

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 PM

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[0:00] How's everyone doing? It'd be great to have your Bible open, 1 Corinthians 11. So everyone has a favorite passage in the Bible?

I suspect this is no one's. So why are we looking at this? Why would we look at this? So at St. John's what we do is we work through, mostly we work through books of the Bible, and right now we're going through 1 Corinthians.

And what's good about that is it forces us to deal with things that are a bit tricky, things that sort of cut against culture, which is what we're doing tonight. We're dealing with something very, very tricky.

By the way, you're new. If you're new here this evening, I hope you enjoy your one visit. No, it won't be that bad.

It won't be that bad. It won't be that bad. I'm going to make some introductory remarks. First, this is an extremely difficult passage, and it's difficult for a number of reasons.

[1:16] At first glance, it sounds repressive and sexist. It's also difficult. It's also hard because some of the really important words have multiple meanings.

It's also hard because the logic of the argument is hard to follow in places. It's also hard because there's a couple of lines in here that I read this week where the scholars say, nobody knows what this means.

Like, no one knows what this means. Finally, it's difficult because it's been horribly misused at times to oppress women, and some of you listening this evening will listen with quite tender hearts.

It could be the most difficult passage in the New Testament, perhaps. That was my first introductory remark. I have a few more. Second, it's important you realize the passage is not just about women. It's also about men. Third, let me tell you what this chapter is not about. Let me tell you what it's not about. It is not about the egalitarian versus complementarian issue.

[2:26] If you're not familiar with these terms, let me give you this incredibly quick definition. These are sort of theological camps where people sit in terms of how they define the relationship between husbands and wives.

So super quick definition. So complementarian view is that men and women are created equal, but they have different roles in church and at home. Like, man's in charge, basically, is the really quick version of that.

That's very simplified. Egalitarian, men and women are created equal, but their roles in church and marriage, et cetera, are interchangeable. Unchangeable. I don't particularly like these terms.

I don't know if I've ever called myself one or the other. I don't find them helpful. The Bible seems less interested in the kind of theological camp you attach yourself to with regards to those things. It seems far more interested in how we actually treat each other. I have known complementarian marriages that are beautiful and mutually self-submitting, and I have known egalitarian marriages where the husband treats the wife like trash.

[3:32] So I'm less interested in the labels. I'm more interested in actually how we treat each other. So in summary, a lot of people have used this passage to support a complementarian position.

I don't think that's the big idea here. I don't think that's what this is about. All right, we are still in my introductory remarks, and we're talking about what the passage is not about.

It's also not about the things you should put on your head, okay? It's not about what you wear. It's as Paul has a much bigger fish to fry, which we'll get to.

The passage is actually about love. It's about love. It's about how we love each other. I want you to think about the thread that Paul has been weaving in these chapters leading up to this point, and this will be very helpful to us.

Do you remember the last couple of weeks we've been talking about this whole issue of, should Christians eat meat that's been sacrificed to idols? I mean, we preach through it, and it feels so random.

[4 : 33] It's so random. But what was the big point? The big point is, Paul says to them, just do what's loving. He said this last week, you know, look, you've got the right to eat meat because it's just meat.

It doesn't matter if it's sacrificed to idols. It's still just meat. You should eat it. But maybe, but should you eat it, though? But should you eat it? It's just meat because, because actually, if you do, it's going to really upset some other people in your community, so maybe you shouldn't eat it.

Actually, don't eat it. Right? It was great. It's great. Don't do it. You sacrificed your right to eat this meat for the sake of loving somebody else. That's the thread. So this week, we come to this other issue that feels so random, feels so culturally distant to us.

And I think Paul is about the same thing. Let's do what's loving, which is going to make sense shortly. Okay, you guys doing all right? Okay, right, good. So those are some introductory remarks. But before I get to the kind of the guts of it, let's talk about the word head, because that's a really important word, head.

It's used a couple of different ways in the passage, a few times to refer to our physical head, as in cover your head, and also used metaphorically, as in the head of the wife is the husband.

[5 : 45] But what does head mean? And remember, whatever it does mean is, I believe, secondary to what Paul is trying to communicate here. But let's have a crack.

Let's have a crack at this. And again, Jesus, loving, thoughtful Christians disagree about this. But let's have a crack at it.

Okay. So firstly, I don't think it's about a hierarchy. So if you look at verse 3, if it was about a hierarchy that Paul had in mind, and you could guess what the hierarchy was, it would be God, Christ, man, woman.

If that was the main idea with that verse, that's what it would do. It would be like, God, Christ, man, woman. But it's not.

It's like, do you notice how it's little couplets? There are three couplets. I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ. The head of a wife is a husband. The head of Christ is God.

[6 : 50] What's the point? The point is not to set up this massive hierarchy, like top dog down, you know, like this big pyramid here. The point is, everybody has a metaphorical head.

Men, woman, even Christ has a head. So again, what does that mean though? What does the head thing actually mean? And there's a variety of definitions, and scholars disagree.

Some say head is really, it's really, it's just about submission and authority. Others say head is about source. Source, S-O-U-R-C-E, source.

And there's a bit of that in there. You know, when you heard the passage read, you might have thought, that sounds a bit like the creation story, like a bit of reference to the Genesis there. Like the man is the source of woman because a woman was made out of the man's rib.

So there's a bit of a source idea there, like the source of a river, the head of a river, right? I don't, I don't, I'm not completely convinced about other of those ones. I think the best, the best definition I read this week, the most, one that makes the most sense of the passage, the most reasonable one, is the idea of prominence, prominence, or preeminence.

[7 : 58] Okay, so bear with me here. So in the first century AD, men had a higher level of prominence. They were like the public face of the family.

They were like the public face of the family. And a woman's honour was welded to the most prominent member of that family. Could be husband, could be the father. And again, you don't have to like that.

You don't have to like that, the scenario. You just have to believe it existed 2,000 years ago to get to the point of what Paul is trying to make. So in that culture, at the time, a woman or a man could positively or negatively impact the honour of the most prominent male person in the family, husband, father.

Here's a contemporary, not really in the ballpark example of this, but it might be helpful. So people will say to me sometimes, your wife, Aaron, Amy, your wife is amazing and she's very beautiful.

Now, when they say that though, they don't smile. Right? They don't smile. They say it like this. They go, your husband's amazing, your wife's amazing and she's really beautiful.

[9 : 15] Like they have the confused look on their face. Because I can, and I know what they're thinking. They're thinking like, huh, like how did, how did that happen exactly?

Right? Does he have a trust fund? What, like what's, what's going on there? So again, this is a terrible example, but she positively impacts people's perception of me.

Okay, back to the passage. So everyone has a head in this relationship. And the behavior of the person can reflect well or poorly on the head. Husband, father, God. Right?

I think we're getting somewhere here. So I hope that makes sense. Because it helps make sense of the rest of the passage. Did you notice there was all this stuff about glory and shame? I think that's what that's sort of getting at.

So we're glorifying or shaming by the way we act. We're glorifying and shaming ourselves and the most prominent member of our family. Now again, you don't have to like that scenario.

[10 : 20] But it existed. So here we go. Let's keep going. Let's get into it. Let's just dive right into it. Let's just dive into the whole head covering thing because that seems to be the presenting issue here.

All right. So hold all of that stuff I just said in your brain. And now I think the rest of it will kind of, well, a bit of it will sort of make a bit more sense.

So verse 4. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, his metaphorical head. Okay? So not his physical head. But every wife who prays or prophesies with their head uncovered dishonors her head, metaphorical head, since it is the same as if her head was shaven.

Okay. So the social conventions back in the days were head coverings for women. Now we don't have those now. Though as an aside, there is a head covering movement in North America.

I watched some of their videos this week and it was quite interesting actually. Really lovely. They seem like really lovely people but absolutely the wrong end of the stick when it comes to this kind of stuff.

[11 : 24] But lovely people. So why are women wearing head coverings? Why were they doing it in the past? It was a mark of respect for themselves and a mark of respect directed towards the kind of the most prominent person in the family, the most outward facing public member of the family.

Be like, like imagine wearing like an old baseball cap to somebody's wedding reception. It would be like a breach of manners. It would show a lack of respect. It would bring attention to you and not the host.

So a head covering was a mark of respect directed towards the head of the family and yourself. So Roman women would actually wear these like, these hood things as a mark of respectability.

It sort of meant you were connected to somebody else and it says, I'm committed to the honor of my family and I respect myself. I'm not going to do anything crazy. The honor of my father matters to me and you don't want to hint at anything else.

You don't want to hint at the opposite of that. Remember, this is an honor-shame culture. So back in the days, a woman who had her hair out, just flowing and out uncovered, that signaled something.

[12 : 39] That signaled that she was a sex worker or that she was open to some sort of, you know, scandalous sexual rendezvous. So it was a really big deal. So remember, Paul here, he's not just bringing this stuff up just because he thinks let's just all be, you know, polite and nice in church and stuff.

Why would he bring it up? Well, there's a particular situation happening in this church in Corinth. We don't exactly know what it is. But I'm going to have a couple of educated guesses.

guesses. And the scholarship sort of genuinely agrees on this. So here's a couple of pretty good guesses. It could have been that there are some women and maybe some men who were disregarding these kind of conventions whilst being in significant roles of leadership in the church, praying and prophesying as some of these women were.

And perhaps some of these women, I use women's examples here, perhaps they were thinking we are free in the gospel, we can do whatever we want. Do you remember like a month or so ago, there was, I guess this is before Christmas, one of the chapters in Corinthians was dealing with a guy who'd shacked up with his mother-in-law and in the church they were going like, it's totally no problem.

The culture around them thought they were crazy but the church was like, no, it's the gospel, we're free, everything's cool. Perhaps something like that was going on.

[14:09] They were disregarding these kind of conventions and we'll get back to why that's important. They're disregarding it. Okay, here's another guess. It could have been this or something else or both and.

Perhaps it was men and women they're wanting to break free of some gender stereotypes, some gender roles. And in this community, women were actually, they were leaders in their church communities which they weren't in any other religious community back in the days. They wouldn't have been allowed to do anything. But in this church community they were prophesying, they were praying, this is all great stuff. And perhaps they're thinking we need to get rid of all signs of our gender.

So later on it talks about men having long hair which was a really sketchy thing to do way, way back in the days. And maybe that makes sense of verse 4 here, the end of verse 4.

I'll remind you of it. Every woman who prays and prophesies with her head covered dishonors her head since it is the same as if her head was shaven. It's hyperbole here and it looks like what it's saying is that look, if you're going to just throw off these gender conventions praying without a head covering, why don't you just shave your head completely like a man would do and look just like a man.

[15:30] So, not covering your head if you're a woman, covering your head if you're a man, it communicates something in those church situations.

It communicates that you don't care about the honour of your family. It brings attention to yourself rather than God.

perhaps it expresses an indifference towards gender and reflects badly on the people that are closest to you.

Now, why is this important? Again, just to remind you of the meat-eating stuff. You have the right to eat meat, but if you do, this meat sacrifice to idols, but if you do, you know it's going to harm the faith of others.

So, follow the example of Christ and sacrifice your right for the sake of love. Don't put stumbling blocks in people's way. I think that's what's going on here. You can throw off these head-covering protocols.

[16:39] I mean, they're just a social construct, but it's probably an unloving thing to do. You know, somebody's going to turn up the church and the person and the person who's leading, dudes wearing a woman's head-covering or a woman without one and they're thinking, hang on, what's going on here?

This is not right. She's going to pray and do something sketchy afterwards. He's going to prophesy and then do something sketchy. It dishonors God. God, they would become the focus of attention. All of that is unloving. The angel's comment at the end of verse 10 is very interesting, isn't it? But it's there as a reminder that church is a, because this is all in the context of church we're talking about here.

This is a supernatural community. We live a supernatural life. Church is an outpost of heaven. We're shaped by the person of God. And what kind of God do we have? One that would give up his rights for the sake of loving somebody else.

Let me remind you of Philippians 2. Jesus Christ, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form.

[18:02] He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. Paul is saying, sacrifice for the sake of others, even though perhaps you have the right to do these things.

So stick with these gender conventions, Paul says. It's the loving thing to do. Now I know, I suspect that some of you, it all still feels really icky, right?

It's like *Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood, like it's, like with the bonnets, right? It all feels still a little bit icky. And verse 8 and 9 are really hard to understand.

But right at the end there, I want to point out verses 11 and 12, which are, which are more understandable. Because Paul doesn't want us to fall into the trap. After saying all that stuff, Paul doesn't want us to fall into the trap of thinking that men and women are unequal.

He doesn't want us to think that women are less than or men are greater than. And this is what's lovely about verses 11 and 12. Let me read them to you. Nevertheless, in the Lord, woman is not

independent of man.

[19 : 15] It could stop there, but it doesn't. Nor man of woman. For as a woman was made from man, it's the rib, so man is now born of woman and all things are of God.

There is no man in the world that exists without a woman. So coming to the end of his argument, Paul wants to emphasize difference and mutuality.

That we are different, but we need each other. Married and unmarried. We don't dominate each other, we don't manipulate each other, we respect one another, we encourage one another, we sacrifice for one another, we give up our rights for one another, we honor the differences in each other, and those differences are not social constructs, they are created to reflect God.

We are both image bearers, men and women, which means there's differences in us. They go deep. That means there's supposed to be a blessing. I want to just read a nerdy thing right now from a scholar called Nancy Percy.

It's a short paragraph. Recent breakthroughs in human genetics have made it clear that humanity is fundamentally dimorphic, which is to say human nature is irreducibly male and female.

[20 : 28] Writing in 2001 for the Institute of Medicine Committee on Understanding the Biology of Sex and Gender Differences, Teresa Wiseman and Mary Lou Perdue concluded, males and females have partially different genomes.

This led them to a call for research on sex at a cellular level. The call was taken up by Paula Johnson in 2013 who said, every cell has a sex and what that means is that men and women are different down to the cellular and molecular level.

That means that we are different across all of our organs from our brains to our hearts, our lungs, our joints. So at a bare minimum, nature teaches us that God created humans, male and female. What does this teach us? It teaches us that men and women are real and that men and women are different. You carry what God is like in your DNA and you're called to show that men and women. Now, these differences are expressed in different ways, culturally of course. And culture changes over time but the mind of God doesn't change over time. So a man with long hair back in the day suggested something very sketchy.

[21 : 37] A woman with her hair out uncovered back in the day suggested something very sketchy. Nowadays, it's not the case. Culture has changed. A man with long hair just means, I don't know, he's in a band or something.

Okay, let me finish with verse 13 here. It's a wonderful way to finish. Verse 13, judge for yourselves. Is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?

Isn't that brilliant? Isn't that great? Judge for yourselves. Is it proper? He doesn't finish with this big long list and here's what you need to do. Here's all the rules.

He says, I just want you to think this through. Just think it through. He invites us to think theologically about this. Think theologically about social conventions around gender because this was an issue in the church and I'm not going to give you a list of rules either but here is a brief overview of the main ideas.

This is not a rhetorically smooth way to end. It feels a bit clumsy but I've said a lot so I just want to kind of list out a few things for you to take away.

[22 : 55] Okay? Here we go. What Paul seems to be saying is this. Don't just throw off these cultural norms willy-nilly in a worship setting.

How we act, how we dress, how we behave can be distracting and unloving to others. You will have personal preferences about what you wear and how you act and how you interact with people.

That's fine. Sometimes, sometimes for the sake of others, you might want to put those preferences aside because we don't want to draw attention to ourselves and take it away from God and we don't want to confuse visitors as well and throw them off and put stumbling blocks in their way.

I remember back in the days, back in New Zealand in the old country, going to church and there was a guy who used, church in New Zealand is very casual. Guy sat at the front row beside the pastor just took his shirt off, just took his shirt off and you know how we have the kids songs with the actions?

He had actions for every, every song and we would sing for like 40 minutes, shirtless, just doing all of these actions and I have no doubt about his sincerity and his love of Jesus but everyone was just looking at him the whole time and it was taking attention away from God.

[24 : 21] So, you know, we can sort of go, man, fantastic, you know, you're celebrating your individuality, et cetera, et cetera but bro, that's a misstep in terms of loving others.

Also, gender matters. It matters. Our otherness, it matters. We're the same. We're equal and we're different and it's good and it's beautiful and it's real and it's not imaginary and it's something to celebrate.

Folks, I hope that was helpful and I know it may have been painful for some of you as well. Again, I'm going downstairs for soup and if you want to chat to me about anything we've talked about, please come and chat to me.

Amen.