

Of Hats, Hairstyles and Christian witness

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[0:00] So do keep that passage open, it will be useful. One of the joys of teaching through whole books of the Bible is that we sometimes discover hidden treasures in odd places that we weren't expecting.

! Things that will help us in our Christian discipleship. The opposite are passages like this. A passage not just difficult to understand and challenging to apply, but touching on a whole range of topics that I suspect may maybe raise a few hackles as that passage was read to us. There's issues here about male headship in the family and the church. The role of women in church and marriage. The importance of sex. The distinction between men and women. Personal freedom in Christ to live as we like versus that call to sacrificial service and the need to do things for the good of others. And of course, what faithful Christian witness looks like. How do we live in a way that shows that we belong to Jesus? So all of that is wrapped up in a situation messy enough for the Apostle Paul to have to write about in this letter to the church in Corinth.

[1:05] What follows will be brief. Okay, not least because I'm taking the service of St Paul's at 11. It will raise a whole bunch of questions. So do think about them. Chat with Gareth and one another afterwards.

And it may be that when we get to the end of this mini-series on chapters 11 and 12, as well as the ones we've done, if there is a need and desire, maybe we can fix up an evening when we just come together and just say, okay, what questions does this raise?

How do we work through this together? Because it does need thinking through. It is not straightforward. Almost every commentary I've read and every talk I've listened to on these passages arrives at a slightly and sometimes vastly different conclusion about exactly what was going on here, why it was a problem, and what it means for us today.

I'm not sure I've encountered any other passage in the Bible where commentators are so varied in their applications and understanding. So we do need to be careful.

For a little idea, let me just run you through some of the difficulties in dealing with this passage. There's a question about whether Paul is talking about women's hairstyles or what or anything they're wearing on their heads.

[2:19] I don't know. I've wrestled with that one this week. I don't know. The Greek word for covering here is very complicated to understand. Paul seems to use different analogies. If I'm honest, I don't think it matters.

Something is going on which has caused the problem. And that's what we need to hold on to. The next question, is Paul speaking to men and women or husbands and wives? Well, I think he's doing both at different times.

And sometimes it's hard to pull them apart. Part of his argument stems from God's order for marriage. So husbands and wives are in view. Another part is about the distinctions between men and women.

So what the whole church is being spoken to at that point. Then there's the question about the word that Paul uses for head. What does he mean?

Is he speaking about an authority that one person may have over another? Or is he thinking about the thing on your shoulders? Both. In different times.

[3:16] So look down at verse 4. Paul writes this. If a man prays with his head uncovered. That's his physical head. On just above his shoulders.

He dishonours his head. That is the one who is over him. That is God. It's tricky. Because it's the same word in English. But about the fourth question.

Is Paul speaking to all women when he raises this subject? Asking them to behave differently? Or just those who are praying and prophesying in church? Well I think he has particularly in view those who are taking a key role in public worship.

But again there are implications for everyone here. Incidentally actually this is one of those times in the New Testament where Paul who is often mischaracterised as very anti-women.

Speaks of the way that women can and do serve within the church. Now what he says here needs to be held in tension with other things that he says. Particularly about leadership in the church. But you can't read the New Testament and Paul's letters.

[4:19] Without seeing that he values the ministry and role of women enormously. Let's go to the list of people he thanks and praises at the end of Romans 16. And you'll see it there.

What's the significance of this passage? That's the other big question. Is it a cultural thing that we can ignore? Or are there timeless principles? Well I think the answer to that question is yes.

I think there is a bunch here that is specific for the context of Corinth. So I shan't be suggesting that ladies you need to go out and buy a hat. Or cover your hair or anything like that.

Or give you a list of certain hairstyles that are newly approved by the clergy team of the parish. But there are some important principles that we need to pick up and work out and wrestle with.

And lastly, this is another big question. What on earth have the angels got to do with it? Maybe you were surprised when Paul said, Ah, because of the angels. Where did that come from? I'll answer that one a bit later.

[5:17] That's just some of the issues. So you can imagine the fun I've had with that this week.

Paul ends this section though with a call that the Corinthians, having considered the matter properly, might judge for themselves.

Verse 13. We do need to engage our minds and our hearts when we come to this passage. We need to be ready to accept what God's word says. And not just what we might like it to say.

But we need to be able to tell the wood from the trees. One of my favourite Bible teachers uses this phrase when he talks about the Bible. The main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things.

We can sometimes get lost in the minutiae and forget the big picture. Let's see if we can work out what the main and plain things are today. So what was the issue?

Well, if you will allow me to be a bit vague on specifics, whether it's a head covering or a hairstyle, it seems that some of the women had been coming into church, prophesying and praying, either without a veil on their head or with their hair hanging loosely down.

[6:21] And that was a problem for Paul, it seems, and I guess for some of the Corinthians in the church too. Because as they looked at that behaviour, it seemed to go against some important biblical principles, against church tradition, what was going on in the other churches, and against the standards and customs of Corinth.

We'll think through how this behaviour did that in a moment. But if that was the case, if some behaviour by some in the church was causing a scandal, bringing the church and the gospel into disrepute, then surely Paul is right to be concerned about that.

We would be here, wouldn't we? If there were things going on that made the people outside think, oh, that is just disgraceful. If it was putting people off the Christian faith, turning them away from Christ, then we should be concerned too.

Because if we belong to Jesus, then all we do, every area of our lives, should be lived for his glory. People both inside the church and outside the church should be able to look at us and how we speak and live and spend our time and how we dress, even things like that, how we use our money and be able to see clear evidence that we belong to Jesus.

And whilst we might imagine that hairstyles or head coverings can't possibly have any impact on our witness today, particularly in our culture, well, just think about some of the news things that have been going on recently.

[7:44] A few days ago, there was a news report about an Iranian female singer, a woman called Parastu Amadi, being sentenced for 74 lashes because she sang in public without wearing a hijab.

Criminal court found her and eight members of her band and production team guilty of charges including offending public decency just because she sang with her head uncovered.

Okay, that's Islamic Iran, you might say. But even in our own culture, hairstyles and head coverings carry a significance beyond what we might imagine. Think about the reaction some people have to

seeing a man wearing a kippah, a Jewish prayer cap.

Think about the reaction people have to seeing a woman wearing a full burqa or to a woman with roughly shaved hair or a man with dreadlocks. We're not in Corinth, but what we have wear on our head, how we cut our hair, says something about us, says something about the things that we believe and maybe about other things too.

Those little things do matter and we know that. So what's Paul's argument? Why was this behaviour a problem? Well, I think he has four arguments why that's the case.

[8:58] You may not agree with Paul's reasoning. I hope you will or at least come and talk to us about it. But I think where we'll end up is a place where whatever Paul is saying, we can see some principles here that we need to take in mind.

So here's the first thing. Something about what he saw was upending God's pattern for Christian marriage. I think that's what he has in mind in verses three to six.

See, when it comes to God's plan for men and women being together, marriage in the Bible is front and centre. It's there in Genesis 2. These famous words, for this reason, a man shall leave his mother and father and be united to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.

It's the pattern for human relationships. Marriage is meant to be between one man and one woman for life. Things don't always work out like that, but that's the aim. That's why in a marriage service, those strong vows are there.

In our culture, of course, the sign of marriage is a wedding ring. Wear it and it shows that you belong to someone else just as they now belong to you. You might have been available once, but now there's a ring on your finger.

[10:08] You're no longer single. In Corinth at the time, they didn't wear wedding rings. There were other cultural signals. Perhaps, and again, this is one of the ways we're not quite certain about the culture of the day.

It had something to do with hairstyles or head coverings. And in the church, though, some of the women were behaving in a way that was upturning that teaching and that cultural norm and so bringing shame and dishonour to their husbands and, as Paul writes, their head.

Now, just an aside here. I know that the idea of a husband being the head of his wife, there's something that's there throughout the Bible. It's taught explicitly, of course, in Ephesians 5 and elsewhere.

That idea doesn't sit always very comfortable with us. And you can see why that is. In our mind, it carries the idea of rule, of dominance, of maybe even abuse. But that isn't what is meant.

Yes, there seems to be a divine order within marriage with a husband as the head. But think how Paul writes how the husband, the head, is called to act. Ephesians 5, Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.

[11:24] Whose example of love must husbands emulate? It's Jesus, who made himself a servant, giving up his life for his bride, the church. That's why we love Jesus, isn't it?

Because of what he gave up for us. How deeply he loved us, giving everything he said. That's why we're willing to submit to him and his commands. So those of you that are wives here this morning, if your husband loved you more like Jesus loves you, then actually accepting his headship in the home is an easier thing to do.

It's not about obedience. It's about leadership. Different roles that we play. God's design for marriage is for the love of the husband, for wife, and vice versa, to point to that relationship between Christ and his church.

But it seems that something in the behaviour of some of these Christian women was breaking that link. What was it? Well, it seems to be that that social convention was being thrown off, that that sign of being married, whether it's a hairstyle or a head covering, well, they weren't doing that any longer.

Which meant that they signalled that they were no longer either under their husband's authority and that their marriage vows meant nothing. And if you think it's impossible to read that into such a simple thing, imagine this.

[12:45] You're out watching someone who you know is married and they are talking to someone of the opposite sex and suddenly they put their hand on their left finger and they pull off their wedding ring and they slip it into their pocket.

You know what that means, don't you? They're forgetting that they're hiding the fact that they're married and that would break our heart to see, particularly if you knew their part.

Well, when that's going on within the church, amongst people who are claiming to live for Jesus, you can imagine the signal that gives to a watching world. Paul says, no, no, no, this is a problem. Here's the second one. It says something that was suggestive of sexual immorality. Corinth was a city with a vast sex industry, a huge port, serving many ships and offering all kinds of pleasures to the seamen who came ashore.

There's some evidence, again, picked up by lots of commentators that these prostitutes selling these services would wear their hair in a certain way or perhaps keep their head uncovered in certain circumstances to show that they were available for hire.

[13:55] Now, if that is the case, can you understand why Paul might think that women in church behaving in the same way was sending the wrong signals? I think that makes sense. Now, I'm old enough to remember, as some of you are, the days when, if you went to church, even as a child, you were a shirt.

If you're a boy and a tie and the girls were in their Sunday best as the adults were as well. You know, and I'm glad that we don't have that restriction anymore. Sometimes it wasn't comfortable sitting in church or to truss up as if you were going to a wedding.

But freedom to wear less formal clothes must have a limit, mustn't it? Particularly for those taking a public role. I tell you, none of you would appreciate me taking the service and preaching wearing my swimming trunks and a T-shirt.

You wouldn't, would you? Of course you wouldn't. Many years ago, I went to a huge church in London for an evening service. Big praise band and one of the women leading the sun worship was there at the front.

She was dressed in a short skirt, a tight top and I kid you not was standing under a red spotlight.

Now you think, well, I don't need to read anything under that but I was, I was a guy in my early 20s and it was harder to concentrate on what was being said and sung.

[15:13] Just as it might have been for some of the women present if a young hip preacher rocked up in tight leather trousers and his shirt unbuttoned halfway down. There are certain things that aren't normal that communicate respect or the opposite.

Our personal choice about what we wear, how we do our hair and I'm speaking to men and women, both of all of us now can convey all sorts of things. It shows our allegiance to different causes, it shows how we feel about ourselves, it shows how we feel about our faith and here we see in some circumstances and cultures, it might even express something about our sexual availability to others. And Paul's point is this, I think, when we gather as a church, our focus, as it has been in our sung worship already, should be on God and nothing we do and nothing we wear should distract anyone else from their worship of God.

That wasn't the case in Corinth. something was going on that fell short of the calling of Christians to live holy, God-centered, servant-hearted lives.

Thirdly, something about it was rejecting God's design for men and women. I think the Bible is clear right from the beginning that there are two sexes, male and female.

[16:31] The Bible says that those things are good and it is a glorious distinction. Across the pages of the Bible, it says that men and women are equal in value and importance and both equally made in the image of God.

There is no excuse anywhere for thinking that women are any way inferior. But the Bible also teaches that men and women are different from each other, but in a way whereby men and women complement each other beautifully.

Now, I think 20, 30 years ago that would not at all been controversial, but much of society has today swallowed the idea that the sex that you're born in should have no bearing on how you live your life. Now, to some extent, that's a good thing. Some of the ideas society used to have about what jobs were appropriate for men and women or what interests boys and girls might have, have been rightly rejected.

Like you, I'm sure I don't care whether my airline pilot is a woman or a man, whether my doctor is male or female, or the prime minister is male or female. As long as they can land the plane, fix my teeth, run the country well, they don't mind.

[17:40] But that doesn't mean that biological sex is unimportant, or that there are no distinctions between men and women, there are. Now, broadly speaking, because you can always find an

exception to any rule, there are clear distinctions between the sexes, biologically, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and the Bible says that's a good thing.

Don't mix it up. Because something in that complementariness shows something of God in his infinite goodness and wisdom. But again, something, somehow, in the behaviour of some people in Corinth, either through the way they were dressing or styling their hair, were stepping over their boundaries and bringing that distinction to nothing.

It could be that some of the men were growing their hair long and so they were looking like women. It was more likely that some of the women had maybe cropped their hair short and were now looking like men. We might think, again, this is all rather silly.

But Paul thinks it's important enough to mention because something in that culture was reflecting badly on the church and contradicting the Bible's teaching about the goodness of God's design.

Here's the last thing Paul picks up and it's this curious thing about the angels. I guess the various commentators have a field day on this. You can barely find anyone who agrees with anyone else.

[19:05] This is my take, okay? And you can wrestle with this to your heart's content. The angels in heaven are far more beautiful and glorious than we are as human beings.

I think we'd agree with that, right? And wonderfully, they get to see and know the glory and holiness of God in a way that we cannot imagine right now. One day we will, but not at the moment.

That's why they sing God's praises continually. That's why their joy is giving glory to God. And maybe that's reflected in the way in Isaiah chapter 6. Some of the angels, as they sing God's praises, cover their faces because he's too glorious and they cover their feet.

And I wonder, as they look down on God's people, on you and me, who have been brought by the precious blood of Jesus, that they are expecting our reverence and worship of God in our lives to be something similar to them.

And Paul is concerned that when the angels looked down at the church of Corinth, they saw anything but. That there was a lack of honour being shown to God by the behaviour of some of these Corinthian Christians.

[20:13] Now that may not be right. You can take issue with me on that later. But it is an incredible thing to know that you and I, who were once lost sinners, once enemies of God, once deserving of his wrath, have through faith in Jesus, who died for us, now been forgiven and washed and adopted into God's family.

That is an amazing thing. And we should live like it. Four reasons then why I think Paul was concerned over the behaviour in the church of Corinth. Something about it was upending God's pattern for Christian marriage.

Something about it was suggestive of sexual immorality. Something about it was rejecting God's design for men and women. And something about it was affecting the angels. use. Let me make one more comment before we draw things to a close.

Something I think, I hope, will tie this passage together with things that we'll see elsewhere. And then I'll leave you with four principles to think on as we try and apply this to our own daily lives and our own worship here.

One of the major problems of Corinth that we've seen over these last few weeks in this series is the way that they had misunderstood God's, or Paul's teaching about the wonderful freedom that we have in Christ.

[21:28] A freedom that is from the law's demands and the condemnation the law brings. And it was that problem that had led them to mistakenly throw off any restraint in lots of other areas.

We've seen that they have a problem around sexual ethics. There is issues going on in the church and they go, no, it doesn't matter. We're free in Christ. They're taking lawsuits against each other because it doesn't matter how we live.

They're eating in idle temples and not caring the impact that has on anyone else. And next week we'll see that the way they behave when they come together for the Lord's Supper is a disgrace. But they don't care. They're free in Christ. They can live as they like with no thought to God or anyone else. We live in a similar kind of culture actually where personal freedom is the watchword of our day.

I'm free to live my way, to think what I want to think, to choose what I want to choose, to be who I want to be, to appear however I want to appear without thinking of anyone else.

[22:32] But that isn't the thinking of a mature Christian, is it? Someone I spoke to this way, we were chatting about this passage, described the Corinthians as a teenage church. I think that fits quite nicely.

A church that was always pushing the boundaries, where people were always wanting their way, that they weren't concerned with how things appeared or principles or anyone else. I think some of that is what's going on here, but that isn't the Christian way.

Yes, we are free from the Lord's demands, but we belong to God. We are saved as individuals, but we're adopted into God's family. We used to live for ourselves, but now we have a new focus on the glory of God, displaying Christ to the world through our lives and through our words and our work, and yes, even if it is something that fits our culture, through the way that we dress and cut our hair. Those things mattered in Corinth, and to some extent they matter today. But how we live and worship matters to God. How we live and worship affects others in the church, and that matters too. How we live and worship affects the effectiveness of our witness. The Corinthian Christians needed to learn that lesson, hence Paul's letter to them here.

[23:57] As I mentioned, Paul ends the letter with this call for the Christians in Corinth to carefully consider his instructions, to remember the honour and goodness of God's design and his commands, to take note of the practice of the church, and how things are seen in their culture as they try to work out how best to live for Christ.

So I'm not going to give you ten things not to wear to church, or a list of approved hairstyles, but here are four principles I think we can draw from this passage, and a question for each.

Something to take away, for you to wrestle with, either individually or maybe with others, as we think through what it means for us. Here's the first one. Rightly understood, God's ways are always best, even when they go against our own preferences, or the feelings or culture in our society.

So how willing are we to submit to God in the big things of life, and the small things of life?

Secondly, how we live and worship matters to God and others.

The way we live and worship will either bring glory or shame on God, or will either draw people to Christ or send them away from Him. What messages are we sending?

[25:17] Something to reflect on as individuals. As believers, our freedom in Christ is wonderful, but it does have limits. So where might we be using our freedom in Christ to please ourselves, and perhaps unintentionally damaging the faith of others or turning some away from Jesus?

And lastly, something we mentioned earlier on, the pattern for our life and worship is Jesus. He's the one our eyes need to be on. See, Jesus not just teaches us how to relate to God, how we can find forgiveness and eternal life.

He gives us a pattern to live now if we are His disciples. Pattern of a life where God is glorified through us in our heartfelt worship and our humble obedience, and through a life lived for the good of others.

I think that's Paul's prayer for the Christians in Corinth. May that be the reality for us. Amen. may
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