

Manhood & Womanhood Conflict and Confusion After the Fall

John Piper

Genesis 3:16 and 4:7

To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you....If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Last week we focused our attention on Genesis 1:27. This is the utterly important foundation for understanding what it means to be human, especially what it means to be human as male and female. "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Moses adds the words "male and female" to make sure that no one makes the mistake of thinking that the word MAN in this verse ("He created man in His own image") refers only to the male human and not to the female human.

Genesis 5:1-2 makes the same point: "This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man (Adam), He made him in the likeness of God. Male and female He created them, and He blessed them and named them Man (Adam) when they were created." So the clear teaching of Genesis is that human beings, both male and female, are utterly unlike all other creatures because humans alone are in the image and likeness of God - both male and female.

Then I said last week that if God created us in his image AS MALE AND FEMALE, that implies equality of personhood, equality of dignity, mutual respect, harmony, complementarity, and a unified destiny.

Equality of personhood means that a man is not less a person than a woman because he has hair on his chest like a gorilla, and woman is not less a person because she has no hair on her chest like a fish. They are equal in their personhood and their differences don't change that basic truth.

Equality of dignity means that they are to be equally honored as humans in the image of God. Peter says (in 1 Peter 2:17) "honor all," that is, all humans. There is an honor to be paid to persons simply because they are humans. There is even an honor that we owe to the most despicable of criminals, like a Ted Bundy, just because he is a human and not a dog. And that honor belongs to male and female equally.

Mutual respect means that men and women should be equally zealous to respect and honor each other. Respect should never flow just one direction. Created in the image of God, male and female should look at each other with a kind of awe that is tempered but not destroyed by sin.

Harmony means that there should be peaceful cooperation between men and women. We should find ways to oil the gears of our relationships so that there is teamwork and rapport and mutual helpfulness and joy.

Complementarity means that the music of our relationships should not be merely the sound of singing in unison. It should be the integrated sound of soprano and bass, alto and tenor. It means that the differences of male and female will be respected and affirmed and valued. It means that male and female will not try to duplicate each other, but will highlight in each other the unique qualities that make for mutual enrichment.

Finally, unified destiny means that male and female, when they come to faith in Christ, are "fellow heirs of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7). We are destined for an equal enjoyment of the revelation of the glory of God in the age to come.

So in creating human beings as male and female in His image, God had something wonderful in mind. He still has it in mind. And in Jesus Christ He means to redeem this vision from the ravages of sin.

We looked very briefly last week at what sin did to the relationship between men and women. I want to clarify that further this morning. Originally I had planned only to touch on this and spend most of our time on the vision of manhood and womanhood before the fall. But the message took a different turn and what I'm doing now is setting the stage to unfold this pre-fall vision of manhood and womanhood next week. I want you to sense very keenly what the conflict is between men and women and how great the confusion is today about what it means to be a man or a woman.

Let's look at Genesis 3:16. Adam and Eve have both sinned against God. They have distrusted his goodness and turned away from him to depend on their own wisdom for how to be happy. So they rejected His word and they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God calls them to account and now describes to them what the curse will be on human life because of sin. In Genesis 3:16 God says to the woman, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, and your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

This is a description of the curse. It is a description of misery, not a model for marriage. This is the way it's going to be in history where sin has the upper hand. But what is really being said here? What is the nature of this ruined relationship after sin?

The key comes from recognizing the connection between the last words of this verse (3:16b) and the last words of Genesis 4:7. Here God is warning Cain about his resentment and anger against Abel. God tells him that sin is about to get the upper hand in his life. Notice at the end of the verse 7: "Sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it (literally: you shall rule over it)."

The parallel here between 3:16 and 4:7 is amazingly close. The words are virtually the same in Hebrew, but you can see this in the English as well. In 3:16 God says to the woman, "Your desire is for your husband, and he shall rule over you." In 4:7 God says to Cain, "Sin's desire is for you, and you shall rule over it."

Now the reason this is important to see is that it shows us more clearly what is meant by "desire." When 4:7 says that sin is crouching at the door of Cain's heart (like a lion, Genesis 49:9) and that its desire is for him, it means that sin wants to overpower him. It wants to defeat him and subdue him and make him the slave of sin.

Now when we go back to 3:16 we should probably see the same meaning in the sinful desire of woman. When it says, "Your desire shall be for your husband," it means that when sin has the upper hand in woman she will desire to overpower or subdue or exploit man. And when sin has the upper hand in man he will respond in like manner and with his strength subdue her, or rule over her.

So what is really described in the curse of 3:16 is the ugly conflict between the male and female that has marked so much of human history. Maleness as God created it has been depraved and corrupted by sin. Femaleness as God created it has been depraved and corrupted by sin. The essence of sin is self-reliance and self-exaltation. First in rebellion against God, and then in exploitation of each other.

So the essence of corrupted maleness is the self-aggrandizing effort to subdue and control and exploit women for its own private desires. And the essence of corrupted femaleness is the self-aggrandizing effort to subdue and control and exploit men for its own private desires. And the difference is found mainly in the different weaknesses that we can exploit in one another.

As a rule men have more brute strength than women and so they can rape and abuse and threaten and sit around and snap their finger. It's fashionable to say those sorts of things today. But it's just as true that women are sinners. We are in God's image male and female; and we are depraved, male and female. Women may not have as much brute strength as men but she knows ways to subdue him. She can very often run circles around him with her words and where her words fail she knows the weakness of his lust.

If you have any doubts about the power of sinful woman to control sinful man just reflect for a moment on the number one marketing force in the world - the female body. She can sell anything because she knows the universal weakness of man and how to control him with it. The exploitation of women by sinful men is conspicuous because it is often harsh and violent. But a moment's reflection will show you that the exploitation of men by sinful women is just as pervasive in our society. The difference is that our sinful society sanctions the one perversity and not the other. (There are societies that do just the opposite.)

This is not the way God meant it to be before sin, when man and woman were dependent on him for how to live. This is the result of rebellion against God. How then did God mean it to be? What was the relationship between Adam and Eve supposed to look like before sin entered the world?

We've seen part of the answer. They were created in the image of God according to Genesis 1:27 and so the relationship they have was supposed to be governed by equality of personhood, equality of dignity, mutual respect, harmony, complementarity, and a unified destiny. But that's only part of the answer. It's like saying to a man and woman ballet dancer: Remember, you are both equally accomplished dancers; you are equally regarded among your peers; you must seek harmonious execution; you must complement each other's moves; and don't forget you will share the applause together.

That kind of counsel is very important and will deeply affect the beauty of the performance. But if that's all they know about the dance they're about to perform, they won't be able to do it. They have to know the movements. They have to know their different positions. They have to know who will fall and who will catch. Who will run and who will stand. It is of the very essence of dance and drama that the players know the distinct movements they must make. If they don't know their different assignments on the stage there will be no drama, no dance.

And so we have to ask this: in the drama of life between man and woman before the fall did God mean for some responsibilities to fall heavier on the one than the other? Both should show equal respect we said; but are they supposed to show it in just the same way? Both should seek peace and harmony by mutually serving each other; but is the form of this service to look just the same for the man and the woman?

I want to try to unfold a vision of Biblical complementarity and harmony in the weeks to come. I'm convinced that the Bible does teach that men have unique God-given responsibilities toward women and women have unique God-given responsibilities toward men. These responsibilities are not identical, and they are not dependent on our gifts. They are based on our manhood and womanhood as God designed us to be. And they are not limited to mere biological functions in the process of reproduction.

These different responsibilities go right to the heart of the meaning of manhood and womanhood as God created us to be. But they are under tremendous attack today. They have been for some time. And the result in our culture is mass confusion.

I would guess that probably two generations of men and women have been raised in this country without a positive vision of what it means to be male or female. We have been told many negative things - things we ought not to be, things we are to be liberated from.

For example, manhood is not sexual exploitation. Manhood is not cool, rational unemotionalism. Manhood is not the ruthless task-oriented drive to conquer. Etc. So be liberated, men! On the other hand womanhood is not boring domesticity. Womanhood is not homebound motherhood. Womanhood is not mindless emotionalism. Womanhood is not sexual compliance. Etc. So be liberated, women!

But when all our talk is done about what manhood and womanhood is NOT, what have we got? A big void of confusion about what they are. Frustrating, guilt-producing, destructive confusion. And with it a tidal wave of homosexuality, an epidemic of divorce, an increase of violent crime, growing domestic abuse, and tens of thousands of suicides every year, 75% of whom are men. (In 1981 there were 27,500 suicides in America of which 75% were men.)

It is simply an abdication of our moral and spiritual responsibility to tell young people to avoid negative stereotypes and then not give them a positive, practical, Biblical vision of what it means to be a man and or a woman. And one of the reasons we abdicate our responsibility is because it is the path of least resistance. It's easy to tear down negative stereotypes; but it's hard and risky work to rebuild the positive archetype.

No one will criticize you if you poke holes in ugly stereotypes of manhood and womanhood. That's a very safe and customary pastime. But a hundred people wait to be your judge if you try to develop a positive vision for your daughters of what it means to be feminine, or for your sons of what it means to be masculine. And so by and large we don't do it. And we leave them confused - telling them what its not but not telling them what it is.

Over the nine years of my pastorate here I have counseled dozens and dozens of couples seeking to be married. My experience has been that it is rare indeed to find a young couple who have a clear vision of what it means to be a Christian husband and a Christian wife. By and large couples will readily admit that they don't know whether being male or female implies any special God-given responsibilities. Or, if they think there are some special responsibilities, they generally don't know what they are. And that confusion has ominous implications for the stability of marriage and the way the children will be prepared for life as male and female.

I mention this just to highlight the challenge before us as a church. God has a vision for a redeemed manhood and womanhood. He wants us to recover what we've lost because of sin. And so next week I want to begin to reconstruct from God's Word as best I can the shattered vision of manhood and womanhood that God ordained before the fall and that he is calling us to recover through Jesus Christ. I ask for your prayers and for your very serious consideration of these things. What we are as male and female goes to the heart of our personal identity. If we are confused here, the repercussions will be very profound and pervasive.