

1 Timothy 2 and Female Leadership

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[0 : 00] Hello, Table family. My name is Heidi Mills, and I'm the Director of Community here at The Table. Some of you may have heard me preach before as a member of the preaching cohort, but this is my very first time preaching to a live congregation in front of people that I can actually see.

It's so nice not to just stare into the abyss of my phone screen as I record for the 20th time or talk to an empty sanctuary. It's so nice to see people, but I think that we should probably start with some prayer.

Dear Lord, I just thank you for the opportunity to gather. It is so nice to be in the same space and see each other's faces and hear our prayers and our words of praise lifted up to you, Lord.

As I give the word, I just pray that you will be with me and your spirit will rest upon me so that people will see you, God, and not me. They will just be able to rest in your presence, Lord, and give me strength and bravery as I deliver your word today.

In Jesus' name, amen. Today, I am going to be continuing our series on misunderstanding Paul. I will be tackling the issue of female leadership within the church, which is still a very contentious issue for many churches today.

[1 : 19] We will be diving deeply into 1 Timothy 2, verses 8 through 15. For me, this passage has always been one of the sticky ones. Meg brilliantly laid out last week how passages like Romans 1 have been taken out of its context and used to stigmatize and exclude LGBTQ plus folks from participating in the church.

First Timothy is still being used today to say that women are not allowed to be pastors. And this rule has really never made much sense to me. I remember asking my father several years ago why women were not allowed to be pastors, and the only answer that my father ever gave was, because the Bible says so.

Yet, I could not shake the questions. If a woman was following Christ, if she had a voice that longed to teach others about God, then why couldn't she? Why couldn't anyone called to proclaim the goodness of God be allowed to do so?

What I didn't know at the time was that this question would remain, despite all my attempts to take the Bible at face value. I could not reconcile my belief in the limitless of the Holy Spirit with this seemingly blanket prohibition.

So I kind of resolved to just ignore this passage. You know, it's not really relevant to my life, I told myself. It's not like I would ever want to be a pastor or preach to a congregation. But it turns out that the Holy Spirit had very different ideas.

[2 : 37] When I moved to D.C., I was unable to question these passages in a new way. The first time that I had ever heard a woman preach in my life was at the table. And I cannot tell you how powerful it was to hear a female voice from the pulpit.

It showed me that representation from the pulpit matters. Part of the reason why I'm here today is because someone, many someones, carved the path forward for me. And so at the time, about three years ago, I was thinking about going to seminary, but not because I thought that being a pastor was in any way a possibility for me.

Instead, I had been going through a period of deconstructing my faith. I had so many questions about what it means to follow Christ, what Jesus had for my life. And I wanted a place to reconstruct my faith.

But God's word continued to tug on me, to pull at me, until I realized that maybe God was actually calling me to this. Maybe it was a possibility for me after all.

And it was both terrifying and exhilarating. Yet doubt continued to creep into my mind. I remember the voices of so many Christians who used 1 Timothy to exclude women, who said that any woman seeking to become a pastor was simply being prideful, that she did not know her place.

[3 : 53] Those seeking to cast doubt on any female clergy would not stop using 1 Timothy as a weapon. So I decided to take a second look at it. If you have a Bible, please flip it open or turn it on and go to 1 Timothy 2.

It's toward the end of your Bible, after 2 Thessalonians, but if you've reached Hebrews, you've gone too far. The words will also be on the screen. We'll be starting in verse 8.

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument. Also that the women should dress modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man, just to keep silent. For Adam was created first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness with modesty. Now, some of you probably feel like throwing your Bibles across the room right now, and I'm right there with you.

[5 : 10] There are so many problematic aspects, it's difficult to know where to begin. Women are being told to be silent. Eve is being blamed for the fall. Paul is claiming women will be saved for having kids.

So what do we do with passages like these? Sometimes it can seem like we only have two choices. One, we can take these verses at face value, or two, we can ignore them altogether. As Pastor Anthony said at the start of this series, sometimes the most biblical thing to do is ignore passages like these if they get in the way of loving God and loving our neighbor.

But I want to encourage us today to take a third path, which is to wrestle with Scripture. When we view Scripture as an invitation to wrestle with what God is truly saying in these words, we are able to breathe new life into these passages.

So the first thing I want to get out of the way right off the bat is this, that Paul is not saying that all women everywhere, for all time, are banned from teaching and exercising authority within the church.

We need to place this passage within the scope of all Scripture. In a time when men were not supposed to treat women as equals, Jesus listened to and respected the stories of women.

[6 : 20] The woman at the well in John 4 was the first evangelist in Samaria. Because of her, most of the town came to Christ. Women were the first proclaimers of the resurrection, and they were disciples in every way.

Paul also relied on women throughout his ministry. They were not only helpers, but active partners and patrons. Romans 16 mentioned several of these women. Phoebe was a deacon of Cancra, who was responsible for delivering the letter to the Roman churches.

In this role, she would have been expected to read the letter aloud to the congregation and serve as Paul's spokeswoman as she answered questions from the house churches in Rome. Another example is Priscilla, who was frequently mentioned before her husband Aquila as a partner in the gospel.

This order indicates that Priscilla may have had a higher standing in the church than her husband. Yet another example is Junia, who was considered foremost among the apostles, along with her ministry partner, Andronicus.

An interesting fact about Junia is that she has been erased from church history for most of church history. Many of your modern translations, if you look, you'll see a footnote that says Junius, which is the male form of the name.

[7 : 34] The only issue with that is that that name never appears in any Greek manuscripts, biblical or otherwise. And most early church fathers did believe that Junia was a female apostle.

Later translators ended up changing it because they believed that women could not be apostles. This is a classic example of reading up preconceived biases and prejudices into the biblical text.

For more information, the Junia project is an absolutely great resource. And in other places, like 1 Corinthians 11, Paul takes it as a given that women would be prophesying, in other words, preaching and teaching in front of the congregation.

His only concern is how women would present themselves in this role, not whether they would be leaders at all. So if Paul is not saying that women are forever banned from leadership everywhere, then why is Paul forbidding women now?

To answer that question, I need to lay out some context. Paul had two primary concerns when writing this letter. First, he was concerned with the survival of the church in the midst of Roman persecution.

[8 : 39] And two, he was concerned with the growing wave of false teaching within the church at Ephesus. During the time of this letter, the church was growing rapidly and receiving unwanted attention from the Roman authorities.

Consider this from the perspective of Rome for a minute. Decades earlier, the Roman authorities had executed this backwater Jewish revolutionary from a nowhere corner of their empire who was preaching liberation for the oppressed and the coming kingdom of God.

Yet not even death on a cross stopped people from worshiping this man. His followers started talking about how he'd been raised from the dead and this radically reshaped the way that they lived their lives.

Somehow people from all walks of life were sharing everything in common, considering each other family, and breaking down the boundaries on who was in and who was out in the kingdom of God. They no longer worshiped the emperor, but a crucified lord.

The Romans decided, if we couldn't get rid of Jesus, maybe we can get rid of his followers. Let's destroy this religion from the inside out. So Paul wanted to give the Roman authorities no reason to consider Christ's followers a threat.

[9 : 45] A few verses before, at the beginning of chapter two, Paul urges the entire church at Ephesus to live quiet, peaceable lives and pray for the ruling authorities. He's essentially saying, don't make too much trouble.

Instead, let your behavior showcase the goodness of the Lord who has delivered you. And at the same time, the church at Ephesus was dealing with the growth of false teaching.

These were not small disagreements of orthodoxy. Instead, they were foundational arguments that distorted the truth of the gospel. 1 Timothy chapter one, verse three is a biblical version of the subtweet.

Speaking to Timothy, the leader of the church, he writes, I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith.

Now, today, we don't know what these false teachings were, but Paul wanted to instruct the church on how to deal with these false teachings. Paul was likely speaking directly to the men who were spreading these false doctrines when he urged them to lift up holy hands without anger or judgment.

[11 : 00] In other words, he wanted them to adopt a posture of worship and not spew endless arguments and deceits that only served to divide the church. The reference to women in particular may have been an attempt to call out wealthy women in the congregation who paraded around their wealth and thought that money could buy them influence within the church.

Some of these false beliefs may have been about Artemis, who was the Greek goddess of fertility and childbirth, whose temple was actually located in Ephesus, which made Ephesus the epicenter of her religion.

Many women would frequently pray to Artemis for deliverance during childbirth, which was exceedingly dangerous during these times. You should stick a pin in that idea because we will be returning to it later.

And then some women may have taken Paul's words to the Corinthians at heart. In the first letter, he urges women, in fact all people, to remain single if possible. Some women may have taken these words to the extreme by either refusing to get married or by refusing to have sex with their husbands.

Some scholars even believe that Paul could have been addressing some form of ancient feminist movement in which women sought to actually reverse the patriarchal gender hierarchy of the household.

[12 : 13] I know that was a lot, but trying to keep all this in mind, let us turn to verse 11. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. The first thing to note here is that Paul has transitioned from talking generally about all women to talking specifically about a woman.

We don't know necessarily who Paul was talking about here. He could have been talking about one specific woman who was kind of like leading these false doctrines in the church, but he's probably talking about, oh, there's this woman over here who is spreading this false doctrine, there's this woman over here who's spreading that one, and he's saying that they should refrain from teaching so that they can learn.

So that leads me to the point that Paul is not saying that women should remain silent at all times. Instead, what Paul is saying is that women who want to teach should first learn.

Not everyone who wants to teach should be immediately handed a microphone. That is part of the purpose of the preaching cohort, to give people the tools and the sources they need to teach well. I'm sure we have all had the experience where we're sitting in a classroom or at church, and we wish the person would shut up because they have no idea what they're talking about.

And that was likely happening in the church at Ephesus where people were getting up and saying things that were false, that were untrue, and they were like, these people should not be teaching.

[13 : 39] But we should ask ourselves for today, what kind of false teachings should be confronted and challenged within our church? It's easy for us to say that anyone who's spouted lies, like gay people are going to hell, or systemic racism isn't a thing, should be barred from teaching at the table.

That's simple. But what about things like the prosperity gospel, where it says that God will bless people with material possessions and an easy life? What about the unholy trinity of patriarchy, white supremacy, and religious nationalism that can creep into our sermons whether we want it to or not?

If these were taught from the pulpit, it would damage the gospel. And these are the kinds of false teachings that Paul was talking about within his context. But I want to be clear that Paul is not talking about barring women forever.

Instead, he is saying that women should refrain from teaching so that they can learn. It's radical in its own way, because Paul is saying, let women learn. Let them adopt the posture of a disciple so that they can learn the truth of the gospel.

It is also worth mentioning that the proper posture for learning is silence. If you are always interrupting the teacher, you can hardly learn. So let us move on to verse 12, which is the big one.

[14 : 54] I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She is to keep silent. So note the use of I here. Paul is not speaking on behalf of the Lord.

Instead, he is speaking as a human leader trying to do the right thing in the moment. And there is also some evidence to support the idea that Paul is not talking about a woman in relation to a man generally, but a wife in relation to a husband.

The word in the ancient Greek are the same, so it really can be interpreted either way. But there are contextual cues, such as the reference to Adam and Eve, who are the first husband and wife, and to childbirth, that indicates that perhaps Paul was talking about a wife in relation to her husband.

So with that marriage dynamic in mind, let us consider the phrase to have authority. I didn't want to bore y'all with too much Greek, but it is so important to focus on the word used here, which is authentio.

Now, this is the first and only time that this word is ever used in the New Testament. In other places, when Paul is talking about the use of authority, he uses another word, which is exousia.

[16 : 06] So, why would Paul use a different word here? To answer that question, we need to go to other manuscripts written around this time to understand how different people use this word.

Authentio had a very negative connotation. It was connected to brutality, to violence, to murder. It referred to the domineering use of force, in other words.

And this is different from exousia, which simply means to have power or moral influence. So this passage can be more accurately translated like this. I permit no woman to teach or to have domineering authority over a man.

She is to remain silent. This tracks with the possibility that perhaps some wives were attempting to reverse the power dynamic within their marriages by domineering over their husbands.

It is likely that some women, especially wealthy women with some social influence, were attempting to spread false doctrines by imposing them upon their husbands and through them to their entire community.

[17 : 08] Now, this might not have been malicious on the part of the women. It could have just been a product of inadequate or at times non-existent teaching. However, for us, we must be careful not to reverse this statement.

If women are not permitted to domineer over men, it is easy to assume the inverse, that men are permitted to have domineering authority over women and this power dynamic is divinely ordained.

But that is not true. Ephesians 5, verse 21 states, be subject to one another at a reverence for Christ. Men and women, in other words, are to adopt a posture of mutual respect and care for one another, not constantly seek to one-up each other on who has all the power and who doesn't.

So, what beliefs about power are we reading into this passage? If we believe that power or authority is a zero-sum game, we might believe that one person necessarily has to have all the power over another.

But if we believe that we all have certain amounts of power and that is meant to be power shared for the goodness of all people, then we might come to a different understanding about how we can leverage that power. It becomes more about power with rather than power over.

[18 : 24] And it is our responsibility to learn how to use that power rightly and properly. In the next two verses, Paul continues this theme. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

So, many of you have probably heard this passage being used to justify male superiority and female inferiority. I know that I have. But that's not really what Paul is saying here.

Because if Adam was superior to Eve because he was created first, then whales and fish and lions and even trees would have authority over Adam. Instead, what Paul is saying is that those who were first instructed have the responsibility to then pass on those instructions properly.

In Genesis, Adam was given the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil directly from God. He was then given the responsibility to pass those instructions on to Eve.

However, when Eve was tempted by the serpent, she said that she was not to eat or even to look at the tree or she would die. So she added to the command. More importantly, when all of this was happening, Eve was not alone wandering in the garden by herself.

[19 : 42] Instead, Adam was with her. Genesis chapter 3, verse 6, tells us that Eve ate the fruit and then she gave some to her husband who was with her and he also ate.

So at any point, Adam could have said, wait, I think you got that instruction wrong. Maybe you added something that wasn't originally there. Or you could have said, no, I don't want to eat that. God said not to. And yet Adam, the one person who had received the command directly from God, made the conscious choice to disobey.

Now, Paul might not be ascribing blame here. What Paul is saying, however, is that Adam did not correctly instruct Eve and then she was left open to deception.

He went along with the deception and he failed to correct it. In a similar way, the leaders of the church were not teaching in a way that prevented those false teachings and deceptions from cropping up in the first place and when they did crop up, the leaders did nothing to correct them.

What small distortions in the gospel might lead to big deception later on down the line? For example, if we are taught that God cannot be in the presence of sin and we are nothing but sinners deserving of God's wrath, we are unable to see the truth of God's love for us and our identity as God's chosen creation.

[21 : 01] Later down the line, this might lead us to try to earn our salvation by good works or walk away from the faith entirely because we can't live up to God's standards. We are unable to rest in God's grace and forgiveness when we inevitably do sin.

So those of us who are leaders have a responsibility to make sure that we are leading people closer, to a closer relationship with God rather than further away. Finally, I want us to turn very briefly to verse 15.

Yet she will be saved through childbearing provided they continue in faith and love and holiness with modesty. So just like the previous verses, this verse has done tremendous harm to women over the centuries.

It has too often reduced women to the reproductive capabilities alone and this serves to marginalize and harm women who do not want to have children, who cannot have children, who may have suffered miscarriages or difficult pregnancies among many others.

Yet, as I've been saying this whole time, we need to put this verse within its context. At the beginning of the sermon, I mentioned the Artemis cult. Women would pray to Artemis for deliverance during a difficult birth and during this time, every single pregnancy carried the risk of death.

[22 : 20] 25 out of every 1,000 mothers died during childbirth. About 300 infants for every 1,000 live births died. And many children did not make it past their 10th birthday.

So given this reality and given the fact that most women would be expected to marry and have kids, it makes sense that women would appeal to any possible sources for deliverance. And even today, we can see, despite all of our advancements in modern medicine, that pregnancy is still a terrifying event for millions of women around the world.

So, given all of this, Paul is addressing both husbands and wives, hence the they. He urges them to leave behind the false teachings, which includes praying to Artemis and persist together in faith, love, holiness, and modesty.

In other words, self-control. Paul is saying that God hears the concerns of these women who are groaning through the trials of childbirth.

He hears them and he's with them through it. And moreover, it is the mutual responsibility of both husbands and wives to faithfully determine together their life as Christians, including the process of having and raising children.

[23 : 39] Just like the world was saved through the birth of one child, Jesus Christ, so too Jesus is willing and able to walk alongside women who are carrying this burden and deliver them through it.

So, we have reached the end of the passage and now we have to try to put it all together. I hope that we've been able to wrestle with this text together and rethink at least some of what we thought we knew about it.

But my main point is that context matters. Paul is not outlining a universal prohibition against female leadership. Instead, he is creating temporary guardrails on those who are permitted to teach or exercise authority so that the gospel shines within this community.

He rejects all forms of dominating authority and urges the congregation to teach those who would like to learn. And so, I want to leave us with a few challenges.

When is it appropriate for us to place boundaries around those who are allowed to teach and those who are not? What might that look like? And what false teachings must we confront as a church?

[24 : 52] And one of those false teachings is the idea that there are people who are exempt from God's call because of our identity. I want us to recognize one truth to replace that false teaching.

The Holy Spirit has no limits, no boundaries, no exclusions, period. Let's look at Joel 2.28 very briefly. Then afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has been poured out on all people. It doesn't matter your gender, your race, your sexuality, your class, your personality, your past, any other factor.

We are all gifted by the same Spirit who breathed life into creation and raised Christ from the dead, and we are all invited to participate in the grand work of bringing God's kingdom to earth as it is in heaven.

[25 : 55] Everywhere, God is empowering us all to join God in the renewal of all things. Without the Holy Spirit, I would not be standing in front of you today. Without seeing the Holy Spirit poured out so powerfully on the female pastors that I know and others who have been excluded, I would not have been able to imagine, let alone pursue, this future for myself.

It has shown me that it doesn't matter what we look like. It only matters that we are committed to the work of spreading the gospel in grace and in truth. Some of you sitting in front of me today or watching from home might think that you were called to ministry and yet something is holding you back.

You want to participate in this grand work, but you think that there's something excluding you. Maybe someone has told you that you can't lead because of your identity, because of who you love or who you don't love, because you do not fit the mold, because you are too much or not enough.

Maybe the words that have been used to exclude you are drowning out the call of God in your life. But to those people, I want to tell you without hesitation that this is not true.

This is a lie. Your identity matters. Your story matters. Your voice matters. And if you take nothing else away from the sermon, I want you to remember this.

[27 : 13] If scripture has ever been used to exclude you from participating in God's mission on earth on the basis of your identity, the Holy Spirit will always break through the boxes that we try to put her in.

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