

1 Timothy 2:8 A Sermon

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This morning, we are continuing in our study of Paul's letter to Timothy picking up at verse 8 of chapter 2 and pretty much staying with that verse for the duration. Now, if you are sort of new to our church or visiting for the first time, it might be helpful for you to know that our approach to the Bible is an *expository* approach which simply means that our usual practice is to work our way *through* books of the Bible, trying to read them in the way that they were intended to be read. That involves systematically going through a book, taking a certain number of verses at a time, and trying to understand what those verses mean *in context*. Sometimes that means we look at ten verses, and other weeks we look at two verses. This week we are looking at ONE verse because there are occasions when we need to take the time to unpack very small portions of the Bible. This is one of those occasions.

In addition, because we are dealing with such a small portion, we will also be taking some time this morning to do a little "set up" so that we are better prepared to hear some things Paul will be saying later on in this passage. Lastly, and by way of introduction, let me say at the outset that I am *deeply* indebted to Philip Jensen for his very fine treatment of this passage. This message, as a result, is largely, although not entirely, an adaptation of a sermon he preached on this same passage, years ago. So, rather than saying "As Jensen says" a million times, you will hear it a few times, and the remainder of the time you can just assume that if you hear something that sounds brilliant – it's him and if you hear something that sounds a little dodgy – that's me. With that in mind, let's press on....

Now, if you remember, Paul in this letter has as his overall goal a desire to *encourage Timothy* and to *promote the good order and functioning of the church*. He approaches these things in several ways, starting out by addressing false teachers and their teaching which we've already seen. After promoting the order of the church by addressing *that* issue, he moves on to the section we are currently reading where he is addressing the Ephesians, through Timothy, on the matter of *how they are to conduct themselves when they are gathered together* which has obvious connections to the whole issue of order and function in a church.

In dealing with this, Paul has already talked about the fact that their time together should include *prayer* and not just prayer for themselves and their own concerns, but *all kinds of prayers* for all kinds of people including people that would be last on their prayer list, like those in civil government. Last week, we saw some of Paul's *theological justification* for their engaging in such expansive and sweeping prayers, such justification being based upon the nature of the Gospel; that it is more inclusive than we

want to believe and yet at the same time, more exclusive than we are comfortable admitting.

This morning, after having looked at the *fact* that we need to pray, the *content of our prayers*, the *breadth of our prayers* and the *theological justification behind such breadth*, we will look at *who is or ought to be involved in this praying*, namely the men. Since the passage itself targets and singles out men in particular, that is what I will be doing this morning through the message. *However*, while I will be speaking primarily to the men, that doesn't mean the ladies can relax, for several reasons:

- 1) For starters, although Paul directs his comments to the men in the congregation, for reasons which we will soon see, much of what he has to say is equally applicable to the women of the church.
- 2) Second, some of you ladies are married and so what I have to say this morning to the men *to whom you are married* should be of great interest and concern to you as well, since it has to do with this one with whom you have become "one flesh".
- 3) Third, those of you who are NOT married *may* one day BE married and so it should be of great interest to you, as one day you may have to make a decision as to what kind of man you might want to marry.
- 4) Fourth, those of you who are NOT married and perhaps have no desire to be married, which is great, should *still* pay close attention since you have no less a responsibility to your brothers in Christ, to encourage them as to what kinds of men they ought and ought not to be.
- 5) And finally, I don't want the ladies to get too comfortable because, if you just read ahead to the next couple verses, you'll see that very soon you will be the focus of attention....

So, let's pray and read the text, and then we'll continue with this morning's study.

1 Timothy 2:8 I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling;

Some preliminary comments

Now, before we look at 1 Timothy 2:8, I want to make, as I said in the introduction, a few preliminary comments which will set up not only the passage before us this morning, but actually the next several passages which we will explore over the next number of weeks.

First, we are, at this stage in Paul's letter, about to embark on an extended look at the matter of men, women and their roles and relationships in the church. This subject is not one that is easy to discuss, especially in this day and age. It is often a highly emotional issue. It is an issue into which people invariably drag a lot of excess baggage and not necessarily with wrong intentions. The reality is that we ALL carry the *imprint* of our past, our upbringing, into this, and indeed *every*, discussion. For some people, that imprint has been largely a good one in this area of men, women and how they relate. For others, the imprint has been horrible. Then for some, well, the truth is we don't know what to think of it just yet. Regardless of our experience, we have to talk about these matters because God wants us to talk about them. Further, when we talk about them, we have to do so in terms that are larger than our personal experiences because *experience*, while a helpful thing sometimes, *is not the measure of all things*, and it is certainly NOT the measure of truth.

Second, it seems, as Jensen observes, that there is a trend in some part of the protestant church that says, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel" and "I am not ashamed of Jesus," but "I am embarrassed and *terribly* ashamed of the Apostle Paul," as if what Paul wrote was somehow less inspired than the other parts of Scripture. As if every other part of the Bible is authoritative but when we get to Paul we are free to either accept what he says or ignore it, it really doesn't matter. But we cannot do that. We cannot dismiss the Apostle Paul any more than we can dismiss the words of Jesus.

Let me say the same thing in another way because this is too important to miss. If we come to the Bible with the attitude that says, "I am willing to believe what it says, or act upon what it says *until it says something hard, something awkward, or something I personally don't like or disagree with or which goes against what the rest of society believes,*" if we come to the Bible with THAT sort of perspective then we are already in trouble, even before we start. If that is your perspective then you are showing by means of that perspective that you do not understand what you are dealing with here. We cannot come to the Bible with "fill-in-the-blank" escape clauses. If you do not regard the whole Bible as authoritative for your life then nothing that is said to you this morning will be of much use to you.

Third, in our study of these matters related to men and women we will, indeed *must*, take the Scriptures as our ultimate reference point. To be sure, there are all sorts of interesting psychological, biological, historical, archaeological and sociological bits of information which one *might* bring to bear on this issue. I would be the first one to allow that these fields of study can shed *some* helpful light on *certain* things. However, these perspectives are not *determinative* nor are they *authoritative*. None of them individually, nor all of them together, have the right or authority to dislodge a single truth found in Scripture.

Fourth, as important as our attitude when we approach the Bible is our *methodology*, the specific way in which we handle the Bible as we study it. The fact is, there are evangelical Christians who come down on both sides of the issue regarding how men and women relate. What separates them, at least *some* of them, is not a conviction

about the authority of the Bible. People in both camps believe the Bible is authoritative. However, that belief, as noble and right as it is, does not guarantee that one will interpret the passages IN the Bible without error.

So it is that when the Bible teachers and scholars critique each other's views on this matter, the focus of their discussion is on *the way in which the other person handled the Bible*, in order to arrive at a particular interpretation. Now, the fancy word for this process of Bible interpretation is "hermeneutics." The "hermeneutic" or *methodology* one employs in studying the Bible is *very, very* important. It must be one that helps to make sense of the Scriptures. It must be one that understands the Bible as a God-breathed, authoritative document. It must be one that does not distort the natural meanings of human language. It must be one that does not import foreign ideas and unlikely meanings into a passage of Scripture. Perhaps most important of all, it must be CONSISTENT.

It is often in *this* area of *consistency* that some of the most frequent problems occur. Certain scholars will handle the Bible a particular way and then suddenly, in the course of their studies, they will come across a passage that through their *normal, usual* approach yields an interpretation they are uncomfortable with. So what do they do? They take an altogether different approach, employing all sorts of what I call "hermeneutical gymnastics" to reach a conclusion *in a way* which stretches the limits of credibility and integrity. They do all of this because they simply *refuse to believe* that a passage just might mean what it appears to mean.

Fifth and final preliminary comment: One of the things we will notice as we read the Scriptures is that the Bible makes *gender distinctions*. That is, the Bible does not treat men and women as creatures that are identical in every way. One may *want* the Bible to do that, one may *wish* the Bible did that, but it *doesn't* do that. The Bible says that men are men, women are women and that these roles *are not negotiable or interchangeable*. Right along side of that, the Bible also says that men and women are, as regards their worth and value and significance, *equal* in the eyes of God. So, we see in the Bible that there is both equality and difference.

Now, the fact that individual persons can have equal worth and different roles is *clear* in the Scriptures. One has to look no further than the Trinity, to the fact that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are of equal worth. One is not more DIVINE than the other. One is not more holy than the other. Yet, the Bible makes it clear that their equal worth does not translate into identical roles. There is a definite *pattern of relating* between the different persons of the Trinity. There are roles that each has that are not interchangeable. Yet, we do not devalue one over against the other because of it. God the Son died on the cross, but we don't think less of the Holy Spirit because His role in salvation is different.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says to God, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." Here is a portrait of Jesus, *submitting, humbling himself* before God the Father. Yet we do not love Him

less, we do not honor Him less, we do not respect Him less in his divinity. In fact, we love Him more. We honor Him more because it was in the giving up of Himself, the abdication of His rights, that He so clearly showed the awesome holiness of His love.

That same reality of equal worth and different roles/functions that characterizes God Himself, in Trinity, that same reality is built into the very fabric of God's creation. In short, as *He Himself is, so He creates*. Thus, it is only fitting that that which is characteristic of God Himself is also characteristic of those who bear the *image* of God, the men and women He has created. In the Garden of Eden the man and the woman image God. *Individually* they image God, yes, but they also image Him *together* both, in the fact that they are, mysteriously, "one flesh" and also in their complementariness (?), the fact that they are two persons of equal worth and significance, but with different roles and functions, just as in the Trinity.

This line of thinking will be pursued in greater depth in a few weeks time, but I felt it was important to get some initial things said in this area because Paul, in this letter as well as other letters, *does* make some distinctions between men and women. Again, not a distinction of worth or value, but a *distinction nonetheless*: A distinction of patterns and roles and structure and order.

Looking at the text itself

At this point, I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that everything I have said so far this morning is only the *introduction* to the main message and passage. The *good news*, however, is that in this particular sermon, the main message is actually shorter than the introduction. So, one may think we are just getting started when, in fact, we're over halfway. So, take heart. Let us read the passage again:

1 Timothy 2:8 I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling;

The first thing worth pointing out here is this phrase "I desire" by the apostle Paul. When Paul says, "I desire" or "want," it is not the case that what he is making here is merely a suggestion, or that this is just wishful thinking on Paul's part. He is, as Jensen so aptly puts it, "expressing an apostolic demand in the language of personal desire." In other words, when Paul says, "I want men to....pray" it is a *command*. He takes the same approach in First Timothy 5:14, and in Titus 3:8, using the same Greek word but in both cases it is clear that what he is saying is more than a suggestion.

The next thing to notice is that Paul is addressing the MEN, in particular. Again, the word Paul chooses is important. Paul does not say, "I want *people* to pray..." he says, "I want *men* to pray..." The word used here is one which means men, as opposed to women; as distinct from women. Now don't read too much into this. Paul is not saying he *doesn't* want the women to pray. He *IS* saying he wants the men to pray. There is a reason that he is singling the men out here. We'll see why in just a moment.

Also notice the word translated as “everywhere” in the NIV is rendered as “in every place” in the ESV. The significance of this phrase is greatly enhanced when we remember that the early church did not have a centralized *building* to which they could all come each week, but rather there seems to have been a series of homes or “house-churches” in which the Christians, scattered throughout the city, would gather. So, when Paul says he wants men “everywhere” or “in every place” to pray, he is saying he wants the men to be active and involved in each of these places, these house-churches. To be sure, the women as well were to be involved and *were* involved, VERY involved, but Paul wants to make sure that the MEN were involved, especially in prayer, in each and every place.

That brings us to the next phrase in the verse, “I want men everywhere *to lift up holy hands in prayer...*” Now, unfortunately, the way the New International Version has rendered this verse, one would think that the main point here is *the lifting up of the hands* with the words “in prayer” almost appearing as an afterthought. But the lifting up of the hands is not the main point.

Yes, the Bible does say some things about our *posture* in prayer. We can be standing, kneeling, laid flat out on the ground, eyes open, eyes closed, hands up, hands down, looking upward, looking downward, all of those things are Biblical and right and acceptable. There is no posture that is expressly more Biblical than others. If we stand, well fine then, stand. If we kneel, well, that’s okay too. If we fold our hands, great. If we hold our hands up, hold our hands up. I don’t think it matters a great deal. All of those things are decidedly secondary to Paul’s main concern and that is that *prayer* is happening and that the *men* are involved in it.

Indeed, if there is any huge concern for posture here, it is not so much with one’s external posture but rather with one’s *internal* posture; the disposition of the men’s hearts as they are praying. Paul says he wants the men to lift up “holy hands” *without anger or disputing*. The words about anger and disputing help to define what he means by “holy hands.” He means hands that have not recently been waving before another person’s face in the form of a clenched fist, hands that have not been pointing accusing and hateful fingers at a brother or sister, or worse, hands that have not been recently used to actually physically fight with, or hurt, another person. Paul doesn’t want that sort of hypocrisy going on. He’s not looking for the men to engage in prayer for the sake of good *form*. He wants it to be real.

We have to keep in mind the larger context of this letter. Remember that we have already looked at the matter of false teachers and their teaching. One of the sad consequences of these false teachers’ “ministry” in Ephesus would have been to create confusion amongst the believers as they pushed their strange, speculative doctrines. The confusion would have bred doubts, divisions, quarreling, factions, anger and fighting, particularly among the men because of their role in the church.

As Jensen puts it, “*Fighting* is a very MALE way of doing things.” Women do it too, of course, but men much more frequently and much more programmatically. Men resort to fighting, violence and warfare much more quickly than women. Pick up any history book and we will see that men have a great capacity for losing their tempers, for “solving” their problems by anger, by fighting in order to get their way. That, often, is exactly how men are. It’s not *right*, it’s not *godly*, but it’s what often happens. It is this particular expression of unholiness and ungodliness that Paul wants the men in Ephesus to avoid because Paul knows there is a connection between fighting and quarreling and prayer, or the lack thereof. You see the same sort of ideas in James 4:1-3. Anger and disputing keep us from praying; they actually hinder our prayers and drain us physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

But, why the MEN? Why is Paul singling out *the men* at this point, and ON this point? I’m going to give two reasons why he is most likely doing this. One is theological and the other is pastoral.

Why Paul focuses on the men

The theological reason is related to some things said earlier in the introduction, the fact that Paul makes distinctions between men and women. This is because *God* makes and *made* distinctions between men and women, from the very beginning. Not distinctions of significance or value or worth, but distinctions of pattern and order and function, just as in the members of the Trinity. Which is why, for example, in the arena of MARRIAGE Paul can talk at one point, in Ephesians 5, about “submitting to one another” and about husbands loving their wives “as Christ loved the Church” and of the need for godly husbands to “give themselves up” for their wives, pouring themselves out, laying their life on the line for their wives, sacrificing themselves, as it were, for the sake of their wives.

Yet, even as he says these things and so affirms the value and worth of the man and the woman, even as he says these things he also speaks of *wives submitting to husbands* and of *husbands being the head of their wives as Christ is head of the Church*. In doing this he makes a distinction between the man and the woman. Again, it is not a distinction of worth or value, but a distinction nonetheless.

This distinction that we see between husbands and wives, this “household” distinction as described in Ephesians, is important because in Paul’s letters there is a very close connection between the household which is one’s family and “God’s household” which is the Church, the congregation, the people of God; this is how he describes the church in 1 Timothy 3:15. The pattern of relating in the ONE household (the family) is the pattern of relating in the OTHER household (the congregation).

This is why, as we’ll see later on in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, when Paul is giving out the qualifications for those who would be elders in the church he ties the two “households” together:

He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)

The relationship between the household that is the *family* and the household that is the *church* is so strong that incompetence in the one (the family) is a sure warning of incompetence in the other (the church). Again, in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 we see the same sort of pattern:

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

Notice Paul's language here: treat older men as FATHERS, younger men as BROTHERS, older women as MOTHERS, younger women as SISTERS. The two households, again, are closely related. *The pattern of relating in the one is the pattern of relating in the other.*

So, the theological reason why Paul singles out the men in the area of prayer is simply because in the household of God, just as in their own households, the men are to take the initiative, to lead the way, to set the example for their families, both the family at home and the family that is *the church*. That doesn't mean they will be the only ones praying, but it does mean they should be the FIRST ones praying, not in a temporal sense, but in terms of pattern and example and initiative.

Now the PASTORAL reason for this command, I believe, is a sobering one. Maybe it has something to do with the tendency that men have toward independence, to isolate ourselves and act as if we are self-sufficient. To pray goes against all of that because it is such an admission of *inability* and *weakness* and *vulnerability* and *need* and *dependence*. Maybe it has something to do with that.

But a more solid pastoral reason, perhaps, is something a little more obvious. It is simply this: *the noticeable absence of men in so many of our churches*. The fact is the men are all too often simply not leading the way. To be sure, the men are often *physically present*, they show up in our churches, but that is often *all* that they do, show up. Often there is a serious and inexcusable lack of spiritual initiative when it comes to men, in the home, for sure, but also *in the church*. They will have great energy and initiative for other things, for work and personal projects and interests, and those things are okay but there is seemingly little energy or initiative for spiritual matters, in both their family household and in the household of God. All too often it is the case that when we look at the work being done in churches we find that it is the women, the faithful godly women in many congregations that carry the burden of so many things, and often alone.

I don't point these things out to suggest, in any way, that the women in our churches should stop what they are doing, or be less faithful - heaven forbid! Rather, the point

being made here is simply to ask: *Where are the men?* The pastoral reason Paul highlights this matter of the men praying, instead of fighting and disputing, is because when it came to that sort of spiritual leadership and spiritual initiative, the men were *missing in action*. They were missing in action in their own homes, and they were certainly missing in action in the household of God.

Over the years, I have had a number of occasions now to hear the concerns of Christian wives as they talk of how they long for the day when their husband will take some initiative in the area of spiritual leadership in their home. When one follows along that track for a while, what this almost always means is that the husbands will not initiate family prayers or devotions, they will not initiate prayers with their wives, and they will not take any serious step toward teaching their children the Christian faith, and on and on. Is any of this sounding familiar? It is to ME. As it is in the private home, so it goes in the household of God.

Why is this so hard for us as men? I suspect it has something to do, perhaps a lot to do, with the fact that deep down inside we know what taking the initiative will mean. It will mean seriously engaging with God, through the Word and prayer, and that sort of thing always has consequences. We're going to have to own up to some things. We're going to have to humble ourselves. We're going to have to rethink a lot of decisions we've made and perhaps admit we were wrong, maybe a lot of the time. In short, we know the price tag on this one is big. So, maybe out of fear, or pride, or unbelief, or perhaps all three, we resist taking the initiative.

But men, I'm telling you, not as an expert but as a struggling practitioner, we can trust God with this one too. In the end, the grace and growth and blessing that will come as we take the initiative in both of the households to which we belong, all of those good things will be worth facing up to our fear and pride and unbelief.

But we have to set the pace.
We have to lead the way.
And none of that will happen.....until we begin to pray.

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