

## **Christians in the Workplace**

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

## **Introduction**

This morning we tackle a complex subject: gender in the workplace. It's a subject none of us can avoid. God has made each of us a man or woman. And being a man or woman influences everything you do, from how you engage in relationships to what jumps out at you when you walk into a room. Another reason we can't avoid this subject is that what the Bible teaches about gender and what our culture teaches about gender are increasingly opposed.

There are at least two errors we want to avoid in applying scriptural teaching on gender to the workplace. One is to treat Scripture as silent on the subject, and to take all our cues from the culture. Some people might feel that it's inappropriate to even raise questions of how gender should play out in the workplace. Isn't equality all about erasing the differences between men and women? But Scripture's teaching about gender is relevant to our jobs, and it is clarifying, liberating, and life-giving.

A second error to avoid is to expect Scripture to give us only rules. Instead, we need to tune our ears to the music of male and female differences as defined by Scripture and confirmed by clear-eyed observation. We need to observe the grain of gender differences, so that we can live along that grain rather than against it.

We need, above all, to seek wisdom. Wisdom is living rightly in light of both God's commands and the contours of God's creation. Wisdom is living with the grain of God's universe.

So, we will address practical questions. How should being a man or woman, or being single or married, influence the kind of job you seek, and how you do your job? But in answering those questions, we are primarily looking for wisdom, not rules.

The first part of the class provides foundations; the second part is application.

## **I. Foundations**

Our first foundation to examine is the most important: Scripture's teaching about gender and work. We'll focus on Genesis 1 to 3. And we'll see that Scripture gives men and women complementary tasks in fulfilling the creation mandate that God has given to all humanity.

### **(1) The Tasks: Complementary Roles in the Creation Mandate**

Let's turn first to Genesis 1, verses 26 to 28.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Here we see that God made humankind in his own image. Verse 27 highlights that both man and woman are created in the image of God. Being created in God’s image means that humanity is appointed to be servant kings, mediating God’s rule to creation in the context of a covenant relationship with God on the one hand and the earth on the other.<sup>1</sup> And verse 28 gives humanity a mandate as rulers under God: be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion. Rule the world under God’s rule. Procreate, reign, and cultivate creation, so that God’s image and glory will spread to fill the earth.

So our first biblical takeaway is this: Man and woman are both made in God’s image and both commissioned to rule the earth under God’s rule.

But there’s also a complementary truth we need to consider: God has given men and women distinct, complementary roles in fulfilling this commission. These complementary roles come with distinct orientations, distinct primary callings. We see this in different ways in Genesis 1, 2, and 3. (In what follows I’m drawing heavily on the article by Alastair Roberts that you’ll see in the “suggested resources” section.)

Genesis 1 shows us a pattern in God’s work of creation.<sup>2</sup> On the first three days, God *forms*, and on the second three days, God *fills*. The first three days are devoted to “structuring, division, taming, and naming,” and the second three days “are days of generating, establishing succession, filling, glorifying, and establishing communion.” God *forms* structure and order, and then *fills* that ordered structure with life.

These two halves of God’s creative work are fulfilled in the two key themes of the creation mandate: dominion and filling. Humanity is rule creation, to give it order and structure.

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<sup>1</sup> This language closely follows Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God’s Kingdom through God’s Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 84.

<sup>2</sup> Alastair Roberts, “The Music and the Meaning of Male and Female,” *Primer 3* (2016), p. 3. My discussion of Genesis 1–3 throughout this section is informed by Roberts’ article, which is available here: <https://primerhq.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/primer-03-the-music-and-the-meaning-of-male-and-female.pdf>. Subsequent unattributed citations are from Roberts, and I often closely paraphrase his wording.

Dominion relates to the first three days of creation. And humanity is to *fill* the earth by multiplying offspring. This corresponds to the second three days. Humanity's vocation in the world is to "reflect, continue, and...extend God's own creative rule in Genesis 1." And man and woman do this in *distinct ways*.

Next, we see in Genesis 2 that man and woman are created to fulfill this calling in complementary ways. Let's read Genesis 2:18 to 25.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called Woman,  
because she was taken out of Man."

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Many details in these verses highlight the distinction and complementarity between the genders.

- Verses 15 to 25 show us that man was created first.
- In verse 19 the man is given the authority to name animals, thereby ordering them, just like God named and ordered elements of creation in the first three days.
- The man is created to keep and guard the garden, and the woman is created to be his helper. The primary sense of verse 18, "It is not good the man should be alone," is not that Adam will be lonely, but that he won't be able to fulfill the creation mandate by himself! Only man and woman together can have children.
- As verses 21 and 22 tell us, while the man was created from the dust, the woman was created with flesh and bone from the man's side. "The woman's being derives from the man's," and "the man's being [derives] from the earth."
- We see in verse 7 that "the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." Only *after that* did God plant a garden in Eden. So the man was created outside the Garden and prior to its creation, while the woman was

created within it. The woman has a special relationship to the inner world of the Garden, and the man has a special relationship to the earth outside the Garden.

- The man is given the task of naming, while the woman is not. The man names the woman; the woman does not name the man.

Look down at Genesis 3. In this chapter, Adam and Eve sin, and they plunge creation into ruin and misery. Adam failed in his task of serving and keeping the garden by upholding God's law, and Eve failed in her calling as helper. In the parallel judgments that follow, in verses 16 and 17, God tells both the man and the woman that they will experience difficulty in the fundamental area of their activity. The man will be cursed in his labor with the ground, and the woman in her child-bearing. And, both the man and the woman will be frustrated and dominated by the source they came from: the man will return to the ground, and the woman will be ruled over by the man.

So what do we see when we put all this together? We see that, in fulfilling God's creation mandate, man and woman each have a unique primary vocation.

The man's vocation corresponds to the first three days of Genesis 1: naming, taming, dividing, and ruling. And the woman's primary vocation matches the second three days of creation: filling, glorifying, generating, establishing communion, bringing forth new life. "Hence, the differences between us as men and women are not merely accidental or incidental, but are integral to our purpose and deeply meaningful."

These distinct callings, and the different physical and emotional equipment God has given men and women in order to fulfill them, are seen most clearly in having and raising children. Yet these distinct focal points of men and women's creational callings are not limits, but seeds that can flower in many different ways. Man is not *only* a gardener; woman is not *only* a mother.

In the perspective of Genesis 1 to 3, to be a man is to be a potential father, and to be a woman is to be a potential mother. Not all men will be fathers; not all women will be mothers. But, in a variety of callings, men and women can exert fatherly and motherly influence for others' physical, emotional, and spiritual flourishing.

Whether you are married or single, childless or a parent, you have a commission from God to draw out the potential of creation, and to help others flourish. That work is part of what it means to be human. And who you are as a man or woman will shape all that you do.

So we're not so much talking about rules as being who God made you, making the most of the gifts and capacities that he's entrusted to you.

### **Are there any questions?**

Now, how can we describe some of the gifts and capacities that are distinct to manhood and womanhood?

**(2) Briefly, our next section—the equipment: discerning gender differences.** What I’m about to say is based on a mixture of common-sense observation, and cross-cultural anthropological and sociological studies.

Men and women are different. Men and women are physically different, in terms of primary and secondary sex characteristics, average height and weight, average physical strength, and more. Some of these differences account for why, in traditional societies throughout the world and throughout history, labor demanding more brute strength has been universally assigned to men.

But men and women also have pronounced differences of psychology and personality. Anyone who has ever played with both young boy and a young girl knows this! My son tends to show me love by attacking me; my daughters tend to show me love by cuddling me. There are overlaps, of course, but the differences are pronounced.

What I’m about to say involves generalizations, trends, and averages. Not absolutes. That said, here are a number of characteristic differences in men and women’s psychologies:

- Men tend to be more analytical and compartmentalized, while women tend to experience situations, and to relate to people, with their whole person. A man is more likely to isolate a problem and seek to fix it, while a woman is more likely to intuitively perceive someone’s complete relational and emotional experience of a situation.
- Men tend to be more oriented toward abstract goals, and women tend to be more oriented toward others’ personal needs.
- Men tend to be more aggressive, while women tend to be more nurturing. Again, an individual woman may be more aggressive than some men, and an individual man may be more nurturing than some women. But when you take each gender as a whole, men have a *vastly higher* “aggression” total, and women a *vastly higher* “nurturing” total.

There’s much more we could say, but this at least provides a baseline. The point of discerning these differences is not to create a mold that you have to force your personality into. The point is to discern the widespread, characteristic differences between men and women, so that you are free to be who you are. And, when we map these traits onto the distinct tasks God gave man and woman in fulfilling the creation mandate, we see that they fit. God has called men to a distinct vocation of “forming,” and he has fitted them for the task. God has called women to a distinct vocation of “filling,” and he has fitted them for the task. Those distinct callings are most evident in raising a family, but they can be manifested in countless ways outside that context.

But it still remains hard for us to connect these roles given in creation, and the differences we observe between men and women, to our roles in the modern workplace.

### **(3) That’s why, third, we need to consider—the setting: technological society.**

The society we live in today, in the modern West, is the result of hundreds of years of shifts in technology, production, kinship relationships, and more. Countless facts of life that we take for granted are radically different from both more remote history, and from many other societies around the world.

The most concise way I know how to articulate this culture shift is to say that our entire society has a technological character. All the major institutions and customs of our society are shaped by modes of production and consumption that depend on engineered technique and functional efficiency.

- We tell time by hours and seconds, not the sun or natural rhythms.
- Our education is geared toward training and credentialing for economically productive work, not the passing on of accumulated wisdom.
- Where we live is increasingly governed by what work we want to do and what work is available, rather than traditional ties to place and family.
- We increasingly live alone, or with only a nuclear family, rather than in a stable, extended kinship network.
- And work itself has been radically transformed. The brunt of much, though not all, physical labor is now borne by machines and even robots. Much work is done with virtually no physical effort at all, just typing on a computer. And what we conceive of as “work” is almost entirely that of giving our time and skills to an employer in a functional relationship governed by a contract. Work is typically done in an employer’s “household” rather than our own. And men and women work side by side, as individual, interchangeable producers, with gender distinctions functionally erased. There are very few jobs in the modern world that, whether by necessity, law, or custom, can *only* be done by a man or by a woman. Certainly some lines of work are predominantly done by men or women, but in many workplaces men and women are virtually interchangeable, by design.

In a word, the entire structure of our society prioritizes productivity over relationships. It evaluates people strictly based on what they can achieve.

This world we live in is radically different from the world in which both the Old Testament and New Testaments were written. So here’s one principle for applying biblical teaching to our roles in the workplace: the complementary gifts and distinct tasks that God has given men and women are most visible and pronounced in marriage and child-rearing. Because of the individual, technological, functional nature of most modern work, the differences between men and women are less obviously relevant. The different capacities and traits that men and women bring to these roles will be expressed in more subtle ways.

So again, this means we're looking for wisdom far more than rules. Your goal is to *be who you are*. Your goal is to use the distinctively male or female characteristics, the distinctively masculine or feminine traits, that God has given you, as tools for loving your neighbor.

**Any questions?**

## **II. Application**

With all that in mind, we move on, more briefly, to part two, application. I'll offer five applications, and the last will be the longest.

**1. First, resist the denial of reality. Gender is real, and so are gender differences.** Our culture is engaged in a collective effort to deny reality. But to be a man or a woman is something objective. It's given, not assigned; fixed, not malleable. Being a man or woman is not something you can change. Efforts to do so, sadly, amount to a kind of self-sabotaging mutilation and denial.

Instead of denying the reality of gender, we should celebrate its goodness. We should thank God for the gift of gender. We should view our differences as men and women not so much as differences *from* each other, but differences *for* each other. Just as in the church we have different gifts, and the body needs those gifts, so also in relating to one another as men and women, our different gifts and capacities are assets for each other.

So we should be alert to how gender differences influence the day to day life of our workplace.

**2. Second, resist the reduction of value to money.** Our culture puts a price tag on everything. But what's the value of motherhood? What's the cost of not knowing your father? As the sociologist William Bruce Cameron put it, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

How much money you make is not the measure of your worth as an individual. How much you earn over your career is not the measure of whether you've spent your life well.

Scripture teaches you to value God's glory above all. To value loving and serving your neighbor. To value seemingly weak and insignificant members of Christ's body. To value children, and to value their training and nurture in the Lord. To value the local and global progress of the gospel.

None of these things will get you a paycheck or add to your paycheck. And often, in different ways, our jobs can compete with all of these values.

How does this apply specifically to gender? Well, depending on your circumstances, you may have other, gender-specific callings that exist in some tension with the demands of your workplace. It may be that those are tensions you can't completely escape or resolve. For instance, very many working moms live with serious tensions between their calling as mothers and their responsibility to their children. Only if you value what the world doesn't teach you to value can you be faithful to both of those callings. Generally speaking, your job will not teach you to value your children. Your boss is not necessarily invested in you being a faithful mom. You will have to train your own heart to rightly prize the calling God has given you as a mother.

**3. Third, recognize that there is less “space” for gender differences in the modern workplace than in traditional societies, the household, and the life of the church.** This observation cuts in at least two directions. The first is that we should not expect the modern workplace to mirror or embody biblical teachings on gender. Scripture teaches that men and women are *not* interchangeable in the home and in the church. But in the modern workplace, there is a striking extent to which men and women *are* functionally interchangeable. That's the reality of the technological workplace.

But this also means that we should expect the church and the household to look and feel different from the world. We should be careful not to import worldly assumptions into the church and the household. We should cultivate distinct callings as men and women in the church and the household in ways that the gender-neutral workplace often hinders.

**4. Embrace your gender as a gift from God and an asset for serving others in love.** If you're a male nurse, then pray for God to equip you to nurture and care for others well, and look out for ways to use your strength, and masculine personality traits, to help the work you do. If you're a female corporate executive, pray for God to equip you to lead boldly, and look for ways to use the motherly capacities God has given you to help your employees flourish.

**5. Fifth, embrace plans that support and fit with gender-specific callings that you either have or desire.**

First, some application for those who are married. As we saw in Genesis 2 and 3, God has given men and women complementary callings in fulfilling the cultural mandate. In marriage, husbands are *primarily* oriented to the task of providing for the family, and wives are *primarily* oriented toward nurturing and caring for the family. This means that, even if both husband and wife work outside the home, their goals should be different. A husband's work outside the home should prioritize his objective ability to provide. And a wife, especially a mother, who works outside the home should prioritize a kind of flexibility that allows her also to invest more intensively in nurturing children and managing the household.

Second, many of you are *not* married. What does this have to do with you? Well, statistically speaking, most of you will eventually get married. So the potential 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. Those are the two goals for employment Paul gives in Ephesians 4:28. Probably someday, that means providing for a family. Ideally, plan 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, that's 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. And very practically, all Christian husbands and wives should welcome the gift of children, which will typically have a more significant effect on work a wife does outside the home. Mothers have a unique and uniquely demanding role in caring for children, especially young children, and they should honor and uphold that unique calling in how they view work outside the home. Practically speaking, this will frequently, though not always, mean reducing work done outside the home in order to care well for your children.

This 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 might have the option to work part-time, or work from home if you choose. So, especially consider jobs that have that potential. You're looking for flexibility so that, if you get married, you can change careers or even drop out of the workforce if you choose. That should make you more wary of taking on large student loans or pursuing careers with long-term commitments.

For both single men and single 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 can help get you the *flexibility* you want if and when that time comes.

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 can 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.

In a phrase, we could sum up the message of this whole class as: 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 and nurturing for women. So in the workplace, look for opportunities to be that—in the job you select and in how you do your job.

**Are there any questions?**