male) priests. Part of their worship was the elimination of normal sexual relations; these women despised marriage and childbearing and child-rearing. Furthermore, this fertility cult extended their sexual and gender freedoms into open practices of abortion and [dangerous] contraception."

There is a lot more that could be said here, but suffice it to say, this again seems to **reinforce** and **shed light** on what Timothy is naming and facing within his churches in Ephesus – and, specifically, why Paul would write about the holy gift of **childbearing** in his letter to Timothy.

Lastly, let me return to one more aspect of the heresy that Paul is confronting in his letter to Timothy. And we hear it in **1 Timothy 2:5**. Following his plea for the church to pray for all people, **Paul states, "For there is one** *God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.*" Paul does not speak in this way in any of his other letters. Why here?

Once again, I'll let Darrell Johnson be our teacher on this. He explains,

"Well, the Gnostics held that God is good and matter is evil. God is so good that He would never contaminate Himself by touching evil matter—not even in the act of creating Creation.

So they developed an elaborate system of intermediate beings who bridge the huge gap between the good God and man who is made of evil matter. Now here is the significant point."

He says,

"Some Gnosticism, steeped in Jewish background, believed that one such mediator between God and humanity was **Eve**... And Eve functioned both as the giver of life and the teacher of knowledge.

And so, Johnson concludes,

"If this was part of the heretical teaching plaguing the church, how would Paul counter it? First, by affirming that there is only **one mediator, the man Jesus Christ** (1 Timothy 2:2).

And second... by re-affirming the Creation narratives where Eve is not the giver of life but herself a creature, created after Adam; where, far from being the bearer of life to Adam, she was the one who was first deceived."

And keep in mind that in **Romans 5:12**, Paul argues the opposite – that it was *through Adam* that sin entered the world. Which, means, as a wise pastoral friend of mine has said, "The theological premise that women are somehow more susceptible to deception cannot be defended."

After all, Eve fell at the word of satan; Adam fell at the word of a mere mortal."

All the more reason to assume that Paul **is here responding to a heresy** that made Eve Adam's teacher, and *to a gender revolution* that was encouraging women to take the roll of teacher, *even if they lacked understanding*.

To which Paul says an emphatic "No!". *Not in the church.*

No, in the church, **those who teach *must first be taught***, and must seek to honor and adorn the gospel with their life – to celebrate the good gifts of God, and not despise them.

And so, Paul writes these authoritative words to Timothy in **1 Timothy 2:11-15**.

"A woman should learn in [*hesuchia*] and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to [*domineer*] over a man; she must be [*hesuchia* = humble, teachable]. 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."

In the light of all that we know of Paul and Timothy, and the Ephesian context, from both the pastoral letters and historical study, this bewildering text begins to be heard in a different light. A light that ultimately, rather than contradicting what we know of Paul, actually **aligns with** what we know of Paul's affirmation and celebration of women in ministry and leadership.

His point in all this being not *the silencing or suppressing of women*, but **the shutting down of a heresy** that was, in that moment, finding its way into the church *through the women*. And so, as Darrell Johnson once put it,

"As Paul instructs Titus to silence the male teachers of heresy in Crete (Titus 1:11), so he instructs Timothy to not allow the women of Ephesus to teach." (Johnson)

And in this posture of humble quietness – *hesuchia* – **to learn**.

That they might, one day, like Priscilla, teach the faith – to men like Apollos – for the glory of God, the good of the world, and the blessing of the church...

Now I recognize that there are many who read and interpret this passage very differently that I have today – and I honor those who read and interpret this text differently.

However, in the light of its cultural and historical context, I am convinced that we have often misunderstood Paul's meaning and intention here – and by this, have believed Paul (and the Spirit who has inspired him) to prohibit women from every

teaching and exercising authority in the church. As I have done my best to show today, I am convinced, along with the Elders, and many Christians and bible teachers, that Paul's authoritative point here is not *the silencing of women*, or the *barring of women from leadership in the church*, but that, in the church, *those who teach must first be taught – and learn – and be shaped by the gospel.*

**Which is something that relates as much to men as to women!
For God's glory, for the sake of the world, and our joy in Him!**

Which, regarding this text, leads me to say with our Anglican sisters and brothers,
**"The Word of the Lord."
"Thanks be to God."**

Let me close with these wise and hopeful words by **Will Willimon** on Paul's first letter to Timothy.

"First Timothy gives us a real-life peek at an early Christian congregation or gathering of congregations that was having trouble embodying the fullness of the good news of Christ. (Do you know any church like that?). For many contemporary believers, the toughest thing about being a Christian is the Christian Church. Being in the Body of Christ can be a real challenge, considering the sad state of much of the Body. It is easy to lose heart when we witness the great gap between the soaring vision of the Church and the grubby sociological reality of it.

'Oh, if we could only be more like the early Church,' some romantics may exclaim. First Timothy assures us, 'You already do look like the early Church—difficult, contentious, fractured, and confused.'

There is hope in that insight, however. A close reading of 1 Timothy reminds us that the Church is a mess—and always has been. The good news for churches is that Christ does not leave us to our own miserable devices, does not abandon us because of our failures at faith. God keeps working with us, correcting us, teaching us, patiently guiding us, reaching out to us through two thousand years of Church in encouraging Scripture such as 1 Timothy."

May this reality be our hope – that Christ is not done with us, but in love, continues to teach, rebuke, correct and train us in His righteousness – by the grace of the Spirit, through His Revealed Word.