

Gifted to Serve

Excuses

Recently, I was listening to a speaker who challenged us to make sure we are ready to meet God, because we know we have done everything He has called us to do. He based this challenge on Timothy 4:7, where Paul writes to Timothy,

“I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me on that day...”

So, I have been thinking about his challenge, and I would like to be confident that I will do everything God wants me to do but, at the same time, I don't think I possibly can. So I have been wondering if God would make an exception for me. Surely, He will let me off the hook when I remind Him of the fact that I am a nobody, born into a family of nobodies, I have little education and no-one knows the place I was born. So I think I have a very valuable excuse not to be able to do what God has for me to do.

Having said this, there is a passage in the Bible that comes to my mind, and it is I Corinthians 12:1-11

“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore, I tell you that no-one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no-one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge, by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He gives them to each one, just as He determines.”

God promises here to give me His spiritual gifts, so that I can do whatever I am called to do. That means I cannot use my background as an excuse. In fact, I have a number of excuses not to be able to fulfil God's will for my life.

One excuse is: **I am too young.**

And I remember Jeremiah using a similar line, which we can find in Jeremiah 1:4-8

“The word of the Lord came to me (Jeremiah), saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

“Ah, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak, I am only a child.”

But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, I am only a child.” You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.

It is clear that God did not accept Jeremiah's claim that he was only a child. Therefore, I don't think that He will accept my excuse that I am too young either.

Perhaps my next excuse will be more acceptable: **I am too old.**

Now, I do remember Daniel mentioned someone who was not that young either. He is mentioned in Daniel 5:30-31

“That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.”

I have to admit this man was not that young when God finally decided to use him.

And I remember Moses. He was even older than Darius when God called him. He had already taken care of ordinary sheep for 40 years, as we can read in Acts 7:30

“After forty years had passed an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai.”

As far as Moses was concerned, taking care of sheep was his job for the rest of his life. But then God appeared to him when he was 80 years old and told him to take care of a few million human sheep. That would have been an even greater challenge for him because, at least ordinary sheep cannot talk back, but human sheep can, and Moses learned that very quickly.

One example is in Exodus 16:2

“In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.”

I realise, of course, that I cannot use the excuse that I am too old either.

But I have another very valid excuse and that is:

The circumstances in my life are just too difficult.

What comes to my mind, though, is a couple who lived in circumstances even more difficult than myself or yourself, and they were willing to fulfil God’s calling for their lives. This couple were Hebrew people. They lived in Egypt, and their ruler had decided that any baby boy born to Hebrew parents had to be killed off. Nevertheless they dared to have a baby son, and dared to believe God would protect him. Their son was Moses.

We can read of them in Hebrews 11:23

“By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born because they saw that he was no ordinary child and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.”

So, even this excuse is not valid in God’s eyes.

More Excuses

Now, I have some more excuses and they seem to have come straight out of the Bible.

They may apply more to women than to men, but I would like to mention them anyway, just in case some of you can identify with them, just as you might have been able to identify with my earlier excuses.

For instance: **A Woman should remain silent.**

We can find that in I Corinthians 14:34-35

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

These words tell me that I cannot use my gift as a woman, so God has no choice but to excuse me from fulfilling my calling.

But then I remember another passage from I Corinthians and it is I Corinthians 11:4-5

“Every man who prays or prophecies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophecies with her head uncovered dishonours her head – it is just as though her head were shaved.”

These two verses imply that both men and women can pray or prophesy. I don't know about you, but to me, men or women who pray or prophesy, use words. Therefore, they are not exactly silent.

But then, what about I Corinthians 14:34-35, the verses we have read earlier?

I believe the reason we have such difficulty understanding that passage is because we do not necessarily realise that these verses are, in fact, not Paul's words, but a quotation from a letter he had received from the church leaders in Corinth, as we can read in I Corinthians 1:11, where Paul writes:

"My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you."

Paul's answer to these people, in the form of a rebuke, can be found in I Corinthians 14:36-38

"Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritual gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored."

Paul actually began this passage with an expression which has been left out by most translators, and which can best be translated as "utter rubbish". So he really wrote to them, "Utter rubbish. Did the word of God originate with you?....."

He declared thereby that the viewpoint of these people was incorrect, because their viewpoint was based on a collection of orally preserved Rabbinical Traditions, called the Law.

Jesus referred to these Traditions in Matthew 15:6

".....Thus you nullify the Word of God for the sake of your tradition."

Jesus, too, made it clear that traditions make the Word of God to no effect on one's life. It seems to me I cannot use this excuse either, since this excuse is based on traditions, rather than the Word of God.

But I have still another excuse and that one is:

A woman is not to teach or to take authority over a man.

We can find these words in Timothy 2:11-15

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith; love and holiness with propriety."

Of all the excuses I have used so far, surely this one will make God see that I cannot fulfil my calling. But then I remember I have studied this passage in greater detail and I learned some things I did not know before. I would like to share what I have learned regarding this passage.

The first statement in this passage is:

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission..... she must be silent."

Paul began this passage by instructing Timothy that women should be taught. Therefore, they cannot yet be teachers. They had to learn the right doctrine first, but they had to learn in a quiet and submissive manner, in order for them to be able to learn well. We need to remember that Paul's desire for women to be taught was, in fact, a very radical idea, for women at that time did not generally receive any education except in the art of homemaking.

Furthermore, Paul used the term "silent". This word in the original language simply means "restful quietness." It does not mean that she was never allowed to speak a word.

The next statement is:
"I do not allow a woman to teach"

The original language indicates that Paul, at that moment, did not allow a woman, or women, to teach. This was a temporary situation, but was not for all times. These women had to learn the right doctrine first, before being allowed to teach.

The third statement is:
"...Or to have authority over a man"

In Scripture the word "authority" is usually the Greek word "*exousia*". One example can be found in Romans 13:1

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority, except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

However, in Timothy 2:11-15, Paul used a different word, namely "*authentain*". This term has not been used anywhere else in Scripture so, in order for us to understand its meaning, we have to go to sources outside of Scripture. Thankfully, that has been done for us by very reliable scholars, and as a result we now know the meaning of "authentain". Its meaning has changed over time but it has always had a very negative meaning, including that of domineering.

Therefore, Paul was not saying that women could never have a rightful spiritual authority over men, but that women should not have an inappropriate attitude towards men, or inappropriate behaviour towards men, for that would be contrary to his teachings.

The attitude of these women may well have developed because of false teachings these women had received.

Paul addressed these teachings in the following statement:

"For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one who was deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner."

What a strange statement for Paul to make, is it not? After all, every believer knows that the man was created first, that the woman was formed afterwards and that the woman was deceived. That is common knowledge so why would Paul even want to mention it to Timothy? May be it is because Paul knew something you and I do not know, and Timothy knew it as well. Therefore, Paul did not need to explain to Timothy why he wrote these words. I wished he had done it, for it would have made it a lot easier for us.

But then Paul did not think about you and I when he wrote this letter, neither did the Holy Spirit, who inspired this Letter, inform Paul that he needed to give more information, because one day we would read this letter. No. Paul was simply instructing Timothy with regard to the church in Ephesus.

And false teachings had entered the church in Ephesus. Very likely some of these teachings had been received by these women and would have included errors with regard to the Creation Account and the Fall. For instance, according to these false teachings, the woman had been created before the man, and the eating of the fruit had been a good thing for, through it, they had supposedly received special knowledge about God.

Paul was correcting these errors in this passage.

The final statement is:

"But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety."

Now, we know that Paul did not teach here on God's free gift of salvation for women, which no woman can add to by her own works, including childbearing.

This verse is very likely a correction on the false teaching that marriage and motherhood are not good things. Paul mentioned this false teaching later on in this letter (Timothy 4:3).

However, he made it very clear that marriage and motherhood were part of God's plan for women and were not obstacles to a close walk with God, as these false teachers claimed.

It seems to me that Paul had women in the church in Ephesus in mind when he wrote these words to Timothy. But we do not live in Ephesus. We live in the 21st Century. Therefore, these words do not really apply to us, although we can learn from them. Obviously, I cannot use the excuse that a woman cannot have any rightful spiritual authority, since Paul does not forbid a woman from having rightful spiritual authority over a man in this passage.

Final Excuse

I have one final excuse which is: **Man is the head of the woman.**

We find this statement in I Corinthians 11:3

"Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

In the English language the word "head" means either "a part of our physical body" or "someone in a position of authority", for instance, the head of a school, or the head of a company.

In the Greek language of Paul's days the word "head" could mean these things, depending on the particular Greek term the author had chosen. Paul had chosen the word "*kephale*" in I Corinthians 11:3, which can mean "physical head" or "source," "source of life." However, it did not mean "authority" or "power."

In the verse we just read Paul, did not establish a hierarchical order, for then the sentence structure would have been different. He established a chronological order, for Christ was indeed the source of the life for the first man, and every man thereafter. The

first man was the source of life for the first woman, and God was the source of life for Christ in His incarnation.

He wrote this to bring correction to people's thinking. Many believers had pagan backgrounds and had been influenced by the idea that the woman was made from a substance different from and inferior to the man, and Paul was bringing correction this error.

Related to the above statement is the statement: The husband is the head of the wife

These words can be found in Ephesians 5:23

"For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the Head of the Church of which He is the Saviour."

Once again Paul used the Greek word "*kephale*". This means that the husband's function as head of the wife did not mean authority or power. Moreover, Paul went on to specify what examples husbands were to follow as head of their wife: they were to follow the highest example, namely Christ's example, as Head of His Church in His role as Saviour of the Church.

Now, we know that Christ functions not only as Head, but as Lord, as King, as High Priest, as Intercessor, among other things. However, it is only in relation to Christ's function as Head of the Church, which is associated with His role as Saviour of the Church, that the function of the husband as head of the wife was mentioned by Paul. This means that Paul did not associate the husband's function as head of his wife with Christ's function as Lord, as King, as High Priest, as Intercessor, but specifically with Christ's function as Saviour, which is a loving, serving, ministering, sacrificial function.

I have run out of excuses and I hope you have too.

Moreover, God's Word teaches me that:

"I have become the righteousness of God in Christ"

According to II Corinthians 5:21

"I am a new creation in Christ, the old has gone, the new has come"

According to II Corinthians 5:17

"There is now no condemnation for me because I am in Christ Jesus"

According to Romans 8:1

"In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female"

According to Galatians 3:28:

"I am a co-heir with Christ"

According to Romans 8:17

"I am seated in heavenly realms in Christ Jesus"

According to Ephesians 2:6

"I am blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ"

According to Ephesians 1:3

"So you and I should no longer make excuses and should go to work, for we must work while it is yet day.

Night will come when no-one can work as we can read in John 9:4.

And with God's help we will surely finish the task that He sets before us so that all of us one day may hear "well done good and faithful servant".