

1 Timothy 2: 1-4, 8-15 (Kathy)

2 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. ³ This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

⁸ I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; ⁹ also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. ¹¹ Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

1st Timothy 5:3-16, 6:1-2; 2nd Timothy 3:1-7 (Widows, Slavery, Basement thinking and Silly Women)

³ Honor widows who are really widows. ⁴ If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight. ⁵ The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; ⁶ but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach. ⁸ And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

⁹ Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; ¹⁰ she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. ¹¹ But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, ¹² and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. ¹³ Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. ¹⁴ So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. ¹⁵ For some have already turned away to follow Satan. ¹⁶ If any believing woman has relatives who are really widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, so that it can assist those who are real widows.

6: 1 Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. ² Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church;^[a] rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved.

3: 1 You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. ² For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them! ⁶ For among them are those who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, ⁷ who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

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1 Timothy 2:1-4, 8-15, 5:3-16, 6:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:1-7

Cringe-worthy

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Now if they had asked my opinion on what should go in the Bible many, many years ago, I would have attempted to make the case that these texts we read from this morning shouldn't be allowed. I would have brought out my Jeffersonian scissors and tried to eliminate that from the Bible which I didn't like. And Thomas Jefferson was not the only authority figure who has ever wanted to have the Bible edited to his own liking. Why do you think they call the King James Bible the King James Version? It's no secret that he fudged a few details to make it a little more sympathetic to the monarchy. Editorial control is a pretty big deal when it comes to sacred texts, and given that I'm neither famous, nor did I get an invitation to the Council of Nicea or even the Jesus seminar, I, like you, have to deal with the less than appreciated scriptural passages that are still a part of our inheritance.

Those particular verses that Kathy read about women learning in silence and not having the authority to teach a man have been problematic for me for some time now. Early in my ministry, I still received anonymous letters on ACTUAL PAPER, mailed with stamps and everything that quoted from those verses specifically to remind me that women ministers were not permitted – according to the BIBLE I said I believed in. Now those same words, and more threatening ones as well, are thrown

around in the comments sections on internet articles written by women. When I did my seminary internship in another world known as Texas, I often felt surrounded by such individuals who thought they were “helping me” by pointing out that this passage of scripture existed, and maybe I just didn’t know about it. Those early years were very defensive times. I was a young person determined to prove myself, and getting into such arguments was one of the ways I thought I could MAKE people see that women had gifts for ministry – just the same as men. I dare say that, even at my most persuasive, I didn’t convince anyone to change their minds. Let’s face it, I still have relatives I see around the holidays who attend churches that follow this text as an example of how to delineate who is allowed to provide leadership in the church. Some things you learn not to talk about when it comes to passing the mashed potatoes and gravy.

But now that much of my early defensiveness has given way to practicality because I know when my words will fall on deaf ears; I have another problem with these texts – embarrassment. It’s embarrassing to say that I do find the Bible to be my Holy Book, a source of strength and inspiration – and then a text like one of these pops up. Usually this critique comes from the other side of the spectrum - from the liberals, the atheists, or at least the agnostics who have given up on the “trappings” of religion, or so they say. Why would you pay attention to a book that allows slavery, treats women as second class citizens, shames young widows, and just tends to have

archaic views about the world in general. Why indeed? Again, there's no amount of persuasiveness that will make my case if a mind has already been made up. They will write me off as someone who has fallen into the trap of religion, no different than the offensive picketers of the Westboro church, no nuance to separate thoughtful Christian rhetoric from the nastiness that surrounds those who use these kinds of passages to defend abhorrent behaviors as somehow being Christian.

All I can say is that it's a trap either way. We've been set up by the deceiver, by all that is false in this world, to always, always be competing or comparing ourselves with one another. Who is the BETTER Christian? Who knows the most about how the world works? Who gets to make the rules, edit the manual, or set the tone? Who among us is the greatest? I think maybe Jesus is going to have something to say about that. The writings of scripture, as sacred as they are, reflect this human tendency toward wanting to identify the "right" model for things. And if something is "right" then we know that means something else has to be "wrong." We, as Western thinkers in particular, are drawn to dualities much like flies are drawn to... well, you know, those bug zapper things.

The good news though for us is that we have an authority in the church that is even greater than scripture. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. It is through the lens of Jesus that all scripture is to be interpreted. At least that's my way to go, my

preference for picking and choosing, and there's a pretty wide swath of Christian history that will tend to agree with me on that.

To avoid both defensiveness and embarrassment when we are the ones being judged for how we discern what is right, and true, and important, let's look again at how Jesus handled his personal temptation. Jesus is tempted by power. Satan says, "You know you're better than all these other people Jesus, prove it." Jesus is tempted by security. Satan says, "You know that God will not let you stub your toe on a rock Jesus, prove it." Jesus is tempted by the desire to get out of this life unharmed as his disciples sleep. Let this cup pass, O God, but your will be done. Jesus felt these temptations as real and as painfully as we feel their draw to power, and safety, and personal comfort. And yet, he did not succumb to the very human things that we do to achieve status over our fellow human beings in moments of feeling weak or vulnerable. Spiritual strength, as he taught it, is derived from jettisoning the practices of comparing and competing with our fellow human beings.

This letter says, men pray and teach and lead in church. Women can also pray, and teach, and lead in church. That should not be a startling realization for us. There's also no such thing as a real widow verses a fake widow. The grief is no different, so shaming certain women for being sensual, or idle, or gossipy, or silly is no different than any other bullying name-calling that we are prone to do. And though these particular texts surely raise questions of how hierarchies have often been put into

place to force women into submission, we are waking up, I think, to the ways in which gender stereotypes have also negatively influenced men. The shame soup that we live in is problematic for us all. Don't even get me started on how the practice of slavery can be improved by slaves knowing their place and loving the Christian masters that are supposed to be kinder than most. PLEASE give me a break!

The writer of these letters, Paul or whomever, actually touches on the real meat of how we are swamped in shame in the third chapter of the second letter. You must understand, he writes (and I do think I'm at least correct in saying "he" here), that in the last days, in any days really, distressing times will come. You will meet all kinds of bad people doing all kinds of bad things. "Avoid them" is the advice given to Timothy. Well, I'm not sure we can always do that. Mostly because we are all "those people." We all live in the basement – at least part of the time.

Let me tell you what I mean by that. We are all tempted by and succumb to those worst tendencies in ourselves. Jungian psychologists locate these things that the Bible just tends to call "bad" in the metaphorical basement. And I get that. As a kid, I was terribly afraid of the basement, especially if it was dark, especially if there were creepy noises. We don't want to go down there – until we realize the draw -and then we do go down there as teenagers to drink, to smoke, to cuss, to hide all those things that, in shame we want to hide maybe even from ourselves. Those shame-filled moments get tied in with fear, and rather than deal with the scary side of the

basement, we turn other things into the monsters there. We've seen it happening over and over again in our culture as our own racism and gender distrust turns to prejudices and the inability to cultivate the kind of equal partnerships that we really desire for wholeness in our life together. We even tend to score our power grabbing points most often against the people we love the most.

Now I'm playing armchair psychologist. Spend a little time with that imagery of basement thinking if it speaks to you. But, getting back to scripture, when we enter the distressing times I think we actually do become: lovers of ourselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to our parents, ungrateful toward our children, unholy, inhuman, unforgiving, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Little does the letter writer realize that his codes of "right conduct" for women, and widows, and slaves show his own hand in how we become blind to others in times of great distress. We fail to see those aggressions that are covered up in common DIS-courtesy.

The communities and categories of people who have been on this underside of power for so long have always found ways to combat unfair systems. The slave songs are a good example of this. Perhaps they couldn't outwardly rebel out of fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones, but they could sing of a heavenly retribution – their masters comeuppance in the great ordering of God. Perhaps we believe that

we're coming closer to justice now, and I do hope and pray that we are, and that each generation can see a little bit more clearly, and yet, I know that as long as there are brothers who fight with sisters, as long as there are rewards for which we want to grasp, and power to draw our attention, there will be those ways in which we aggrandize ourselves by putting down another. The more we can acknowledge the inner truth, that our grasping has more to do with ourselves and less to do with someone else's gender, or skin color, or sexuality, or religious background, the further we will go toward our own healing and the healing of our world. Paul, in moments of clarity, and Jesus in full consistency and transparency, taught this way. They were opening up and breaking down divisions rather than making them more entrenched.

These texts are officially cringe-worthy. I don't like reading them. And preaching on them is to preach about how they represent a not so great side of the human condition. And yet, if we didn't have such human language in our Holy Book, would we trust that it truly understood the world, not only as it could be, but as it is in real life? I'm not sure. Paul, this Paul, whoever he was, was writing through the lenses he inherited. We all do this – talk and write and exist through whatever cultural assumptions were part of our learning. The good news is that we can also move and grow beyond those assumptions. The shame we learned about being a man or being a woman or being a minority or being a person of privilege doesn't have to be our only narrative. Learn the way of Christ – whose love knows no boundaries. Amen.