

DIVINE COMMISSION II

Don't you think that women should be preaching on Mother's Day? Would that not give us a better, deeper perspective? Men may wax more eloquent than honest on this day, not that they always remember such sentiments all the way through the year. But I would think that women could reflect on motherhood with greater depth and understanding. Maybe we can see to that in the years to come. Meanwhile – stuck again.

If you are a mother, I hope you are basking in great appreciation and affection this day. May all your children know that there is genuine delight in doing things that please you. And may it last far beyond this one particular day.

In two of the Scripture passages for this morning, we find Jesus refusing to let His mother define or control His ministry. It recalls even harsher teachings from Him: *“A person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”* (Matthew 10:36-37 ESV) From the perspective of the Pharisees, it is just one more illustration of how Jesus is willing, when necessary, to break the Ten Commandments. And from our perspective, it reminds us that the New Covenant is not always easy. The Kingdom of God is more important than the commandments, and sometimes that makes our choices difficult indeed. The Kingdom of God is even more important than our families. We never want it to come to that, but if it does, we need to know our priorities.

In the nineteenth chapter of John, we are reminded that despite the issues along the way, Jesus deeply loves His mother. In the hardest hour of His life, He wants to make sure that she will be taken care of. It's interesting that He does not assume His brothers will do that best. He turns His mother over to the care of one of His disciples. It's nice to know that despite His faithfulness, Jesus ends up getting His family back. The books of James and Jude are in the New Testament, and neither book was written by one of Jesus' twelve disciples; they were written by two of His biological brothers.

While we are musing: Have you ever thought about finding appropriate Scripture readings for Mother's Day? You ask me to do that every year. With a little ingenuity, we can maneuver some Bible

verses into service. But when we do that, we often warp their context or their purpose. I suspect the reason for this is the opposite of what we might at first imagine. The importance of motherhood and mothers was even more obvious in the ancient world than it is in ours. Our world is overpopulated; theirs was not. In the ancient world, to be a wife with no children was a shame and a curse that we can hardly fathom. We know stories of women who were dishonored and stories of motherhood that was not valued, but those are rare exceptions that prove the rule. “*Honor your father and your mother*” was among the Top Ten on the hit parade. And to strike or even curse father or mother incurred the death penalty. (Exodus 21:15, 17; Leviticus 20:9). Ah yes, “Give me that old-time religion.”

Whatever our opinions about biblical wisdom, with all the mayhem going on today around marriage, raising children, custody battles, and what we believe about the roles of men and women in our society, it is hard to imagine that anybody could seriously think that we have found all the genuine solutions to these kinds of issues in our time. Everybody seems to know that women were “put down” in the ancient world. You think that men were not? This is a broken world. Even in idyllic Orange County, we all know that if you scratch the surface, there is still pain and fear and alienation and anger and depression. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse always ride. And some of us still need a Savior.

Even so, I catch myself wondering about biblical wisdom and its place in our society. Can a modern woman come to the church or to the Scriptures and get help for understanding what it means to be a woman or a mother, and what the role of a woman should be in our world? I know some churches that claim they have the total truth about such matters. They are certain they do; I am certain they do not. I also know many women who say that the Scriptures are so infected by a male perspective that there is no help for women there – at least no help with the subjects of womanhood and motherhood.

Of course, I think the Scriptures have some marvelous things to say on such subjects, but it also seems clear to me that only two or three of us understand such passages correctly. For the most part, whenever a group takes the Scriptures to be a true guide for women and their rightful role – and claims to know the pattern intended by God – the group *invariably* describes a role in which women are the slaves and servants of men. This, of course, makes it almost impossible to think about the subject or to deal with the biblical texts without

reacting to this perspective. That is, I know both men *and* women who buy into the subjugation role for women. But those who do not, both women and men, find this approach so offensive that they frequently turn away from the Scriptures altogether, and sometimes away from the church as well.

Naturally, I wish they would stay with the Scriptures:
“*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*” (Galatians 5:1 ESV) Yeah Paul!

But would you say to your daughter or to a good friend or to yourself (if you are a woman): “Go to the Scriptures to learn about motherhood ... go study the Bible to find wisdom for how to approach life as a true and whole and wholesome woman”?

The truth is, the Bible is *not* our only source of information about womanhood or marriage or raising children, or about chemistry, physics, medicine, geography, or lots of other subjects. The Bible does not forbid us to read other books or to keep growing and learning about our world and all its endless dimensions, though some Christian groups strongly imply this attitude or even state it outright. Every culture and time has its patterns, and the Bible is written from many different cultures and lands, by many different people, covering approximately two thousand years of changing circumstances.

For example, Jacob is the father of the twelve tribes of Israel – a great patriarch of faith and destiny in our tradition for all time. But is there anyone in this room who wants their daughters to pattern themselves after Jacob’s two wives? That’s Rachel and Leah, if you are searching your memory. Do you want *your* daughters to give their husbands another woman so he can have more children? (Bilhah and Zilpah, in Jacob’s case.) Or do we want our daughters to emulate Jacob’s lying, cheating, conniving mother Rebecca? Now *there’s* a story for Mother’s Day. Actually, Rebecca was wonderful in her way – just a little overprotective of Jacob. And fortunately Jacob finally grew out of it.

In any case, just because the Bible “tells it like it is” does not mean it is like it’s supposed to be. What about THE FALL? This is a broken, alienated realm. We are supposed to be following Jesus into healing and redemption. Why does the church so often speak as if its only purpose is to cement the damage?

What women in the Bible do we want our daughters to emulate? Bathsheba? Tamar? Delilah? Mary Magdalene? In real life, there are always places in the story where we would rather not go. Esther certainly is portrayed as a woman of great courage. Perhaps emulating her courage and her love for her people would be a good thing. But Esther is also the sexiest concubine in all of Persia, and *that* is how she gets the leverage she needs to save her people. Do we really want our daughters to copy Esther's role? Hey, it's in The Book – it's God's Word; just believe it without doubting or questioning? Is that the formula?

Ruth, Rachel, Abigail, and Lydia are among my top picks. I always wish King David had kept Abigail and left the rest alone. He would have been far better off and far happier if he had. We might even have missed the Civil War and the Babylonian Captivity if he had. But conjecture gets us nowhere.

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Despite whatever rumors you may have heard to the contrary, I actually did have a mother. Her maiden name was Ruth B. Morgan. She was really quite wonderful. Even so, she died in 1971 – forty-five years ago – and I have been Ruthless ever since. My mother's life was full of contradictions. She was incredible and pitiful; powerful and pathetic; a powerhouse and an invalid; amazingly wise and a slave to her illnesses and her drugs.

I have never known any person who had a higher opinion or higher regard for motherhood or who tried harder to nurture her children: with food, understanding, truth, ideals, self-worth, confidence. That was tough because sometimes she did not have much of those things herself. But that was one of the contradictions; sometimes in some ways she did, and sometimes in other ways she did not.

My mother had a lot of issues with the outer church. She also had a deep love for God, and she struggled to free herself from the straitjackets of the narrow, fear-based anger and judgments of the religion she was brought up in as a child. My mother and my father were both seminary-trained. I was named after Bruce Kirchner, their Greek Professor at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis (formerly Butler University School of Religion). One day I came across a medal in one of her dresser drawers. She had won the Indiana State speech contest in 1927.

When I was in fifth grade, the Pastor of our church persuaded my mother to teach the high school Sunday School class. They were down to three and sometimes two students on Sundays. Six weeks later there were nineteen kids in her class on the average. Nobody in the church even knew there were that many high school kids in the area. My mother was willing to be open and honest about the things young people really cared about, so the word went out and they came. Did it cause any controversy in the church? You don't even have to ask. But if my mother were alive and healthy today and you called her to be your Pastor, this place would be packed out every Sunday.

I have lots of hard memories, but my favorite memories of my mother are of sitting on the couch next to my sister, with my Mom standing over the floor furnace at the end of the couch. She would be reading us a story or telling us about her childhood, or engaging us in some conversation about the meaning of sex, when was it okay to tell a lie, why we thought life was the way it was, why we liked some people more than others, and on and on. There was no such thing as "because I told you so" in our home. There were reasons for every rule. God never made any commandments for God's own benefit. They were all for our well-being and because God wanted our lives to be better.

My mother died of cortisone poisoning. It was not an accident. The doctors at the time could not think of anything else to do for her. She had lost half of one lung and two thirds of the other. She never smoked, but it was thought that infection from her abnormal sinus cavities had spread to her lungs. Over the years, there was less and less that anyone could do. Several months earlier, a doctor had mentioned to me that if I took the medication my mother was taking every morning and evening, I would be dead within five minutes.

So life is not all sweetness and light. And people do not have to be perfect to be wonderful. No matter how much we may grow and learn, we never outgrow our need for God, our need for a Savior, or our need to be converted and changed one more time. It is a long and endless pilgrimage that we are on. We should take it more seriously, but also with greater joy and abandon. We should take it with far more trust in God, and also with far less fear and caution.

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What I want to suggest to all of us on this Mother's Day is that the Bible has never tried to define one role for women or one role for men. When the Bible does speak to or reveal anything about men's roles or women's roles, it is always in the context of much more important issues. That is, the context is the relationship of humans to God, to the purposes of God, or to what God is doing in the world in a specific time and place. In general, the biblical perspective is not interested in either men or women being dominant. Either one is a disaster. The Bible thinks *God* should be dominant, that we should put God in charge of our lives, and that all humans should come to the awareness that this is our only hope – that in our right minds and hearts, we truly *want* God to be in charge. This puts all of us into subservient roles – to God; never to each other.

Therefore, spiritual progress and spiritual awakening are always spoken of in terms of humility, meekness, surrender, repentance, obedience. **ALL biblical roles are subservient roles.** Has the world ever seen a more obedient Son than Jesus? God is to be adored, worshipped, served, obeyed. Therefore, if we listen to descriptions of virtuous women or virtuous men and forget that God is the primary concern and the primary relationship, we come away with great distortions. A person who is quiet (peaceful), controlled, responsible, productive, thoughtful, considerate, effective, and consistent probably has at least some of their act together, and indeed displays qualities we associate with spiritual development. If the Bible praises these qualities in a wife, it also praises them in any role for either sex. If the Bible praises them for a woman, it also praises them for a man.

“Moses was the meekest man who ever lived.” (Numbers 12:3) Moses is considered the greatest person in the Old Testament *because* he was the most subservient to God. But not when he walked into Pharaoh's presence. And Jesus was the most obedient man we have ever seen when it came to prayer, to obeying God, to finding and following the guidance of God in real-life situations. But He was totally unmanageable when it came to the human authorities all around Him, even though they were the top religious authorities of His nation.

It makes one suspicious that at least some women have tried to use equality and liberation themes as excuses behind which to hide their spiritual rebelliousness. Certainly a great many men do. The church is never perfect, and our theologies are ever incomplete. But blaming God and the church for our own spiritual rebelliousness is an old and classic ploy. “The reason I am such a bitter, self-centered,

unloved, and unloving agnostic is because I went to church when I was three and saw a hypocrite there.” Terrific.

A certain hog farmer refused to have anything to do with the church because whenever he went to church, he saw a bunch of hypocrites there. And he could always name two or three outstanding examples. One day, the Pastor of the church came by his farm to buy a hog. After looking over the farmer’s entire swine herd, the Pastor pointed to a scrawny, sickly, ugly little pig and said, “I want that one.” The farmer was aghast. “You don’t want that one!” he insisted. “Look, here are some fine hogs over here.” “Nope,” said the preacher. “I want that one. And I’m going to haul that pig all over the countryside and tell everyone I see that this is the kind of hog you raise here.” The farmer looked startled, then angry. But slowly a smile started playing around the corners of his mouth until he burst into a grin, stuck out his hand, and said, “I’m sorry, Pastor. And to prove it, I will be in church in the front row next Sunday, and from now on.”

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells Christian slaves to obey their masters. He is not approving of slavery! He is not making a social statement or recommending a political structure. He is talking to Christian friends about how to walk a spiritual path in the midst of incredibly difficult circumstances. It takes about .003 seconds to know what Paul’s opinion of slavery really is, if you want to talk about the subject of slavery itself. He is Jewish. He is a Pharisee. He is rabbinically trained. He does not need us to remind him of the truths of Moses, Passover, and the remarkable release of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. And we also have his letter to Philemon, where he sticks his neck way out to get Onesimus freed from slavery.

I am suggesting that we need to be cautious with our use of biblical statements about the role of women or men or children or parents. And when we do come across gems, they will be in the context of the spiritual life and will not apply merely to secular living. A woman who is obedient to a man who is disobedient will soon become disobedient herself, and vice versa. On top of that, most of us are sometimes obedient and sometimes disobedient, and often we are confused about when is which and which is where.

The biblical perspective is that one of the marks of human alienation from God is the animosity and inequality between the sexes. It is one of the major “curses” of the so-called FALL OF MAN. We are supposed to *maintain* a curse? Jesus came to *reverse* the curses.

Paul describes a very different WAY for Christians. Some of us are still caught in or even enthralled with the warfare. We still willingly carry some general opinions (or resentments) against women or against men. It may be too strong to call most of us “women haters” or “men haters,” but the terms are still known and the attitudes are not extinct. To the degree that any of us still carry such attitudes, we are at war with the Christ and His Kingdom.

Mother’s Day might be a good day not only to celebrate our gratitude for all the care and love and bother and worry our mothers have expended on our behalf, but also to remove from our hearts and minds a little more of our prejudice, fear, and dislike for *any* person on the basis of their gender alone.

In closing, I would remind you that Deborah was a judge and a warrior, and Sisera took orders from her without complaint or wonder, as did everyone in Deborah’s army. Joseph was a seer and an introvert. Jacob was not as macho as Esau. Joshua was as tough an old war-horse as this world has ever seen. David was half poet, three-quarters statesman, and every inch a warrior. Mary was a mother; Daniel was an astrologer; Matthew was a tax-collector; Lydia was a cloth merchant and probably quite rich. All of these people served God. There is no biblical “role” for women *or* for men. The Bible thinks all of us should love and serve God in all of our various roles and ways and patterns. And the Bible reminds us that God loves each of us, wherever we find ourselves. There is no prescribed role.

A woman’s place is where? A woman’s place is with God. A man’s place is also with God. And sometimes we find love-bonds forming with each other, and we try to find ways to walk side by side, to support each other, and to make life better for each other. But the roles do not save us, and neither do the pronouns. We are saved by faith. Hallelujah!