

## ***The Godly Woman***

In the name of our Creator, Savior, and King, dear friends in Christ: As I mentioned before the service, for some time I've wanted to do a short, two-part sermon series on the biblical concept of manhood and womanhood. There seems to be a lot of confusion about this subject out there, a lot of which has spilled over from the secular world into Christendom in general and even to some extent into our own church body. And I think it's safe to say that it's a sensitive topic – that a lot of people have very strong opinions about it; and for that very reason it's a topic that is often avoided: no one wants to trip the wire that may lead to an explosion of tempers. But avoiding the topic only prolongs the confusion and allows it to grow. So inasmuch as one of next week's readings is one of the essential texts that addresses this subject, I thought that now would be a perfect time to take it head on and see if we can't over the next two weeks shed some light in the darkness and move in a positive direction toward understanding what it means to be specifically *men* and *women* of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And perhaps I should warn you right up front that a lot of what I'm going to say today and next Sunday is likely to get me labeled "sexist" by some people. And since that's probably the case, let me say this: if it is sexist to say that men and women are intrinsically different, that though they share much in common as human beings, they are nevertheless at the very core of their beings dissimilar, and that they have by the design of the Creator distinct but complimentary roles to play in the family, in the church, and in society at large – if it's sexist to say such things, well, okay then: I'm sexist. And I'm not ashamed of it. It seems to me that a major goal of the architects of the radical feminist movement is to reengineer humankind in such a way that the result is something like what happens when the English cook their vegetables: they boil them together for hours so that they all turn into the same, indistinguishable, gray, flavorless mush. Yuck. Who wants that? Certainly not me; and I doubt that you do either. No, I confess to preferring a world in which men are free to be men – *masculine* men, with all that entails; and in which women are free to be women – *feminine* women, with all that goes with that; and in which neither men nor women have guilty feelings about or apologize for being what they are: different – *wonderfully* different – more like the way the French cook their vegetables: lightly, crisply, so that they retain their natural, God-given, individual flavors, textures, colors, and forms. Lord knows there isn't much I appreciate about the French; but they do know how to cook – and I think they've got exactly the right idea when speaking of men and women they say, "Vive la différence."

But far more important than my (or anyone else's) personal preferences in this matter is what the Lord God has to say about it. He did the design and the work of creation, so he gets to make the rules. It's as simple as that – and we have to live by them or suffer the consequences. But that's looking at it negatively; there's a positive side to this. We, as the Lord's children, know that he is infinitely wise, loving, and good. We seek to be shaped by his Word and to live within it because we know that whatever he has to say is for our good, and that we will find our greatest fulfillment when we attune ourselves, our attitudes, and our desires to his will and to his gracious design.

And what is his design? Well, in the first chapter of Genesis we have a very brief account of mankind's creation. It says this, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created *them*." From this two things are apparent. First that God never made a neutral or genderless human being. He made a *man*. Then from that man he made a *woman*. The more detailed account comes in the second chapter of Genesis – I'm sure you remember the story; but the point is that no one is ever just a generic human being. The moment you come into existence you are either a he or a she—by God's own design. So, far from being something arbitrary or incidental or added on as an afterthought, your maleness or femaleness is an essential part of your very being; it's a defining part of who you are. The second thing to see here is that there is something in mankind being made male and female that reflects the image of God. That is to say he made us the way he did to reveal in us something about himself.

What's that? It has to do with relationships. Our God has revealed himself to us as Trinity of three distinct persons; three persons who are eternally and inextricably united in one divine essence. And the basic quality of the relationship these three divine personalities share and interact with is love: divine love, that selfless, sacrificial devotion that seeks only the good of others without taking thought about the cost to self. Now specifically, in creating mankind the way he did, that is, taking part of the man who was made first to form the woman, we see that God was reflecting in his created children the relationship that exists between the Father and the Son in the Godhead. As the Father gives of his own divine essence to beget the Son, so the man gives of his own body to form the woman. And as the Father and Son though are two persons remain one God, so the man and woman though they are two remain one flesh. It's really quite beautiful when you think about it.

But it doesn't end there because in their ongoing relationship of love for one another, God assigns roles to the man and to the woman that continue to reflect the relationship of the Father and the Son. To the man he gives the role of headship. As the Father is the initiator, the one with the plan, and the one who is ultimately responsible, so also the man is placed in charge so that he can give himself to the task of being responsible for the care, protection, and wellbeing of the woman. To the woman is given the role of submission. As the Son sets aside his own will to do the work the Father has assigned, so the woman is to set aside her will and give herself to the task of fulfilling the will of the man. In this way the man and the woman together continue to reflect the image of God.

And besides being a lovely theological portrait of the God who made us, we see that it's a wise and practical plan. A creature cannot have two heads. And by assigning these roles as he does, our God frees us from the confusion of having a stalemate every time a decision must be made. The analogy I like to use is that of ballroom dance. When he leads and she follows, the two can move together as one in perfect harmony. If both are asserting their own wills they'll be stepping all over each other. The result is clumsy and painful. And I think we can see too that in a general way our Lord has equipped us with the singular gifts helpful in fulfilling the roles he has assigned. The characteristics we call masculine such as aggressiveness, strength, and decisiveness lend themselves to the role of headship. And the characteristics of femininity such as gentleness, thoughtfulness, and sensitivity lend themselves to the role of submission. One would think that God knew what he was doing when he made us what we are. But even if we weren't so equipped it wouldn't change God's directives for us. These are the roles he has assigned. So even when we find an individual who doesn't quite fit the mold, say a man who is quite passive by nature or a woman who is extremely headstrong, the roles he has assigned to each still stand. It isn't a question of what's more efficient or what's more practical or what makes more sense to me. The question is, "Will we trust the Lord and be obedient to his Word?" knowing that by doing so we will be blessed.

Okay, with all of this in mind, I'd like to spend the rest of our time this morning focusing on the role that God has assigned to roughly half of the human race. And since I admit to being sexist, we'll do the ladies first. Next week, we'll do the men. But I don't want you to think that by doing so I'm addressing only half the people here. It's important that both men and women understand not only their own roles but that of their counterparts as well. Only by understanding the whole picture can we support each other and live and work together in the harmony that our Lord intends for us.

So, I'll ask the question, "What does it mean to be a godly woman?" And to answer that, I'd like to start with what it doesn't mean. While visiting one of the National Parks this last summer, I saw a teenage girl wearing a T-shirt on which were emblazoned these defiant words: "Anything a boy can do, I can do better." Now I don't know if she meant it seriously or not – if so, I'm sad for her – but I think it does encapsulate pretty much everything wrong with the philosophy behind much of the modern feminist movement. Don't get me wrong; I'm glad that some of the abuses of the past and certain inappropriate attitudes toward women have been corrected. And I think we can be grateful to the feminist movement for helping to make these changes. But this slogan reflects what's driving a lot of the movement in the wrong direction. It's an angry spirit of competition. It's an "in-your-face", "us against them" mentality that perceives life as a struggle for supremacy in an imagined war between the sexes. I saw something showing hints of the same misguided spirit in our synod's newspaper this last summer. In a featured editorial, a writer lamented the fact that only 16% of the voting delegates at the last synod convention were women. To the writer, this meant

that women were “underrepresented” in the decision making. It was clear that the writer thought that to be fair to women, the mix should be fifty-fifty.

You see the problem here is that people are trying to superimpose on God’s created order their own notions of what’s just and fair. In their minds there’s some kind of competition going on, and to be fair the playing field has to be level. But God never set it up to be a contest. He made the man and woman to cooperate not compete. And he never set things to be fair in our eyes. He said he made all things *good*, and there’s a difference. Yes, God made men and women *equal* before him. They have to be: they are the same flesh. But he did not make them the same. God made Eve, our first mother, to be a helper right for Adam; not to be like him in every way, but to be a compliment to him, to complete him, to be things that he wasn’t and couldn’t be by himself. And to Eve and to all her daughters the Lord assigned the role of submission to the headship of the man.

And that’s something of a dirty word in our culture; but if so it’s because we made it that way with our own misguided notions of what’s fair. God does not think of submission as bad. Certainly, our Lord Jesus didn’t think so when he submitted himself to his Father’s will and went to the cross on our behalf. Being submissive is being Christ-like. And that’s why we heard in the Epistle reading that God places so much value on the inner beauty of a woman’s gentle and quiet spirit. When he sees her in submission to the men in her life, when she is following the lead of those God has given to direct her, God sees the Spirit of his own Son in her. This is best exemplified by Mary, the one who became the mother of Jesus. She stands out among so many who were called by God to perform his service. Men like Moses and Jeremiah and many others balked at the Lord’s call. They didn’t want to do what they were asked to do. Like typical men, they argued with the Lord. Mary, by contrast, gives herself in complete submission, “Let it be to me as you have said.” Wow. That’s the inner beauty of a Christian woman. And let me suggest that it’s probably the reason God chose Mary to bear the Lord Jesus. When he looked at her he already saw in her a double portion of the Spirit of his Son. Who better to carry and nurture the body he would make for him?

There is an excellent essay entitled *The Essence of Femininity* written by Elizabeth Eliot. Her name may be familiar to some of you. She was wife of one of the missionaries killed by a tribe South American Indians several decades ago. The story was recently retold in a motion picture called *The End of the Spear*. In any case, in this essay, she writes about the womanly virtue of being submissive. And what she says is remarkable. She understands that the essence of being a Christian woman is to be a receiver of what God gives. It means trusting God and looking to him for all things – even direction and leadership from the men that he places in her life. And so for her, the act of submission to the men in her life is ultimately an act of faith and trust in God.

I hasten to add that submission does not mean mindless passivity. The noble woman described in the passage from Proverbs that we heard earlier is hardly a doormat that her husband uses to wipe his feet, nor is she locked in the kitchen and kept barefoot and pregnant. She is instead a veritable whirlwind of creative activity. She’s heavily involved in the community. She’s well educated. She’s a cottage industry in her own right, and she’s shrewd in her business dealings; but we see that her primary focus is on the wellbeing of her household. She’s the one whose responsibility it is to ensure that the house is a home – a safe refuge for her family from the world out there. There’s a myth in our culture that somehow the home is not the real world, and that somehow what goes on in the home, the nurturing, caring, sharing, and all that takes place there is not as important as what goes on outside. That’s awfully strange since most people spend the majority of their lives at home. And I think we’d all agree that family concerns should take priority over any job. So if the home is not part the real world, what is it? Not only is it real world, it’s the most important part. And something else we can capture from this description of the noble woman is of her joy in making the house a home. This is the description of a woman who rejoices in her role of being a woman. There’s an exuberance expressed here in being what she was made to be.

Now, there are likely to be some objections and questions to all of this, and I can’t take time today to answer them all today. But perhaps the most common one is going to be along these lines. Someone will ask, “This is all well and fine for those women who choose to get married; but what about those who don’t? Or those who are divorced or widowed? How does any of this apply to them?” The short answer is that the essence of being a godly woman doesn’t change because of marital status. A woman’s true strength and full

identity still reside in her femininity, in that gentle and quiet spirit upon which God places so much value. Even when she has no husband or family at home, she brings these same virtues to the church and to the community.

In summary let me say this: in a world of confusion concerning the roles of men and women, we as the church need to be proclaiming the goodness of God's original design. Today especially, we need to uphold the distinct virtues of femininity, the Christ-like quality of being submissive, and the vital importance of making family life in the home a top priority. To be a woman of God is a high and noble calling, and we should say so loudly and clearly. And we should see in every Christian woman a living model of the church of Jesus Christ who opens her hand to receive the gifts of her Lord. On the cross he surrenders for her his own body; and from his side flow forth the blood with which he gives her life and the water with which he cleanses her to make her his holy bride. He gives himself for her, and she in turn submits her will to him and calls him Lord – just as God designed it. So, for where we, both men and women, have failed to hold forth God's good design and for where we have failed to conform ourselves to it, we pray for his forgiveness. And receiving to ourselves once again his word of pardon by means of his body and blood given for us, let us go forth from here forgiven, strengthened, and equipped to do his gracious will. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***