

A Praying People II

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments" Volume #19, #23 June 6, 2004GG

I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. {1Ti 2:8-10}

What is your personal prayer habit? Do you have a particular place where you typically pray? Some Christians dedicate a particular place in their homes to prayer, their private "prayer closet." Others pray wherever they are as they realize the need for prayer. There is no absolute Biblical rule on this question. We obviously have multiple Biblical encouragements to pray regularly. Jesus mentions a prayer closet, but here Paul specifically opens the question of location as broadly as possible. Men are to pray everywhere, not just in one dedicated location.

Frequently we overlook the insignificant issues in Scripture as if they didn't matter at all. In a particular way of thinking the fact that something appears in Scripture makes it significant. In this passage what is the role of "lifting up holy hands," of "without wrath and doubting"? D. A. Carson integrates these three factors into an instructive lesson on prayer.

"First, the lifting up of holy hands suggests a believing approach, true holiness being attainable only through the righteousness of Christ. Secondly, true prayer cannot exist side by side with anger. Thirdly, prayer and disputing do not go together. Our attitude to others does affect our approach to God." {1}

Have you ever tried to pray while you were angry with someone? If so, you quickly realized the utter impossibility of the effort. Paul confronts personal holiness, anger, and unbelief in an impressively efficient manner. Insignificant? Hardly, these three simple words capture our attention and direct us to the heart of effective Biblical prayer.

"In like manner also...women." Paul expects no less of prayer from women than from men. There is no double standard with Paul here. Occasionally conservative Christian subcultures will place more emphasis on the way women dress than the way they live. They will require a strict dress code of women, using such passages as this to load their women with guilt if they refuse to follow the protocol. The Bible normally contains the best antidote available to imbalanced interpretations. Let's take a brief look at this lesson from the extreme perspective of dress code. Women should dress modestly. No problem here with most folks, including Christian women. Women should dress with shamefacedness and sobriety. First we need to understand the words and then Paul's intent. Although the Greek word translated "shamefacedness" can refer to shame, it can equally refer to "...honour, modesty, bashfulness, reverence, regard for others, respect." {2} No doubt Paul had this broader meaning in view with this word. Once we understand the word, few Christian women indeed have any desire to dress so as to show dishonor or disrespect for their faith. The word translated "sobriety" obviously can refer to one's refusal to drink alcoholic beverages excessively, but it also means soundness of mind and self-control according to Strong.

We are getting to the heart of the matter; "...not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array." Does Paul intend to imply that a Christian woman cannot braid her hair or wear jewelry of any kind? This is the teaching of groups who place emphasis on dress code and use this passage and a similar lesson from 1Pe 3 as supposed Biblical authority. If Paul intended to forbid any form of braided hair or jewelry, he also forbade clothing! The folly of the interpretation appears with this last prohibition.

As with so many other passages, the lesson flows far more easily when we allow it to lead us and speak to us instead of forcing our ideas onto it. Paul's point takes us to the ongoing debate between the external and the internal of Christian conduct. No amount of external ritual and dress can make up for

an internal godly spirit. His point matches the context far better when viewed as urging that women (and men for that matter) allow their internal Christian spirit to mark them, not external styles and dress. Men and women who profess godliness should be known for their good works, not for their unique dress or styles.

Roy Zuck affirms this point. "Instead of stressing external beauty, according to the world's standards, Christian women should manifest a different set of values. They should adorn themselves with (lit., "by means of") good deeds. They should depend on their faithful service in the name of Christ to render them attractive to others. This was no plea for women to make themselves unattractive; it was simply an exhortation to reject the world's yardstick for measuring beauty and adopt heaven's standard." {1Sa 16:7} {3}

"Feminist" groups, even within Christianity, often ostracize Paul as being anti-woman. If you compare Paul's view of women in the church with the dominant view within his culture, you will quickly realize how unfair and inappropriate this caricature is. Not only did Paul magnify the vital role of women in the church, he frequently worked specifically with them and commended their work to others. In this lesson he affirms an equal role between men and women in prayer. "In like manner also..." puts men and women on the same platform in prayer. God doesn't check a believer's gender before considering whether to answer a prayer or not. Over the years of my personal ministry I have heard fully as many experiences of answered prayer and exceptional, supernatural blessings that resulted from women's prayers as from men's; maybe more.

This whole lesson tugs at our sensitivity. What characterizes a Christian? What is it about someone that leaves a positive impression in the mind of a neighbor, friend, or work associate? Paul precisely makes the point for us. If a Christian elevates hairstyle, makeup, and dress to the point of making these items his/her identifying characteristics, his/her Christian profession just dropped out of sight. For a man we might add the make and model of the car he drives. For either or both men and women we could add the address of their home. Do they live in an exclusive neighborhood or one block away from the slums?

Remember that Paul is equipping Timothy to confront problems in the church at Ephesus. We could quickly gather that cultural issues involving dress and personal identity formed a significant part of the problem. Most major Roman cities had no less elitism than any modern major city with which we are acquainted. Years ago I worked for a couple of years in a suburban city that was known for its elitism. Within this city the citizens subdivided the whole city into merit sectors by the name of the tract of homes where people lived. If you lived in one tract of homes, you simply didn't belong among the "beautiful" people of the city. If you lived in another tract, you could just about be a renegade, but a nice car, expensive clothes, and a salon hairstyle gave you all the credentials that you needed. You belonged. Paul would not have fit well into this kind of culture. For him it was not the ideal culture; it was the problem. Apparently this problem of elitism became a major factor in the first century church. Consider James confrontation of elitism in his admonition that the church refuse to allow "respect of person's" to influence the way they treated people in the church gathering. He describes assigned seating in the church gathering based on the way a person dressed. The greater portion of Jas 2 addresses this problem. How do people know you; by your dress and external trappings, or by your faith? What we wear inside will show outside.

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FOOTNOTES:

{1} Carson, D. A. (1994), New Bible Commentary: 21st century edition. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.). {1Ti 2:1} Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

{2} Strong, J. (1996). The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order. (electronic ed.) (SGreek: 127. aidos). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship. lit. literal, literally

{3} Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). The Bible knowledge commentary: Exposition of the scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.