**Class 4: Biblical Femininity, Part 1)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**I. Introduction**

Our world has high expectations for women. Today’s “ideal woman” radiates both beauty and competence. Look at her Instagram feed and you’ll see: she can get the promotion, balance the budget, get her kids to eat Brussels sprouts, and run a marathon, all without smudging her mascara. Women today are told that they can be whatever they want to be: they don’t need to let traditional, outdated stereotypes of “femininity” define them. But yet, at the same time, so many women in our culture feel trapped by impossibly lofty expectations – to be successful, to have cute kids, to be pretty, to have a life that is so Put Together it could be featured on the cover of *Real Simple*.

We should recognize that women haven’t always been treated as deserving of equal worth and respect as men in our society. Such injustices persist today. 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. In our fallen world, where abuse, neglect, and even human slavery afflict women and men, women tragically tend to suffer the disproportionate weight of such awful burdens.

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 display 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.

2) Today’s lesson, though, is focused on the very specific question of what tends to be distinctive about **womanhood** 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 **sometimes describes femininity in the context of a marriage relationship.** When the Scriptures were written, marriage was a 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! We can look at Esther, Ruth, Mary and others in scripture to see exemplary, strong single women and widows who can teach us much. We’ll try to do that as we go along today.

Now, just to point out the obvious… I’m teaching this class as a man. That’s because as we’ll study more closely in coming weeks, God has called men to the role of formal teaching for the gathered church. So I’ll do my best to explain what scripture says in the beginning portion of our time today. But the Bible also affirms 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 Lindsey Parker so we can hear about her experience in seeking to live out God’s design for femininity.

**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 in **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** “*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? Verse 18, She’s a “**helper**” to the man as they jointly exercises dominion over the garden. This is an exalted title. God is often called the “helper” of his people in the Old Testament. Ps 54:4, “Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.” Without God’s help, we’d be doomed. That’s 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 (as Paul points out in **1 Tim 2:13**), and God holds him accountable first for the couple’s sin in **chapter 3**. But “helper” is a term of strength. 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 unable to exercise dominion and be fruitful and multiply without her! So, in the context of the first marriage, Eve was to be Adam’s equal, with her own distinct gifts, who would complement him in every way even as she submitted to his leadership in their marriage. She was improve his weaknesses and sharpen his strengths. She was to use her wisdom, strength, perspective, insight, and creativity to ***help***him in ways that he crucially needs. And his calling was to love and protect her, sacrificially.

Matthew Henry has a famous quote that reflects on the fitting symbolism possibly suggested by 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. In our first 3 weeks we explained that masculinity lends itself to a “**working disposition.**” Now I want us to see the Scriptures suggests 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 challenged by the fall. This points to 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 can and 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 anguish of that unmet longing. But the rest of the scripture reminds us that 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 strengths to foster fruit and growth and encouragement and godliness in others. Paul exhorts women in **Titus 2:3** to train other women in godliness. That’s consistent with this feminine inclination to cultivate life in others. That’s what we see in **Luke 8:3**, where Mary, Joanna, Susanna, and other women use their financial means to sustain and nourish Jesus and his disciples. God will call some women to be physical mothers, but he calls all women to be mothers and sisters in a broader 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. This chapter is a summation of the wisdom commended by the whole book of Proverbs. The woman we’re about to see is a model of godliness for men and women alike, but we will still notice uniquely feminine virtues in this description. What do we learn here about femininity? (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 literally 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 kindness. Her mouth’s not shut. Her words bless others and point them to God.
2. **Her endeavors bless her family and 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, notice how devoted she is to being **a helper to her husband and her children**. She has business endeavors outside the home, but not primarily for the sake of her own reputation or fulfillment. Her work benefits her family and her neighbors.

**\*\*\*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**, which says she was “*full of good works and acts of charity*”. Or Phoebe in **Romans 16:1** that says she was “a servant of the church at Cenchrea” who had been *a patron of many*, including the Apostle Paul. We don’t know if these women were married, but it’s telling that their husbands aren’t named. They are simply notable for how they nourish and cultivate life in others.

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 reverences and adores God. 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. Like a love poem or sonnet. The author is highlighting her strengths. His point here isn’t to dwell on her sins and weaknesses. In fact this text is an acrostic poem, he starts each line with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which reflects a sense of completion. The point? It’s OK if you feel a bit exhausted when you read of all this woman’s accomplishments. We shouldn’t see **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. 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.

The truth is, there is no perfect woman among the daughters of Eve. Whether in the book of Proverbs or here in this classroom today. All of us, women and men, are saved not by our ability to live out the virtues we see in the book of Proverbs, but by trusting in the one who is Wisdom himself. The one who is the promised offspring of Eve (Gen 3:15). The great Son who would crush the serpent and undo the curse and give us life and make all things new. The one who would take the curse of death and rise again to save all who trust in him. Jesus is the hope for every woman and every man here today.

With that said, just like we can learn from the woman in Proverbs 31, we can learn from godly sisters in our midst as well. So I want to ask Lindsey Parker to come and answer a few questions about how these teachings on femininity have played out in her own life. We want everything we discuss in this class to have practical application for real life and Lindsey has been very kind to agree to share with us.

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?
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?
1. Assembly Introduction: (2018: Who was the first person to witness the risen Christ? Mary Magdalene – a woman. That one example typifies the high and noble view that the Bible has of womanhood. So this morning in the Biblical Manhood and Womanhood class we want to answer the question: is there such a thing as femininity? Is it good? How does the Bible define what it means to be a woman? All are welcome, both men and women alike, we’ll be meeting downstairs in room 5.) [↑](#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)