**Christians in the Workplace**

**Class 8, Gender: Being Who You Are in the Workplace**

**1. Introduction**

How does your gender affect you in the workplace? How does being a Christian change the way you answer that question? Those are really hard questions to answer, but they’re very important. The Bible tells us that being male or female is fundamental to who we are—but often we try to answer our questions about work without regard for gender. For all practical purposes, our world views us as solitary, genderless people whose work is defined by what we do 9 to 5.

But the Bible isn’t the story of solitary, genderless people. The Bible—even after the Fall—describes us as people who are built for relationship. And a key piece of where we fit in those relationships is whether we’re male or female—because gender is part of God’s good creation. We can’t address the topic of Christians in the Workplace without addressing questions of gender.

Should my gender affect what job I take? Should it affect what role I play in my job? Is it right for husbands to make different career decisions than wives simply because they’re husbands? Or wives simply because their wives? Or is that just giving in to repressive stereotypes and expectations of past generations?

We live in the wake of a sexual revolution that’s had a profound impact on the workplace, and that continues to evolve. That wake is choppy, it’s confusing, it can leave us struggling to figure out exactly where gender fits into the workplace. What’s Biblical? What’s cultural? Where’s the line between unbiblical and oppressive on the one hand and counter-cultural and liberating on the other?

That’s the territory I’m going to take us into this morning. I’ll be honest, it’s hard to teach on—because the Bible doesn’t give us a lot of rules in this area. No rules—but we do have wisdom. The problem with wisdom, though, is that while it’s generally true, it’s not always true. So nearly everything I have to say today is going to have an exception. Instead of picking at those exceptions, though, I’m going to assume that wisdom that’s generally true is going to be generally true for us. And if there really are exceptions, we can figure those out in conversation later on.

So let me give you a roadmap of where we’re going today. We’re going to start at the very beginning of the Bible to see the connection between gender and work. Then we’ll examine some implications of that for the married, implications for those who might someday get married, and finally implications that hold true because of our gender, regardless of whether or not we’re married. One note: this whole class is based on a Biblical view of gender that says that we are equal in dignity and worth but different in role—especially in the home and in the church. I’m going to assume that as our starting point, not argue for it from Scripture. If what I’m saying seems crazy and new to you, I’d suggest you take the class called Biblical Manhood & Womanhood that starts when this class finishes—where these assumptions are carefully built up from the Scriptures and considered in much more detail.

Ready?

**2. Gender and Work**

We may think of gender as the third rail of work—the thing proper people never talk about in the workplace. But in the Bible, gender and work are inextricably linked. We first see gender as part of God’s creation of human beings in Genesis 1 when God first gives us our job assignments.

Then when we see gender again, in chapter 2, it’s even more closely linked to work. God lays out Adam’s job in verse 15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” The man is made steward of God’s creation—to work it and keep it, that is, to provide and to protect—and he’s made steward of God’s words. Then God tells us the one thing in creation that’s not good, verse 18, the man is alone. So God makes “him a helper fit for him.” The woman, Eve.

The “not-goodness” of Adam’s state, of course, wasn’t that he was lonely. He had perfect fellowship with God! No: the problem was that he was incompetent. God gives him this amazing task, this stewardship—and Adam needed help. So God gave him a wife. A helper. And like we talked about last week, her role as a helper isn’t a sometimes thing. It’s who she is. All the time. Which is far from demeaning. Like the man, she’s valuable because she’s made in God’s image. As it turns out, the word “helper” is most often used in Scripture of *God* who calls himself the helper of Israel. Jesus calls himself a helper as well, and refers to the Holy Spirit as “another helper.” Women don’t help from a place of need but from a place of strength[[1]](#footnote-1).

So the human race becomes male and female because of a problem in the workplace. Adam *and* Eve can together do what Adam could not. So, newsflash: marriage is not in inherent competition with work! It was designed to define and enable our work—including the glorious work of depicting Christ and the church in Ephesians 5. In fact, whether you’re married or single, your understanding of work is “not good” if it doesn’t integrate work, marriage, and gender. The family was created *for* work and ministry. And if work and ministry are properly understood, the family remains the nerve center for work and a critical outpost for ministry.

Let me summarize all this with three observations and then we’ll turn to some implications.

1. Gender is good. It’s given by God and defined by him.
2. Gender is all-encompassing. It’s part of identity. So it’s tied to all we do.
3. Gender, at least in Genesis, is most clearly described in marriage. Which means that a Biblical understanding of gender if you’re single is going to take some extrapolation.

***Questions?***

**3. Implications for the Married**

This is something we started to cover last week. A good summary of how God designs marriage in Genesis 2 is that he orients the husband to the task—that is, stewardship of creation in the form of protection and provision, stewardship of God’s words. And he orients the wife to the husband, as his helper. All the differences between man and woman in marriage come out of that one difference that we see in Genesis 2.

So how does that affect husbands and wives in their work? Let me give you two implications for married men and two for married women.

* For married men: you need your wife in every area of life. Adam needed Eve as his helper for all the work he was assigned by God. As a married man, there should be no area of your life where you’re operating independently of your wife—otherwise you’re foolishly thinking you can handle the assignments God’s given you without the help he thinks you need. Some of us think that a successful husband keeps his family entirely insulated from his job. But while boundaries are helpful in life, a complete separation between work and family is exactly the opposite of why God created marriage. So what does this look like exactly? Well, thinking of my own life, here are some of the ways my wife is my helper in my various assignments.
  1. She spends a lot of time caring for our kids. According to Ephesians 6, who’s on the hook to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord?” [wait for answer]. That’s right: me, the dad. And the massive investment she makes in their lives—often while I’m away from our home caring for this congregation—is a big part of how I obey Ephesians 6.
  2. She refines me so that I can be of greater use in the lives of others.
  3. She gives me wise counsel—on everything from taking care of our house to taking care of our church.
  4. She is different from me. And learning to understand and serve her is a big part of how God has shaped me to understand and serve others. She’s willing to be the one to knock off the rough edges, so to speak.
  5. She builds relationships. There are dozens of people—neighbors, church members, for example—who are willing to build a relationship with me mainly because I’m married to her. “She’s such a wonderful person! I guess he can’t be *that* bad.” She’s my ambassador to much of the world.

I could keep going—for a long time. Hopefully that gives you a sense of how her work enables my work.

* Second implication: you’re responsible as a steward of all that your wife has to offer. This idea of being given a helper could be wrongly viewed from a very selfish perspective. “Cool! God’s given me a helper, I don’t have to work so hard.” What an atrocious idea. As Jesus said, to whom much has been given, much will be required. You will answer to God someday for how you’ve stewarded all the gifts God’s given you in your wife.
* For married women: you are his helper in all that you do. When Joan and I got married, she was part-way through school. She took a year off of school when we got married, and then we made the decision for her to finish up. But we didn’t talk about it as school; we talked about it as “helper training.” In other words, we felt that given how God had wired us and the opportunities to serve him that we saw in front of us, she could be a more effective helper with that education than without it. And when she got her first job out of school, we talked about it in terms of how it would be a help to the callings God had placed on me. We even wrote out our job description of her job—how it would enable her to be my helper.
* By bringing in extra money so we could be extra generous.
* By giving her a day away from our kids so she can be a better mom.
* By expanding our friendships.
* By expanding our service to our community.

Her job is about being my helper—just as her callings in our neighborhood, in our church, as a mom, and so forth, are about being my helper. Practically, whether she’s acting as my helper or not may not radically change *what* she does. But it certainly changes why she does it.

* Second implication for married women: you are oriented to your home in a way that your husband isn’t. I mentioned earlier that in marriage, God orients the husband to the task and the wife to the husband. In Scripture, that orientation carries over to their home. In other words, one big way she’s her husband’s helper is to create a home that’s the nerve center for work, family, ministry, and more. Think of 1 Timothy 5:14 where Paul calls younger women to manage their households. Literally, to be the “despots,” the rulers, of their homes. Or for a more lengthy treatment of this, think of the women of Proverbs 31. Her work is both inside and outside of her home. She’s a manufacturer, an entrepreneur, a merchant, a provider, an investor, a farmer. She’s generous, she’s hospitable. But how does Proverbs evaluate the value of what she does? In terms of the impact on her household. Her husband, verse 23, is known in the gates. Her children, verse 21, are clothed in scarlet. Her own clothing, verse 22, is fine linen and purple. And so, verse 11, “the heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.” Her activity ranges far and wide—but her focus is always on her household. A husband and a wife will both have work; that’s one of the purposes of their marriage. But their goals in that work will differ. Because in God’s mysterious plan for marriage, their roles and orientation differ.

**4. Implications for the not-yet married**

As I look out across the room, I’m noticing that most of you are *not* married. What does this have to do with you? Or, if you’re married, the single person you’re discipling? Well, God’s typical plan for humanity is for us each to get married. Notice that I said *typical*. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul makes it clear that extended singleness can be a wonderful and worthy calling, even if it’s not typical. Since there’s no marriage in heaven, as Jesus says, singleness is in many ways a more heaven-like calling than marriage. But most of you will eventually get married. So the prospect of future marriage should impact your goals in the workplace today. Quite counter-culturally, I’ll go so far as to say that because career goals are different for husbands and wives simply because they are husbands and wives, career goals are different for single men and single women because they have the potential to become husbands and wives.

So for single men: you’re building a career focused on your ability to provide. For now, that means providing for yourself and to be generous. The two goals for employment Paul gives in Ephesians 4:28. Probably someday, that means providing for a family—ideally, so that you can live on just your income should you and your wife decide that’s what you want—or should circumstances force that on you.

For single women: you’re in a more challenging position. Just like your single brothers, your career is focused today on provision—feed yourself and be generous, Ephesians 4:28 again. But should you get married, your career goals will change in a way that your husband’s won’t. He was focused on provision before marriage, he’s still focused on provision after marriage. Once you get married, your career goals shift because your orientation has changed to that of a helper. That means that for you, *flexibility* will be a major goal in career planning. You’re looking for flexibility so that if you get married, you’ll have the option to work part-time, or work from home if you choose—which values jobs that have that potential. You’re looking for flexibility so that when you get married you can change careers or even drop out of the workforce if you choose—which will make you extra wary of large student loans or careers with long-term commitments.

For both single men and women, focusing on building a marketable skill set will go a long way to pursuing these goals. A skill set the marketplace values is how you’re going to *provide* in a competitive job market. A skill set the marketplace values is how you’re going to have leverage to get the *flexibility* you want if and when that time should come.

Now, does it seem inherently unfair that Christian men and women pursue careers differently? Well, if you’re evaluating a career in the currency the world uses—money, power, impact—it does feel unfair. Someone might say, “I get where they’re coming from, but it’s just a bit grating when my church friends give me different advice about school simply because I’m a woman.” Remember: Jesus’ goals are not this world’s goals. Whether you’re a man or a woman, his main goal for your work is not money, power, or impact: he’s got that already. He doesn’t need you for that. His goal for your work is that your work might show off his work in you. That it might bring glory to him. We *have to* keep that in mind or else the impact of gender in the workplace is always going to be a struggle.

***Questions?***

**5. Implications regardless of marriage**

But what if I never get married? Should my gender be a factor in the workplace? Absolutely. Male and female is *who we are*, not just who we are in marriage. Of course, the tricky part of figuring this out is that in Genesis 2, the Bible only defines masculinity and femininity in the context of marriage. But we can see through the rest of Scripture that gender is a real factor in your life even if you never get married. After all, single people all through Scripture—even in different cultures—act in accordance with their gender.

We could get a fuller definition of masculinity and femininity, but for the purpose of this class, let’s stick to what we see in Genesis 2: the essence of masculinity is a posture of protecting and providing—in a way that’s appropriate for a man’s different relationships with women. The essence of femininity is a posture of helping leadership—in a way that’s appropriate for a woman’s different relationships with men.

Now, what do we do with this idea of gender when we approach the workplace? Well, the language of calling that we’ve used in past weeks can be really useful here. God has *called* you to be male or female—simply by virtue of how he made you. And if you’re an employee, he’s *called* you to the workplace. We will do best when we try to align those callings as much as possible so they support each other. To make that more specific, let me leave you with three ideas for what this might look like:

1. Be who you are. Not everyone will express it the same way, but one Biblical truth we see every day is that men and women are different. They look different, they act different. And that difference is part of God’s good creation. So avoiding unhelpful stereotypes, act your gender in the workplace. I’ll give you an example. When I worked in business before I became a pastor, my boss was a woman who, prior to coming to my company, had been President and COO of one of the world’s largest food and beverage companies. From a career perspective, she was phenomenally successful—she was used to managing thousands of people. And she led in a very strong, very feminine way. In some senses, her management style was quite maternal—very nurturing, very supportive. It was very effective—and I think it was effective in part because she didn’t feel the need to deny who she was in order to lead effectively. Her management style was different from her male colleagues—and it felt right. Be who you are.
2. Much of that will involve, #2, taking opportunities to be your gender in the workplace—as is appropriate. An example. My wife Joan is a doctor. In the emergency room where she works, she’s in charge. But when a situation was potentially volatile and dangerous, a male subordinate insisted on walking with her into the room. Just standing there to make sure she was OK. How wonderful! She appreciates a man acting like a man. Putting himself in harm’s way to protect a female colleague. This is a sticky topic because some people get offended when others act according to their gender. But often, as a woman you have opportunity to support the leadership of others in a very feminine way. And as a man, you have opportunity to protect and provide for the women around you. So do it!
3. Some jobs are more of a stretch than others. Patrick gave the example last week of how it can be beneficial to align your callings together. For example, let’s say you’re a high-school English teacher. You’ve got two teenagers at home. At church, you teach the class on parenting. In your neighborhood, you’ve got a little posse of pre-teen boys who hang out at your house and look up to you as a father-figure. Very different assignments—father, employee, neighbor, church member. But do you see how each assignment is helping you prosper with the others? Well, gender is a calling from God—and it can either support your other callings or struggle against them. Of course, this is going to look different for different people. So going back to my wife’s example. In medical school she was really interested in trauma surgery but decided to opt for pediatrics since it would better mesh with her possible future calling as a wife and a mom. If you’re a woman working in a very command-and-control type of job, you might find some degree of cognitive dissonance with that helper-focused gender God gave you. If you’re a man working in an intensively helping-focused job, you might feel a similar tension. There’s no hard rules here for two reasons: (1) some of us can happily accommodate more tension between our callings than others, and (2) gender’s gonna get expressed differently by different people. But we need to consider whether a particular job is going to pose an uncomfortable stretching of our gender—and whether we’re OK with that.

**6. Conclusion**

If there’s one thing I want to leave with you today, it’s the title of our class. Be who you are. God has made you a man or a woman. Even though masculinity and femininity are going to look different for different people, there’s going to be a general posture of protection and provision for men, and a posture of helping for women. So in the workplace, look for opportunities to be that—in the job you select and in how you do your job.

***Questions?***

1. The Bible makes it clear that as men and women we share a common humanity, equal in value, but we’re not identical. One was made male, the other female. Lose equality of value and the relationship between the sexes becomes a parade with one in front and one in the back. Domineering men belittle women and bark orders because they think they’re superior. But lose gender distinctions and the relationship becomes a race. It’s male versus female, each elbowing past the other in a race to get to the top. But the Bible says it’s not a parade, it’s not a race, it’s a dance. The man leads, the woman follows, and yet together they move as one, in perfect harmony. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)