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Title: PAUL'S INSTRUCTION FOR WOMEN & MEN IN THE CHURCH

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Today we are continuing in 1 Corinthians. Here we remember that Paul's letter to the Corinthians is divided into 5 major sections. Paul addresses: 1. Chapters 1-4 – divisions in the church 2. Chapters 5-7 – questions about sex and singleness 3. Chapters 8-10 – navigating controversies that kept them from reaching people which included the controversy of meat offered to idols.

Today in chapter 11, we begin the section that deals with the issues concerning worship. This section is a doozy. The subject today is men and women in the church. One author stated that some of the most confusing, misinterpreted statements found in the New Testament are in these verses we are about to read. I would guess that even for those who grew up in the church, you may have never heard a message about this passage. SO here goes.

²“Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you [The KJV says ordinances. TRADITIONS is the more accurate translation. An ordinance is an authoritative order such as water baptism or communion. A tradition is culturally oriented and thus passed down – much like a habit.] ³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. ⁷For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ¹⁰That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹²for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God” (1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

To be honest, I might well have skipped this portion of scripture, except that, early on in our study of 1 Corinthians, I was specifically asked if I'd be preaching on this portion of Scripture. I don't remember my exact answer, BUT... I'm concerned enough that I think I may have said, "Yes." Therefore, I am going to try. This must be one of the more challenging passages I've attempted to preach from. I'm rather sure that I won't likely get an A for content or delivery, BUT... I think I deserve a high grade for effort as I have read and reread this passage, and it is still proving to be a challenging text. I usually have my go-to sources when I struggle with a passage, but most of my go-to sources seem to have skipped this passage. It didn't dawn on me till Friday that I should have given this passage to Pastor Norm, but I knew I wouldn't have appreciated getting such a passage on such short notice if it were given to me. In addition, it would be rather easy to alienate both males and females in sharing from this portion of scripture. People get understandably sensitive when we talk about gender issues in our society because there's been misunderstandings, confusion, and stereotypes around these topics.

We now live in a culture that says all gender distinctions are sociological constructs. Culture seems to say that you can be biological sex HE, but gender identified as HER and vice-versa. Supposedly one can identify as NON-BINARY – they/them. It is my understanding that the context Paul was writing in was even more contentious than ours. (That's somewhat hard to imagine.) On the one hand, you had the Jews, who were uber traditional and patriarchal. On the other side, Corinth was one of the most sexually confused societies in history.

Remember we told you that the word “Corinthianize” in Greek was actually used as a verb: to “Corinthianize” someone meant to sexually corrupt them. Sexual promiscuity was rampant. Historians tells us there was a large gay and lesbian community. Transgenderism was a big thing there, too. Cross-dressing was common for both genders. There was even a division of the gladiator games where women would shave their heads and conceal their femininity and enter the arena as if they were men. That is the context into which Paul says these things.

So, here it is: 1 Corinthians 11. Having read this passage earlier, you already know that it raises a few questions. Today as we explore this section, I want to make a few general observations about the text and about our method for interpreting Scripture in general. And... Then we’ll look at what we can take away from Paul’s words to the Corinthian church in chapter 11.

OBSERVATIONS:

1. The FIRST observation that I want to make - and it’s one I suppose most have heard before – is that **EACH INDIVIDUAL TEXT MUST BE UNDERSTOOD AND INTERPRETED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE.** We can’t just take a random verse out of context and build a belief system on it. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul says that women are to be silent in the church. Some churches still hold to the rule, BUT... In today’s text, in verse 5, Paul said how women should be adorned when they PRAY OR PROPHECY in church. In the book of Acts, on the day of Pentecost, Peter quotes the prophet Joel who said that in the last days God would pour out His Spirit, so that *“your sons AND DAUGHTERS will prophesy,”* and *“even on my servants, both men AND WOMEN, I will pour out my Spirit and they will prophesy”* (Acts 2:17-18). So, before we shush anyone, let’s look at all the Scripture. Before we make a single verse the foundation of any doctrine, we need to first look at the full context of Scripture and weigh it out.

2. A SECOND observation is that in **ALL INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION THERE IS A NUANCE TO TAKE NOTE OF.** Another way to say it is that there is **COMMON SENSE TO CONSIDER.** We find, in the gospels, certain cut-and-dried guidelines to follow. In fact, they’re not mere guidelines, they’re **COMMANDS.** They still require wisdom and nuance and common sense as we put them into practice. For example, Jesus said (Matthew 5:42) – *“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”* When Jesus said this, was He serious? Absolutely. Does this mean, then, that we’re never allowed to set limits for ourselves or boundaries for others? No, it doesn’t. Does it mean we’re obligated to empty our bank accounts and run up our credit cards to the limit every time someone demands something from us? Of course not. When we encounter the direct and explicit commands of Scripture, we need to ask ourselves, through the filter of wisdom and common sense, what does it mean to take this principle seriously, and how do we go about applying it to our lives?

3. A THIRD observation is that **WHEN WE DON’T FULLY UNDERSTAND A PHRASE OF SCRIPTURE, OR EVEN AN ENTIRE PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE, IT’S OKAY TO SAY, “I’M NOT YET SURE ABOUT THIS.”** You may find footnotes throughout Scripture which say something along the lines: The meaning of this word or this phrase is uncertain. Such notes are few and far between, but part of being students of the Word means that we understand that we don’t know everything there is to know about the ancient text. In 1 Corinthians 15:29 Paul makes a puzzling statement: *“Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?”* Baptism for the dead? Is that a thing? It might have been a custom in Corinth but there’s no indication that it was practiced elsewhere, AND... It certainly never caught on and became common practice in the early church. What exactly is Paul talking about? I’m not exactly sure. But... Based on this one verse, we’re not going to add a whole new ritual to our church tradition. This reference falls under the category of “the meaning is uncertain.” There’s another such reference in chapter 11. Paul says... *“That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.”* Because of the angels? What do they have to do with it? Again, I’m not sure. At best we can hazard a guess, but it would only be speculative, not authoritative. Throughout Scripture there are words and phrases whose meaning may not be clear, but there aren’t many. The overwhelming majority of

Scripture is abundantly clear in what we are expected to do and how we are expected to respond. But... When we encounter a topic or a passage that we're unclear about, it's okay to say: "I don't know."

4. Here's a FOURTH (and last) observation for this morning. We see this in both the Old and New Testament. It should not be surprising that **AN ANCIENT DOCUMENT – DATING BACK THOUSANDS OF YEARS – WILL SOMETIMES REFLECT CULTURAL VALUES AND TRADITIONS THAT ARE ANCIENT AS WELL.** Some of those values are no longer relevant in our modern world – BUT... The principles behind them are. In the book of Ruth, when Boaz considered redeeming the land that Naomi's late husband had left to her, he knew that part of the arrangement included taking responsibility for Naomi's son Mahlon's widow, Ruth the Moabite. Today it is NOT common that when you buy a property, you're required to marry the widow. But... This was an ancient custom driven by compassion, with the idea that no one would be left indigent, and that no family heritage would be lost. When we read Scripture, we have to be wary of the danger of presentism. What is presentism? It's the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts. We must avoid this tendency, especially in the study of Scripture. It would be like watching a movie from the 1930s and saying, "This isn't good at all. The sound is awful. The lighting is awful. There's no color ... they should have made their movie look more like the movies of today." Clearly, that wouldn't have been possible 90 years ago. It's the same with our values and ideals. We sometimes make the mistake of expecting that everyone back then should be as fully enlightened as we are today. It's foolish to think this way. So, let's take a closer look at what Paul is saying to the church in Corinth, and let's see what we can learn about what it means to give honor to God with our lives.

I want us to consider three truths taken from today's text that can apply to our lives today.

TRUTHS:

1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IS FUNDAMENTALLY A RELATIONSHIP BUILT ON PROTECTION AND RESPECT. This relationship is symbolized by the VEIL. Some might see the veil – even today, as it is still used in many cultures – as a symbol of inferiority. But... Those in the ancient world would have seen it differently. I hold that this is one of those passages which has a local and temporary significance. Paul said it is wrong for a man to appear at public worship veiled and equally wrong for a woman to appear unveiled. We need to read this chapter in the light NOT of the twenty-first century but of the first century. As we read it, we must remember 3 things: **1. We must remember the place of the veil in the East.** To this day eastern women wear the YASHMAK which is a long veil leaving the forehead and the eyes uncovered but reaching almost to the feet. In Paul's time the eastern veil was even more concealing. In the Dictionary of the Bible, T.W. Davies says, "No respectable woman in an eastern village or city goes out without it, and if she does, she is in danger of being misjudged." The wives and daughters of English and American missionaries have found it best when going out that they wear the veil. The veil was 2 things: It was a sign of inferiority. It was also a great protection. William Ramsay explained it this way – "In oriental lands the veil is the power and honor and dignity of the woman. With a veil on her head, she can go anywhere in security and profound respect. Without the veil the woman is a thing of nought, whom anyone may insult. Should a woman remove her veil, her authority and dignity vanish as well. In the east, any woman without a veil was deemed to have been immoral and loose. So, culturally it was important that any woman be veiled. Can you see where it would have been important, especially in church? The veil made a statement regarding her modesty and chastity. **2. We must remember the status of women in Jewish eyes.** Under Jewish law, a woman was vastly inferior to man. She was created out of Adam's rib (Genesis 2:22, 23), AND... She had been created to be the helpmeet of man (Genesis 2:18). There was a Rabbinic piece of exegesis which said, "God did not form woman out of the head lest she should become proud; nor out of his eye lest she should lust; nor out of his ear lest she become curious; nor out of his mouth lest she become talkative; nor out of his foot lest she should become a wandering busybody; BUT... Out of his rib which was always covered; Therefore, modesty should be her primary quality." It is an unfortunate truth that in Jewish law a woman was a thing and was part of the property of her husband over which he had complete rights of disposal. **3. It must always be remembered**

that this situation arose in Corinth, probably the most licentious city in the world. Paul's point of view was that in such a situation it was far better to err on the side of being too modest and too strict rather than do anything which might either give the heathen a chance to criticize the Christians as being too lax or be a cause of temptation to the Christians themselves. So, I think it safe to say that this passage was intensely relevant to the Church at Corinth, but it has nothing to do with whether or not women should wear hats in church at the present day. Now, it's important to note that when Paul refers to man and woman in this passage, the words he uses in Greek – *aner* and *gune* – are typically translated “husband” and “wife.” Paul is talking about family leadership more than he's talking about society. He's not saying that all women are under the covering of all men; He's referring to the marital/family relationship that exists between individuals (especially husband and wife). And he talks about the importance of a woman praying or prophesying with a covering on her head. He's not speaking symbolically. He's referring to the “yashmak” that most women would have worn in public. The “yashmak” was a symbol of PROTECTION – signifying that the wearer was under the covering of her husband or her father. It was also a symbol of RESPECT – it indicated that the wearer is a woman of chastity and modesty, and she is one who is to be treated as such. Today, in our culture, we might not see the need for the veil or the head covering, and we might be inclined to pick apart the dynamics that existed in ancient relationships ... but here's how we can put the truth Paul is teaching into practice. This is something that all men can do today to all the women they encounter. Every man can treat every woman – and especially every husband can treat his wife, and every father can treat his daughter – with dignity and respect, while offering HIS PROTECTION in whatever way he can. Thus, the male (the husband or father) is to be the protection (the covering) of his wife and daughter. This sermon isn't going to be about how the husband is the master and everyone in the family must obey his every whim. Instead, I'll say that it's the man's job, as a leader, to provide his family with a veil-like covering of dignity, respect, and protection.

2. HEADSHIP AND SUBMISSION DOES NOT EQUAL SUPERIORITY AND INFERIORITY. There's a difference, in this case, between one's role and one's status. Paul makes this clear when he says, *“But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”* When he says that God is the head of Christ, is he saying that Christ is less than God, or somehow inferior to God? Of course not! In the early years of the church, the Arian heresy presented the idea that Christ was a lesser being, created by God, not equal to God. But... That heresy didn't survive. Instead, we see in Scripture that Christ is God's equal: God exists eternally in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Though they are each equally God, one is not greater than the other. Yet each person of the Trinity also performs a certain role within the Godhead. Jesus made it clear that He is God – *“I and the Father are one”* (John 10:30). His religious enemies understood what He was saying, which is why they sought to kill Him, because He claimed to be equal with God (John 5:18). In spite of this equality, Paul would state that the *“head of Christ is God.”* In Chapter 15 he says that the Son (Jesus) will be subject to the Father, so that God may be all in all. Now, when Paul says in verse 3 that *“the head of the woman is man,”* I can hear some people bristle. But I'm going to ask you to turn down your bristler for just a moment and consider what this text is saying. Even though we may serve different roles or positions within the context of the church or the context of the family, no one person is really ever greater than or less than or better than (or subservient to) anyone else. I said at the beginning of this message that this passage may raise a few questions. If it raises questions for you about how this principle of headship should be applied in your life and your marriage and your relationships, then I encourage you to explore it further and study it in greater detail, until, like Paul said in the book of Romans – you are convinced in your own mind what it means to live according to this Biblical principle (Romans 14:5).

3. THE ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN ARE EACH DISTINCT, AND THEY COMPLEMENT (AS IN COMPLETE) ONE ANOTHER. The Bible teaches from the very beginning that God made male and female, and He made them each unique, with their own set of strengths and gifts to offer one another. The Gnostics, whose heresies often invaded the church throughout the early years of Christianity, loved the concept of the androgynous human, and they promoted the blending of gender in such a way that one would be indistinguishable from the other. This was considered a more advanced, more spiritually enlightened way to live. Does this sound

familiar? Paul had said in the book of Galatians – *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (3:28). His point in saying this was that God doesn’t see us as – one race being better than the other, or one social class as being better than the other, or that even one sex is better than the other. Paul is saying that God has removed all the limits of inequality; we are all equal in His eyes. Not identical, but equal. Later in the book of Corinthians, Paul would compare us all to parts of the body – the HAND, the EAR, the EYE, and so on. He says that each member of the body has its own unique role to perform. The same can be said for the relationship between men and women. We are different; we can’t pretend we’re not. And... We need each other. And... We’re here to strengthen each other.

CONCLUSION. In Barclay’s commentary on this text, he said this is one of those passages that has a purely local and temporary significance. We must read it, he says, not in light of this century, but with an understanding of the first century. Paul was writing to a church in a specific time and place, and not everything he said has a modern-day equivalent in application. But... The truths he brought to light will always have relevance in our daily lives. As a society and as a church – even as families – we may still be finding our way when it comes to the roles we perform in the context of our relationships. But I can tell you this: the role of the man will always be to treat his family with dignity and respect, and to be the source of protection they need. Men, you’re the veil the “yashmak” your family needs. This doesn’t mean that anyone – in the church or in the family – is less than anyone else because we’re all one in Christ. We’re equal, even if our roles differ. Though we’re different from one another, we need each other. And THAT WILL NEVER CHANGE!