

1 Timothy 2:11-12 A Sermon

[Scott Lindsay](#)

For quite some time now, futurists, like Toffler, Naisbitt, Sweet and others have been telling us, through such popular and not-so-popular books as *Future Shock*, *Megatrends*, and *Soul Tsunami* that the world is changing - which is no great discovery. However, they have also been telling us that the rate of change is changing - which is perhaps not as widely recognized. What writers mean by this is that the tremendous amount of change that once happened over the space of, say, 200 years - that same degree of change and revolution is now happening much more quickly - over a space of, say 50 years or 30 years.... or less. As a result, living in this opening decade of the 21st century can be a fairly disorienting experience - for both individuals as well as whole societies. As another writer has put it: we are living in "The Age of Redefinition."

Among all the various aspects of our culture that are changing and being re-defined, even as we speak - aspects such as family, work, marriage, politics, values - surely one of the most obvious arenas in which a great deal of redefinition has been taking place, in addition to the ones just named, is the whole matter of gender and roles and relationships. And, to be sure, much of the change and redefinition that has gone on in this area has been a good and right and helpful thing. Serious inequities and injustices, mostly against women - in the home, in government, in the court systems, and in the workplace - serious injustices in all these areas and more have been, and continue to be addressed - and rightly so.

However, not all that has gone on has been good. In the rush to embrace many helpful changes in attitudes and actions there are signs that we have gone too far. And the level of disorientation that this has produced, and is producing, in our culture is palpable. The problem is that, in working to right some very real wrongs and in trying to extinguish various illegitimate distinctions between men and women, we have pushed the pendulum so far the other way that the trend now is to *deny any and all* distinctions between men and women. In short, we have "overcorrected" and in so doing are very much like the person whose car begins to skid and spin in one direction, who then responds by turning the wheel so hard in the other direction that he moves out of one spin and straight into another one.

Now this is not the first time these kinds of issues have surfaced. Indeed, much of what has been going on in our culture parallels some of the experiences of the early church, specifically with regard to women. If you have any knowledge of history then you will know that the stature of women in pre-Christian times was not at all flattering. In many earlier cultures the women were regarded as little more than possessions, and were not valued for who they were in themselves as much as for what they could provide. Education was forbidden to all except for a very elite few.

Further examples of the disparity that existed can be seen by looking at particular cultures, almost at random, like, for example, the Jewish culture where women were relegated to the outer courts of the Temple - not permitted to come any closer. Additionally, they could be divorced and essentially abandoned for no reason at all, with no means of protection by the justice system. Indeed, their testimony was not even accepted in a court of law. And the list goes on and on.....

Now thinking about the Jewish culture in particular is important because it was into that sort of context that Jesus came. By his teaching and example he showed that he valued women in a way that was extremely counter-cultural. He spoke to them, reasoned with them, encouraged them, healed them, forgave them and in general interacted with them in a way which was quite unlike those around him. And the same was true of his Apostles, including the Apostle Paul. Following in his Master's footsteps, Paul interacted greatly with the women of his day. A number of them became his staunchest supporters in ministry and, not surprisingly, he refers to them as "co-workers" in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, seen through the lens of our 21st century glasses these things do not seem to be of any great moment - but let me assure you that such behavior, in that day and age, was extremely radical.

Indeed, the message of the Gospel was, for everyone in general and for women in particular, a revolutionary, counter-cultural message. It was a liberating truth. And the response to the news back then is paralleled, in many ways, by what has been taking place in our own culture today. In Paul's day, in their enthusiasm to embrace their new-found freedom in Christ some had gone too far - especially in Ephesus and Corinth. In their effort to throw off illegitimate distinctions between men and women which should have been thrown off, they nevertheless went too far in the other direction so as to deny legitimate, divinely established gender and role distinctions. To use the previous analogy, they came out of one spin and went right into another one.

The result was that it was "open season" in the church - anything and everything was up for grabs. Roles and relationships that had previously been regarded as distinctive for women were being questioned and abandoned (e.g., being a wife) and, at the same time, roles that had previously been distinctive to men were being sought (teaching and authority positions) by the women as well. Amidst all this upheaval, and with so much false teaching going around in Ephesus, the effect of all this was to undermine the order and structure of the Ephesian church. As a result, Paul sets out here to respond to these things and through such response, to promote the good order and functioning of the church.

Now, as we have seen in previous weeks, this has been Paul's over-riding purpose in his letter - and he has approached it by firstly tackling the issues of false teachers and false teaching and now by addressing them on the matter of how they should conduct themselves when they are together as the gathered community of God's people. In addressing this latter subject matter, we have so far seen Paul discussing the matter of prayer in a fairly general fashion in verses 1-7, he then begins to make some gender

specific comments, also related to the Christian gathering - firstly about the men in vs 8, and then the ladies in verses 9-10.

Which brings us to the section we will be beginning this morning, verses 11-15. Now, in this final section of chapter 2 Paul continues his comments regarding the women in the church and is, in many ways, expanding on what he has already said in verse 10 where he speaks to the women about adorning themselves with good works. Verses 11 and 12 in particular help to further illustrate - at least partly - the sort of thing Paul had in mind when he talked about “good works” and about the women devoting themselves to doing what was “appropriate for women who professed to worship God....”

Now because the matters addressed here are ones which are fairly controversial - at least in our cultural context - and because there is a great deal packed into these few verses, we are going to need more than one sermon to think through these things. And so, the way I am going to proceed is to focus this morning on verses 11-12, and then I will divide up the remaining 3 verses as they need to be. So don't expect that we will get it all covered today - we won't - but hang in there. Hopefully, questions you may have which are not addressed in this particular message will be addressed at some point over the next few weeks. If not, please feel free to talk with me and I will try and answer your questions, or else point you in the direction of someone who can. With that as an introduction, let's read passage, and then we'll pray and dig in.

At first glance, it would seem that there is not a great deal to discuss when looking at verses 11-12. Paul does not use language that is difficult to understand and the meaning of the text would seem to be fairly obvious. However, in spite of the straightforward nature of these verses, the recent history of the interpretation of this passage would indicate that, at least in modern times, it has been regarded as anything but straightforward. Of course, the fact that some people have considered a passage to be unclear does not mean it IS. The alleged lack of clarity may not be a reflection on the passage at all but simply a reflection of the person *reading* the passage. Still, the level of debate on these verses, and the subject matter itself, are sufficient for us to take the time to look at these things carefully, trying not to assume too much. But there is a caution we must take to heart as we begin.

As has already been suggested, a great deal of ink has been spilled, and many forests felled, as these verses have been frequently dissected and debated, especially in recent decades. And this is understandable, to a degree, because there is a great deal at stake here. And as these verses have been scrutinized, much of the discussion has centered upon the meaning and use of particular words. Now there is nothing wrong with that. Words are important. We DO need to be careful in how we handle the Bible and that means being careful with words. This is what Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15, when he says he wants him to “do his best to present himself as a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth....”

So, words are important. We need to look at them, and we will. However, even as we do, we need to acknowledge, as Jensen observes, that there is a point where studying

and debating about words ceases to be an act of obedience and becomes an act of disobedience. And that is because of the nature of words - they are very fluid and, as such, can have a great diversity of meaning. As a result, because this is the way human language is, there is an almost “endless capacity for creating arguments over the meaning of certain words.” (Jensen)

Which is why Paul, while wanting Timothy to handle correctly the word of truth - on the other side of things also warns Timothy about not carrying this too far. As Jensen points out, 2 Timothy 2:15 needs to be read in the context of 2 Timothy 2:14, which reads, “Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.” So, Paul tells Timothy to handle the word of God carefully but *only after* he has warned him about the danger of quarreling over words and causing ruin among those who are involved in such things.

And so, we need to heed Paul’s warning. Because there comes a point when our arguing about words becomes, in reality, a smokescreen - *a convenient way to avoid doing what the Bible tells us to do because we don’t like what it says.*

That being said, let me define what our limited objectives will be in the time we have remaining. As we focus on verses 11 -12, the three main questions we will be addressing are: 1) What does Paul mean when he says he wants a women to learn in quietness and full submission? 2) What is the significance of the phrase “I do not permit” and 3) What does it mean to say that a woman is not to teach or have authority over a man?

For starters, what does it mean to say that a woman should learn in “quietness” and “full submission”? Now, before we wrestle with the words “quietness” and “full submission,” I don’t want you to miss the very positive implications of the words which precede them: “A woman should LEARN....” Now, falling on our contemporary ears that doesn’t sound all that remarkable. In fact, it may even sound condescending. Yet if we remember the circumstances in which these words would have been first read, then we would realize that they are really quite revolutionary.

In a culture where education was, sadly, considered to have been WASTED on the female, to speak in a way which simply assumes that the women will be learning and ought to be learning is a HUGE leap forward. Indeed, some of Christianity’s critics who argue that the Christian religion has been the great oppressor of women, frankly, haven’t the foggiest idea what they are talking about and regularly ignore the revolutionary implications of passages such as this for women in that day and age. And yet, as important as this is, the emphasis in this verse is not on the fact of learning but on the *manner* of a woman’s learning - in quietness and full submission. What does Paul mean by these words?

Well, when you want to understand what a writer intends by using a particular word there are several things you can do. For starters, you can go to a dictionary and there you will find a range of possible meanings for any given word. Some words have a wide

range and others a very narrow, technical range. But going to a dictionary is, most of the time, never enough since, contrary to popular belief, a dictionary cannot usually tell you what a given word means in a given sentence. It can only tell you what the options are, or typically have been, for that word. It can only tell you how other people have used that word, but that doesn't guarantee that the word is being used that way in the sentence before you at the moment.

In addition to looking at the possible uses of a word, you can look at whether or not there are other words that are used to express a similar or related idea. In other words, sometimes knowing what other words could have been used by a writer - but were not - can help you to narrow down the possibilities for what the writer was intending. So, for example, in the English language there is one word for "snow." And so, when English writers want to write about snow they have one choice which they can then modify with other words around it. However, in the language of the Eskimo people, there are at least 8 different words for "snow." There's a word that means wet snow, and a word that means very dry snow and a word that refers to snow of a certain size or shape, etc. And so, when an Eskimo writer talks about snow you can learn something about what he or she intends by simply knowing all the other words that weren't used.

Now, once you know what a word CAN mean, and what other words were available to the author (if any), you may know some things but ultimately, you see, the only way to know what a word means in any given instance is to see how the various possible meanings fit in with the other words around it and with the flow and thrust of the passage in which the word in question is found.

And so, keeping all these things in mind we need to think about the words for "quietness" and "full submission" - what the possibilities for meaning are and what meaning seems most likely when you look at the context. In verse 11, the Greek word there (HNSUKIA) is translated by the NIV as "quietness" and then, in verse 12, the same word is translated as "silence." And the natural question is, why would the translators do this? Why not translate it either as "quietness" in both places or as "silent" or "silence" in both places? Because it does make a difference. If the women are merely to learn in *quietness*, that does not rule out the possibility of speaking. If however, she is to be silent, then she is not to say anything at all. Well, the short answer to those questions is that I think the NIV translators are sitting on the fence with this one and, as a result, have produced a translation that doesn't actually help very much. So what does Paul mean? Is he talking about silence, or is he talking about quietness?

Well, looking at the immediate context, we see that Paul links this word with a word that has a pretty narrow range of meaning - the word translated as "full submission" which is almost exclusively used to denote the appropriate, voluntary response of a person to one who stands over him/her in a position of authority. It is used to describe the submission of all Christians to God the Father (Heb 12:9), of Christians to civil government (Rom 13:1), and of wives to husbands (Eph 5:21-22). As such, it would seem that linking a word which can mean either "silence" or "quietness" with a word that speaks of submission would suggest that the emphasis is not so much on whether or

not any words are spoken but rather, in context, the emphasis is on the relationship and attitude within which the woman's learning is to take place. It is describing an attitude of quietness, a willing receptivity to that which is being taught as opposed to fighting against it and resisting it. Such an attitude does not at all preclude speech. And yet, it must be said that it is not merely external quietness that Paul has in view here since, after all, a person might appear to be quiet and receptive on the outside but be absolutely raging within. So, Paul is concerned here with both the internal attitude as well as the external behavior.

Now, the fact that Paul must mean "quietness" as opposed to silence is also seen if we look at the even wider context of his other letters such as, for example I Corinthians 11 where he talks hypothetically about the manner in which women might pray or prophesy in a corporate setting. Paul's assumption there is clearly NOT that women were to be silent in the church gatherings and so, unless he suffered from sort of theological schizophrenia, he cannot mean silence here.

So, Paul does NOT want women to be silent in the churches, which is reflected well in the ESV translation. But he does want them to learn with an attitude of quietness and submission. Whatever their freedom in Christ meant, it most certainly did not mean they were free to abandon or lose sight of legitimate authority structures which God had established.

To be sure, having an attitude of quietness may, at times, involve not speaking, but it is ultimately about more than that. It's about speaking when it is appropriate and restraining oneself when it is not. It is about "coming to an end of your words," as Jensen says, and accepting the fact there are times and places and circumstances where nothing more is or ought to be said.

Now, I might add at this point that learning in quietness and full submission is not only the responsibility of the women in the congregation, it is, ultimately, the responsibility of every believer. Men and women both are to have an attitude of submission to the authoritative teaching that goes on in the Church - a point which the NT makes clear in other places (e.g. 1 Pet. 5:5; Heb. 13:7). However, it is not the men that Paul is addressing at this point but rather the women, and specifically, those women who had taken the very legitimate message of their equal worth and status in the Gospel and applied it in illegitimate ways - over-correcting and over applying one truth in a way which caused them to deny other, equally, legitimate truths, namely those that had to do with how God wanted his people to relate to one another.

The second issue that seems to surface fairly frequently in discussions of these verses has to do with the words at the beginning of verse 12 where Paul says, "I do not permit..." The reason for the debate is that some people want to say that this kind of language indicates that what he says in verse 12 is simply an example of personal preference and not a command that is binding for the church in every age.

Well, let's think about this a bit further, firstly by noting that there are other places in the NT where Paul takes a similar approach, speaking in the first person to express a desire or command. And in these other places it is clear that what he says is not merely preferential but is intended as applicable and binding for all Christians, in every age....

For example,

Rom 12:1 - *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship....* Paul is not presenting this idea of "life as worship" in a kind of take-it-or-leave-it sort of fashion, is he? NO! We understand that the truths expressed here are not only applicable for the Roman church in the first century but will always be applicable for God's people. And I know of no writer that has ever disputed that sort of interpretation of this passage.

1 Cor 4:14-17 - *I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the Gospel. Therefore, I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere, in every church....* Again, in this, and in many other passages, Paul speaks in the first person, talking about what he desires or commands. But the thing that he says is clearly not intended simply as an expression of his personal approach to a certain matter.

"Well then," someone might interject, "Even if you accept that this is not merely Paul's personal preference but IS a command, it still has little to do with me because he was only dealing with a particular historical circumstance that has nothing to do with the church today."

To be sure, a number of writers have tried to argue this point but, can I just say, *there is nothing terribly clever about pointing out that Paul was addressing people in specific circumstances.* OF COURSE HE WAS! How could he do otherwise? Paul was writing letters, not term papers. As Douglas Moo writes,

Almost the entire NT is written to specific circumstances but this does not necessarily mean that what is written applies ONLY to those circumstances. For instance, Paul develops his doctrine of justification by faith in Galatians in response to some specific false teachers who were misleading a specific group of Christians in a specific place. But the specific nature of these circumstances in no way limits the applicability of his teaching. Nobody questions the on-going validity of the doctrine of justification by faith. So, we might say that the circumstances give RISE to his teaching but they do not LIMIT it. ... Therefore, the question to be

asked of 1 Tim 2:12 is not, "...is it written to people in specific circumstances "...Of course it is. The question is: Is there any biblical, contextual reason to limit its application TO those circumstances, and only those circumstances?

We'll be answering that particular question next week, Lord willing. However it is enough to say this morning that pointing out that Paul was writing to people in particular circumstances is not an especially helpful observation to make and, by itself, proves absolutely nothing.

But there's a further point to be made here with regard to this sort of objection being raised to what Paul is saying. And it has to do with one's whole approach to and view of the Bible. Because, you see, as you are reading Paul here, you always have to keep in mind who it is that is speaking and in what capacity he is doing so. When Paul says things like "I permit" or "I do not permit" or "I want" or "I urge" - whenever he says those things *he does so as an apostle of God*. He says it as one through whom God has sovereignly chosen to speak. That's what apostles do.

So, to take the view that this is mere opinion and personal preference is to ignore Paul's self-conscious understanding that he was God's Apostle and that therefore his words carried the imprimatur of God. To take any other view is to take a view of Scripture which says that only some of the Bible is inspired and authoritative and means, ultimately, that you might as well write the Bible yourself. As James Hurley points out,

By adopting such a stance [that these words are merely Paul's opinion] we have set ourselves as the judges of Scripture and as the ones who have the right to determine when the words of the apostle are authoritative [and when they are not]. We thus claim to stand over the Bible rather than under it. If we may judge [Paul's] understanding ... to be error at this point of application ... there is no reason why we should not do so at other points as well.

At the end of the day, then, to dismiss these verses of Scripture on the basis of the words, "I do not permit" is a fairly "desperate attempt to avoid the implications of these words" (Jensen), and cannot be reasonably defended.

The third question is: What does Paul mean when he says he does not permit a woman to "teach or exercise authority over a man"? These are certainly the most difficult of Paul's words here. *Not so much because they are hard to understand but because they are hard to accept*. Still, in spite of the fairly obvious meaning of these words, some comments are helpful.

Firstly, there is the word translated as "to teach" (*didaskhein*). This word is the usual one for describing the activity by which God's truth and its implications are communicated and applied to believers. It is helpful to remember, at this point, that the Bible also recognizes a corresponding gift associated with the activity of teaching. And so, when

the Bible talks about the activity of teaching God's people, it has in view not teaching on any and every subject matter, but rather the specific teaching of God's truth - either expositionally or topically - and, further, it recognizes that not everyone is called TO or gifted FOR this task.

This is worth reflecting on, if only for a moment, because what is often overlooked in the debate over the meaning of 1 Tim 2:12 is that while Paul does here prohibit women from teaching men in matters of Scripture or doctrine, the truth is that because teaching is a gift, and one that is not given to everybody in the body of Christ, then while Paul prohibits women from teaching men in these areas, *the vast majority of men in the church are also prohibited from teaching other men and women in these areas*. That is, being male does not, in itself, qualify a person to teach in the body of Christ. As James 3:1 says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

Returning to the verse again we see that the prohibition on women's teaching is not a general one. It is not ALL teaching that is prohibited but only one kind of teaching - the teaching of men. That is, they are free to teach other women, they are free to teach young people, and they are, by implication, free to teach men in those areas which are not doctrinal or exegetical in nature. Now more needs to be said about this, but let me ask you to be patient as we will come back to it at a later point.

For now we need to turn our attention to the other half of Paul's prohibition where he says he does not permit a woman to teach "... or exercise authority over a man... ". As you might expect, a certain amount of debate has taken place over the significance of the main word in that phrase, which is translated as "have authority over" (*authentain*). Most of the difficulty lies in the fact that this is the ONLY time in the NT that this particular word is used. Because it is only used once in the Bible we cannot turn to other biblical writers but must, instead, look at other Greek writings that appeared on or around the same time as Paul's letter to Timothy to see how the word was used by others in that culture. When we do we discover that in the vast majority of cases it is used in this same sense of "having authority over" someone or something.

Now there are a very few occasions where the word is used to mean not so much "have authority over" as "to domineer" someone, and it is this very rare usage of the word that some writers have seized upon as Paul's intention here. If that were the case, then the passage would read, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to domineer a man".

However, if you DID translate the word in that way, it would be possible, although not very convincingly so, to conclude that a woman might be in a position of authority over a man as long as she was careful not to domineer him. But this is where we have to remember our grammar lesson at the beginning. You don't get the meaning of a word by searching among all the options and then choosing the one that suits you best. You must always ultimately determine the meaning of a word by its context.

So, besides the fact that the meaning “to domineer” is an extremely obscure and unlikely translation for this word, the fact is that the context does not support the idea of “domineer”. Paul’s instruction in verse 11 regarding “full submission” makes it very difficult to accommodate the translation “domineer” but goes quite naturally with the translation “have authority over”. Additionally, when we look at verses 13-15 over the next couple weeks we will see that those verses also do not support the idea of “domineer.”

Another approach to verse 12 has been to tie the two ideas of “teaching” and “having authority over” together such that what Paul was prohibiting was “authoritative teaching” which, so the argument goes, leaves the door open for women to teach men as long as it is not in an authoritative way - that is, while holding some sort of office or position of authority in the church. However, as Douglas Moo points out, the ideas of teaching and authority cannot be tied together in such a manner. He writes,

This is because if it was only AUTHORITATIVE teaching that Paul was worried about he could have just said “I do not permit a woman to teach a man” as teaching, by nature, is an authoritative act.

In other words, what Moo is saying is that there is no such thing as “non-authoritative” teaching. To stand before others and teach something is to necessarily assume a position of some kind of authority. This is true with any subject matter but is even more true when it involves the teaching of something like Scripture which is itself inspired by God.

Douglas Moo then goes on to say that the reason Paul mentions both “teaching” and “having authority over” is because, while every act of teaching is, by definition, an authoritative act, not all exercising of authority in the church is through teaching. Even further, Paul treats the two tasks as distinct elsewhere in 1 Timothy when discussing the work of elders in the church (3:2, 4-5; 5:17). And so, Paul mentions both activities here because it is his intention to prohibit the women from conducting either activity in relation to the men. This, too, is something that we will find further support for in the verses which follow.

Now, that’s as far as we will go this morning. And I suspect that for some of you, perhaps for many of you, this sort of discussion will stir a number of questions and emotions. I understand that. And this is only exacerbated by the fact that the surrounding culture, and indeed large portions of the evangelical church, seems to have already made up its mind on this matter. Even further, your own personal experiences of being sinned against in just this area can make this sort of discussion hard to cope with. I understand that too.

However, all those things notwithstanding, can I please ask that you patiently and prayerfully and charitably consider the possibility that our society and even many of our churches have lost their bearings on this issue? Will you at least entertain the possibility that the church’s capitulation to cultural pressure in this area is yet another example of

the church being conformed to the patterns of the world, when it OUGHT to be confronting and challenging the world on these very issues?

The world wants to say, there is no difference between men and women. God says, through his apostle, that there is. The world says “equal means identical.” God says, “equal, and yet different.” What sorts of good deeds are appropriate for women who profess to worship God? Paul, the Apostle of God, tells us they are, among other things, to learn in quietness and full submission and to refrain from teaching or having authority over a man. That’s what God, through Paul, says. Next week we’ll begin looking at the BASIS for this teaching.

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