# SERMON SERIES: PROBLEMATIC PASSAGES

**“Was Paul A Jerk Toward Women?”**

## *1st Corinthians 14:34-35*

*1st Timothy 2:11-13*

We’re nearing the conclusion of our sermon series titled “Problematic Passages,” in which we’ve been exploring some Scripture verses that prove challenging, confusing, or which raise a lot of questions we struggle to answer. Next week will be our final message, but I do hope to do a follow-up series sometime in the future.

As we’ve made our way through this series, we’ve picked up some tools to help us interpret and understand problematic passages. We’ve said that we should always allow Scripture to interpret Scripture―that is, discover if key words or phrases appear elsewhere in the Bible and use those instances to interpret the troublesome verses. We should make us of biblical resources such as commentaries, dictionaries, study aids, and the Internet (with caution!), drawing upon the research of others to aid us. We should always determine what’s at stake in the passage―whether it’s crucial to our faith and how we live, or something that doesn’t carry as much weight. We should consider all the evidence that’s available on our passage, including historical, social, cultural, political and religious background information. And we must always remember to pray, stay humble, and maintain a teachable spirit.

Thus far in our series we’ve looked at verses in Genesis on the Nephilim and the sons of God, at the question of whether or not God created evil; and last Sunday we explored why the pacifist Jesus instructed his disciples to buy swords. This morning we turn our attention to a thorny issue that continues to plague the church to this day: was the apostle Paul really a jerk toward women? We have two Scripture readings that seem to answer in the affirmative. Let’s find both: 1st Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1st Timothy 2:11-13.

We’ll begin in ancient Corinth. As you likely know, the church at Corinth had a lot of problems. Within the congregations there was fighting and factions, arrogance and apathy, sexual misconduct and lawsuits, abuses of the Lord’s Supper, and a lack of order in worship. It’s the last one that forms the context for our first Scripture reading.

*34Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says.  35If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings.*

Let’s unpack this beginning with the context. Chapters 11 through 14 are one long argument about propriety and order in worship. Paul addressed the Lord’s Supper as well as the use of spiritual gifts, including those of prophecy and tongues. In this midst of this is chapter 13―the beautiful passage on love―which Paul used to show the Corinthians that love should be the abiding principle that governed all their actions in worship.

Many of the Corinthian Christians thought of themselves as spiritually superior to others in the church. They believed they had “arrived” at the summit of the spiritual mountain, and were therefore too good to listen to Paul or treat their fellow believers with respect. It would seem that their worship services had degenerated into mass confusion with lots of people talking over each other all the time. ***We need to remember that worship in the first century AD church was completely different than what we’re used to. At that time there wasn’t an ordained leader, choirs, bulletins or a set order of worship. Believers came together and shared words―hopefully inspired by the Holy Spirit―that were to strengthen and build up the church.*** But instead of a respectable, orderly format of sharing, the spiritually arrogant were monopolizing worship.

Paul used chapter 14 to explain that the gift of prophecy was greater and more desirable than speaking in tongues. Prophecy, he said, were utterances in understandable language that benefited the whole church. Tongues, on the other hand, when used in corporate worship, should always be accompanied by interpretation so the whole church could understand what was being said. Otherwise, Paul encouraged the use of tongues in private prayer since it’s primarily for the edification of the speaker. Paul wasn’t saying that one spiritual gift was better than the other nor was he saying that only one had a place in worship. His focus was on orderly worship wherein everyone had the chance to participate and share if they desired.

Then we find our Scripture reading: *34Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says.  35If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings.* What are we to make of these two verses?

Let’s allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. In 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 Paul noted that women can, in fact, pray and prophesy in worship. He wrote in 11:5, *But a woman dishonors her head if she prays or prophesies without a covering on her head…* Furthermore, other Scriptural evidence indicates that women played an active role in preaching, teaching and prophesying in the early Pauline communities. For example, there’s Romans 16:1: *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon in the church in Cenchrea.* In verse 3―*Give my greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in the ministry of Christ Jesus.* In verse 7―*Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews... They are highly respected among the apostles and became followers of Christ before I did.* And in Philippians 4:2-3 we find *Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement.  3And I ask you…to help these two women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News.*

Would Paul allow women to serve in ministry, have churches meet in their homes, have them participate in worship, and entrust them with leadership if he was against women? I don’t think so.

I think Paul gets a bad rap because of this verse (along with its companion in 1st Timothy 2:11-13). Yes, Paul was a man of his times and culture. He lived in a patriarchal world and that no doubt influenced some of his thinking. But this is the same man who wrote in Galatians 3:28, *There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.* I find it hard to reconcile the idea of a chauvinistic pig with the man who placed men and women on a level playing field―who allowed and encouraged women to serve and lead―who commended so many women in his letters.

So what’s up with 1st Corinthians 14:34-35 then? And what’s up with 1st Timothy 2:11-13. Flip over to that passage.

This letter was written to Timothy, who was leading the Christian community in Ephesus. The Ephesian church had problems of its own, as we discover in Revelation 2:1-7. Something that young Timothy had to contend with was the newfound freedom in Christ that some of the Ephesian women had experienced. If they had converted from Judaism―where women were forbidden to learn the Law ***(it was often said “Better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman”)***―or had come out of dubious, high-risk lifestyles, such as prostitution, it’s possible they were being overly boisterous and outspoken in worship.

*11Women should learn quietly and submissively.  12I do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly.  13For God made Adam first, and afterward he made Eve.*

One question that arises is whether or not Paul was addressing a specific situation in the Ephesian church, or whether he was making a blanket, universal statement? I believe it to be the former. I don’t think he was giving this rule for all time, for all women, but for a very specific situation that was transpiring in Ephesus. It’s been suggested by some scholars that the passage in 1st Corinthians may’ve also fallen into this category.

One thing that biblical scholars and commentators have wrestled with is the authorship of these two passages. Both, if not directed at specific situations, don’t sound like Paul in their use of grammar and syntax. ***A growing number of scholars think that these two passages may’ve been what’s called “glosses”―that is, annotations in the margins or text of the biblical documents. Today we’d likely think of them as edits or perhaps footnotes. In the early decades and centuries of the church it wasn’t unusual for scribes to jot down comments or notes in the margins of documents they were copying.*** ***A perfect example is the traditional ending of the Lord’s Prayer: “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” These words aren’t in the original Greek texts but were added as a gloss which, over time, eventually made it into the text itself.***

So it’s entirely possible that at some later date, Paul’s letters had these two problematic passages inserted into the text by copyists who wanted to either diminish Paul’s egalitarian view of women, or reinforce patriarchy in the church. If Paul was not addressing specific issues (or persons) in Corinth and Ephesus―which would allow for statements such as these―then it’s likely they were added later on.

Personally, I have a hard time believing that Paul was a jerk toward women. I think there’s too much biblical evidence that shows his inclusivity―which in and of itself was controversial during those times. As the years progressed, and as the church moved farther and farther away from its Jewish roots, women assumed and carried out leadership roles that would’ve been unheard of in many other contexts.

It’s simple and easy to write Paul off as a chauvinist, a man of his time that looked down on and oppressed women. But that’s a cheap way out. It doesn’t take into account the biblical context, what we know of women’s leadership roles in the early church, or the grammar and syntax of Paul’s writing. As with all Scripture, once we start digging we discover there’s much more beneath the surface than we assumed.

**ASK: Now, before we conclude, does anyone have any questions that I might―or most likely cannot!―answer?**

Let us pray: *Lord, sometimes we wish Scripture was plainer and easier to understand. We wish Paul could’ve been a little clearer about what he meant about a number of things, his view of women in ministry being one. These two problematic passages we’ve looked at have caused a lot of anger, dissention and hostility over the years, and have been used to keep called, equipped and gifted women from serving in ministry. We should remember that our own denomination didn’t extend full clergy rights to women until 1956.*

*We give you thanks for the women who’ve served your church from its beginning. Among our own congregation we’ve been blessed with the gifts, talents, love and service of such women as Judy Teague, Nancy Woodall, Suzie Weber, Carla Anderson, Kathy Jones, Almeda Frazier, Evelyn Caldwell, Karen Yeatts, Marge Smith, Angie Carson, Alma Gann, Pat Ricketts, Jimmie Irwin, Nell Smith, Virginia Gram, Kathryn Mullins, Jimmie Lou Mulkey, Vicki Hardesty, and so many, many more. If they remain among us today, let us remember to thank them for all they do for our church. And if they’ve returned to their Creator, let us remember their faithfulness to your church, and thank you for their example. In the name of Jesus Christ, who makes us all one; amen.*