

A photograph of a man and a woman sitting on a lawn, reading a Bible together. The man is on the left, wearing a grey suit jacket and blue jeans, holding the Bible. The woman is on the right, wearing a white hijab, a pink cardigan, and dark pants. The background is a soft-focus lawn.

heirs together

OF GOD'S GRACIOUS GIFT OF LIFE

Christian Men and Women
Serving Together in God's World



PART ONE

Preliminary Thoughts

Why have a specific study about men and women?

As with any teaching of the Bible, each generation must be taught by the Spirit through God's Word to take possession of a teaching as their very own. To merely parrot the words of those who have studied this before us rather than searching the Bible anew for ourselves leaves us with something dangerously short of a full understanding. As terminology and ministry settings change over the course of time, the grave danger is that we may end up quoting the words of Christians who have come before us, while seriously missing their point and the Bible's focus.

There is only one solution for that danger: a prayerful and thorough study of a teaching from the Bible to help us join our voices with courage and conviction with those who have faithfully confessed before us God's wonderful unchanging truth for a changing world.

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Lesson 1: All God's People Shared an Equal Status in Creation

Do you see a family resemblance? Can you guess the relationship?



How are your family members similar?

How are your family members different?

The closer we get to each other, the more we tend to see the vast differences. But if you step back, we start to appreciate the many things we have in common.

Many want to jump into a study to point out what is unique about us as men and women and what separates us because of our differences. But we dare not forget that what we have in common as sons and daughters of God in Jesus is really far greater than what is unique. **Only as we keep both points in mind—what is shared and what is unique—will we be able to grasp the bigger picture of what Scripture has to say to us as men and women serving together in God’s world.**

Our Common Gift



In the next 10 minutes, quickly read through **Genesis 1:1-25**. Then, carefully read **Genesis 1:26-27; 2:4-7; & 18-25**. Note the similarities and differences about the creation of human beings and the creation of everything else. Form a list below and discuss with the people at your table or one near you.

Similarities	Differences

Imagine someone who has never traveled outside the United States trying to understand the culture of China. While books and study could reveal quite a bit, there is nothing like having “been there.” It is impossible for us in a fallen world to grasp fully what it was like for Adam and Eve to exist in God’s image as perfect creatures in a perfect world. We have never “been there.” If we could have fully experienced that, it would answer some questions we long to ask on the relationship of men and women.

But we can understand what it’s like to be in our parents’ image, can’t we? As we grow older, most of us discover that we “become” our parents. Certainly there is a physical similarity that becomes more pronounced as we age, but it’s much more than that. There are times we find ourselves responding like our parents. We tend to know the same things, like and dislike the same things, and have similar goals in life due to our shared experiences. People who knew our parents well may have responded, “When I look at you doing those things, you remind me so much of your dad (or mom).”

Scripture helps us gain a composite picture of the image of God, both of what it is and what it isn’t. What is and is not the image of God according to...?

Genesis 5:1–3 (NIV) This is the written account of Adam’s family line. When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. ² He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them “Mankind” when they were created. ³ When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.

John 4:24 (NIV) God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

One of the ways for us to grasp what the image of God must have been in its perfection is to note the difference between our old self and our new self. Our new self is a spiritual re-creation of what Adam and Eve possessed before the fall. We might also try to categorize the beauty of God's image by noting how that image is reflected in human intellect, emotion, and will. It involves knowledge that is true and correct (intellect in line with God). It includes loving what God loves and hating what God hates (emotion in tune with God). It displays eagerness to act in accordance with what pleases God (will in line with God).

Read the quote below by Johann Gerhard, a theologian and a well-loved author of devotional literature in the 17th century. How does he eloquently define the beauty of this image of God in which both man and women were created?

Man was created in the highest innocence, in the highest purity of soul and body, so that in him as in a kind of living mirror the image of God shone forth. Thus the image of divine wisdom shone in the intellect of man; the image of goodness, patience, gentleness, and tolerance in the soul of man; the image of divine love and mercy shone in the feelings of the human heart; the image of divine righteousness, holiness and purity shone in the will of man; the image of friendliness, kindness, and truth in man's deeds and words. (Johann Gerhard, Loci, p. 246)

Search the verses from **Genesis chapter 2** listed below. Identify ways that Adam and Eve exhibited this awesome gift of the image of God.

Genesis 2:15-17

Genesis 2:18-20

Genesis 2:21-24

Genesis 2:25

What is the potential impact for male and female relationships if we would each look at the other as originally created in God's image?

The Purpose of Our Common Glorious Gift

After they fell, Adam and Eve heard "the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day." (**Genesis 3:8**) They recognized that sound immediately. What good thing does that tell us?

Undoubtedly as God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden, he desired fellowship with them. Because Adam and Eve were created in God's very image, they were able to relate with him in a uniquely personal way. They could all share the bliss and happiness that existed in the Godhead from eternity. With the people at your table or the table next to you, take 5 minutes to examine how these passages illustrate God's continuous desire and activity to rebuild the type of fellowship with him that we could enjoy.

Exodus 24:8–11 (NIV) Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." ⁹ Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up ¹⁰ and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. ¹¹ But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

Matthew 26:26–29 (NIV) While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Isaiah 62:4–5 (NIV) No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. ⁵ As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Matthew 22:1-14

Enjoying fellowship with God does not seem to be the only purpose for the gift of his image. Look at **Genesis 1:28-30**. This comes right after God created male and female in his image. Describe what God means by ruling over the earth and subduing it. (*Note: This is not the oppressive type of ruling that sinful man devises.*)

When we speak of God entrusting the care of his world to those created in his image, this does not mean that God has stepped back and has nothing to do with the day-to-day operation of his world. The world would then cease to exist. And yet, God does allow human beings to be his instruments in the world. He has entrusted much of his care of the world into the hands of his "representatives." Luther often spoke of this as the "masks" God wears.

Compare **Psalms 115:16** with **Psalms 24:1**. Explain how each passage adds to our understanding of what it means to care for God's creation as his representatives.

Psalms 115:16 (NIV) The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to mankind.

Psalms 24:1 (NIV) The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.

Because of the fall and the loss of God's image, our ruling and subduing a fallen world is marred and incomplete. To see evidence of that, compare **Genesis 1:26-30** with **Genesis 9:1-3**. Give examples from our fallen world of how mankind's ruling and subduing the world remains a blessing of God and where we can see this ruling and subduing marred by sin.

Genesis 1:26–30 (NIV) Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." ²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

Genesis 9:1–3 (NIV) Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. ² The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. ³ Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

What are the implications of the fact that God spoke to "them" (not just to Adam or just to Eve) about ruling over the earth and subduing it?

Why would human beings need the image of God if they were to properly carry out the task of ruling over the earth and subduing it?

Living It!

As male and female who are heirs together of God's gracious gift of life, what truths do we want to treasure in our hearts from this first lesson of our study?

List at least two ways your words and actions will be affected by what we have learned today.

As we close our lesson, for what does this lead us to pray?



For Further Study

A Third Purpose of the Image: Godly Offspring

It could very well be stated that a third purpose for God's image was to pass that image down to "godly offspring" who would join Adam and Eve in the care of God's creation. Even in our fallen world, this is still one of the great purposes behind marriage as God seeks to produce godly offspring from believing homes through his gospel. This is why the role of believing father and mother is so critical in the home!

For further study, consider these passages:

Malachi 2:15 (NIV) Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.

Ephesians 6:4 (NIV) Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.



Lesson 2: All God's People Share an Equal Status in Sin and Redemption

Paradise Lost

God created man and woman to enjoy a harmonious fellowship with God and each other that would reflect his image and reveal his glory. But once Satan introduced the concept of evil into the universe, it was not long until he looked for ways to drive a wedge between God and those created in his image. Suddenly the glorious panorama of pleasure, peace, and perfection in the garden becomes the ugly scene of sin, strife, and sorrow. Where Adam and Eve were in perfect harmony with God, now the exact opposite reveals itself. Sadly, that first sour note in human history has become a cacophony of sinful "noise" resounding from us all! Read the three sections of **Genesis chapter 3** listed below. Note the disharmony with God that appears in the intellect, emotion, and will of Adam and Eve. Discuss the evidence that God's image has been lost.

Genesis 3:1-7

Genesis 3:8-9

Genesis 3:10-13

Adam was no less responsible than Eve for the fall into sin (**Romans 5:14**). With their disobedience, the image of God is gone. Adam and Eve's emotions no longer love what God loves and hate what God hates. That image of God given to enjoy fellowship with God is now shattered. Joy in God's presence is replaced with fear. The fallout from that is a shattered fellowship between them. That shows itself with finger-pointing, resentment, and blame. Love and service were replaced with protecting self.

Like a somber, tolling bell, the Bible repeatedly rings out the sad tones of Adam and Eve's actions in the garden. Indicate what each of these sections of Scripture unfolds as the real problem behind the way we see things in our relationships today.

Genesis 6:5–6 (NIV) The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. ⁶ The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.

Romans 3:9-20

Did you notice the awful progression in the passages we studied above? We are reflections of sinful parents instead of a perfect God. From hearts depraved by nature (what we call "original sin") flow countless sinful thoughts, words, and actions (what we call "actual sins"). "Sinful" fits both the nature we possess from birth and the fruit that our nature produces. We have broken and shattered our fellowship with God and neighbor. Our whole purpose for living is distorted. Left to ourselves we have become nothing more than "worthless" clay that has lost its God-given purpose for the breath of life. Finally, unless God's grace intervenes, we are held guilty and accountable before God in this life and for eternity. This is an awful equality we all share as men and women!

Sin has complicated God's original purpose and design of creating men and women. Things don't flow together so smoothly anymore. We've wrecked things so badly that at times it is hard to visualize the original design of the architect and builder. From your experience, how does our "equality" as sinners infect our viewpoints and relationships between men and women?

We are so equal in sin it hurts! Both men and women have contributed to the troubles and tensions we at times feel toward one another. We must recognize our own sin and recognize our individual needs for God's mercy.

Paradise Regained

We can easily find ourselves wishing we could live like Adam and Eve did in the garden before the fall. Jesus not only shows us the grandeur and purpose of the original plan, he also set to work to restore it for us so we could live in perfect harmony with God and each other. The apostle Paul calls Jesus the "last Adam." Look at **Romans 5:18-19**. Explain the comparisons or contrasts between Adam and Jesus that identify how Jesus completely reversed the effects of their fall into sin.

Romans 5:18–19 (NIV) Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. ¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

It was God's eternal plan to make us in his image. Although sin shattered that plan, God made it possible again for us to enjoy that image through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. Read how Professor John Meyer helps us appreciate all the more this gift of being created in God's image:

God made man in his image. This was not the result of a momentary mood. It was his counsel from eternity. This thought filled eternity. And even if man has thrown this precious gift away in ingratitude, has left God's image and become God's enemy, God still has not given up his thought. He made man in his image and does not look at man differently, even after the fall. In accordance with the changed circumstances, he must deal differently with his image. He seeks to restore it. But it remains his image. In the beginning it was made by a creative act of God. Now it is "made" by the unspeakable sacrifice of God's Son and is "made" by the untiring working of the Holy Spirit. (John Meyer, p. 190)

Read **Galatians 3:26–4:7**. Paul intentionally uses the Greek word for “son” that carried with it the concept of being a full legal child of the family. In addition, among the Jews, if you were the firstborn son, you had the additional favored position of receiving a double portion of the family inheritance.

What is the comfort of **verse 26** for those wondering about their standing before God?

Look at **verse 27**. What gift does Baptism give us to assure us of our full status as children of God for both men and women?

Determine how the concept of “heirs” mentioned in **verse 29** adds to the concept of “sons” mentioned in the earlier verses.

What point is Paul making in **verse 28** when he writes that there is “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”?

God didn’t “equalize” everyone by bringing some down, but by bringing everyone up. In Christ those seen as in lowly positions in this world’s setting are raised up to share the highest status. None of the things that often mean so much to the people of our world—race, social standing, gender—make one bit of difference in our status before God. A female Greek slave was every bit as much a precious child of God as a male Jewish householder. We are all equally important and precious “legal sons” and “heirs” of God.

1 Peter 3:7 (NIV) Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. Peter calls the Christian wives' "heirs with you of God's gracious gift of life." What difference does it make in their relationship when a husband clearly understands this equal status and importance in God's sight?

Too often there are times husbands fail to treat wives with the respect Peter talks about. Explain how seriously that affects their relationship with God.

If we grasp the profound reality of being "heirs together," it has a transforming effect on our lives. How can we get closer to living out this co-heir relationship between men and women?

1 John 1:5–2:2

Colossians 3:9–10 (NIV) Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

2 Corinthians 5:16–18 (NIV) So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

Because **1 Peter 3:7** emphasizes the profound equality of men and women in our eternal status before God as “heirs together of God’s gracious gift of life,” this verse has become the title of this study. The same Greek term for “heirs” is also used in **Romans 8:17**. There Paul emphasizes that all those led by the Spirit of God are sons of God and “co-heirs with Christ.” God rebuilds the spirit and actions of the original relationship as we humbly confess how we’ve each sinned against these relationships and as we each grow more like Christ through the powerful influence of the Spirit in the means of grace.

Describe how today’s culture buries our valued identity in Christ by putting the emphasis on various tasks, jobs, skills, looks, ethnic backgrounds, gender, or roles in life.

Reflect on how important it is to remember our equal valued status in Christ when later we begin to speak about other challenging topics concerning our relationships and callings as women and men.

Living It!

As male and female who are heirs together of God’s gracious gift of life, what truths do we want to treasure in our hearts from this second lesson of our study?

List at least two ways your words and/or actions will be affected by what we have learned today.

As we close our lesson, for what does this lead us to pray?



For Further Study ***Galatians 3:26-4:7 in Context***

Galatians 3:26–4:7 traces for us the results of that great reversal that is ours in Jesus.

We don't want to force this passage to say any more (or less) than the Spirit's intended purpose. Recall the context of the book of Galatians. Certain false teachers ("Judaizers") were insisting that simple faith in Christ did not yet make gentile believers "full sons and heirs" in God's family. To become first-class children of God, they would need to submit to at least some regulations that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai. Only by becoming a Jew could a Gentile really be part of God's family.

The Greek word for "son" that Paul uses was a very important concept in the ancient world. The term "son" carried with it the concept of being a full legal child of the family. In addition, among the Jews, if you were the firstborn son, you had the additional favored position of receiving a double portion of the family inheritance. It was gaining just such a favored position in God's family that the Judaizers dangled before the gentile Christians of Galatia. It would be theirs, the Judaizers claimed, if only they would follow some of the laws and regulations the Jews received at Mount Sinai.

But what the Judaizers proposed as a giant "step ahead" would in reality be an awful double step backward. First, they would be putting themselves back under a covenant that was only temporary. That covenant was like a guardian under which Israel, as a minor child, lived until the time of its "maturity" when Christ came. For Gentiles to put themselves under the regulations of that covenant was to adopt something that had finished its purpose and was never intended for them!

But even worse, to put their trust for salvation even partly in outward obedience to laws would reject Christ's free gift of salvation. Either salvation is by grace or it is by works. It cannot be both, or grace ceases to be grace. If the gentile Christians listened to these Judaizers, that would not make them sons of God at all, but miserable slaves to a code of laws that not even Israel had been able to keep!

Our Spiritual Wedding Gown

One baptismal custom is the white baptismal "gown" (dress!) that infants—both girls and boys—have often worn for their baptisms. It was meant to be a tiny wedding dress. In keeping with the picture used in **Isaiah 61:10** (and elsewhere), it is a visible reminder that in the water of our baptism our Bridegroom (Christ) makes his promises of faithfulness to us. There he takes each of us to himself as a dear and precious part of his holy Christian church—his bride! In the water of Baptism, he washes us free from every sin and clothes us with the purity of the perfect life he lived for us.



Lesson 3: All God’s People Share a Common Mission: Equal Status and call to Service as Royal Priests of God

Priests deal with the holy things of God. They approach God in prayer and praise and represent God before the world. At Mount Sinai, God sealed Israel to himself as his special people. There he declared his purpose for them in the world: *“Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”* (**Exodus 19:5-6**). Even though he would use the tribe of Levi, and especially Aaron’s sons, in the public ministry of the old covenant, yet God intended that all the Israelites be a holy priesthood in service to him. In this way they would glorify their saving God as they waited for him to bring the world’s Messiah from their nation. So, too, God has a special calling for us who live as his people under his gracious new covenant in Jesus. In the water of Baptism, our Lord calls us all—men and women, young and old—into his glorious royal priesthood!

The Shared Blessing of Our Status as God’s Royal Priests

Read 1 Peter 2:4-10. Compare this section of 1 Peter with what once was true about us: *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.... Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world”* (**Ephesians 2:1,12**). How does that contrast add to our appreciation for what God has made us in Christ?

Peter mentions that the “spiritual sacrifices” we bring as God’s “holy priesthood” are “acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Describe how the following passages help us appreciate what astounding grace it is that God rejoices in our priestly sacrifices.

Isaiah 64:6 (NIV) All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

Revelation 1:5b–6 (NIV) To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

“Royal priesthood” is only one of several special names this section of 1 Peter chapter 2 uses for us as Christ’s church. Take 3 minutes with people at your table or a table nearby, read your assigned passage, and depict how each of the names below adds to the beauty of the picture Peter is painting.

Chosen People (**1 Corinthians 1:26-31**)

Holy Nation (**Revelation 7:9-14 & Galatians 3:26-27**)

A People Belonging to God (**Acts 20:28**)

In his commentary on Revelation, Siegbert Becker beautifully captures the gracious gift it is to be God’s royal priests (**Revelation 1:5b-6**).

It would already have been a tremendous gift of love if the Lord Jesus had only set us free from the punishment of our sins. The punishment of hell is so terrible that just the cancellation of that punishment would have provided us at least with the hope that our future would be without pain and torment, even if it would have been nothing more than untroubled sleep. But Jesus has not only set us free from punishment; he has given us an exalted position. John says that he has made us into a kingdom, a royal house of kings.... Not only has Jesus made us to be a kingdom, but we are also priests, who have the right to approach God directly in our own behalf and in behalf of other men. (pp. 30-31)

Discuss the ways men and women in Christ can encourage each other to appreciate what they share with this exalted position of priests.

God has given us grace upon grace to set before us the eternally important work of being his priests, his representatives, in this world. Our calling to let his light shine in all that we do wherever we are gives meaning and purpose to every activity of life.

The Shared Priestly Privilege of Service to God's Glory

It's one thing to be part of God's chosen, royal priesthood. It's another thing entirely to know what that will mean in my daily life. Our priesthood is far more than a mere honorary title. It is a position that daily holds before us the opportunity and privilege to carry out royal priestly service to God and those around us. It is the glorious restoration of the real purpose for life on earth that was lost when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. Let's develop a "job description" for what it means to be God's royal priests.

Read 1 Peter 2:9-12. Look again at **verse 9**. Peter gives a general overview of our "job description." We usually think quite narrowly when we talk about "declaring God's praises" or giving "glory to God." The word *praises* in that verse could more literally be translated God's "excellencies" or his "excellent works" or his "excellent virtues." Comparing Peter's words to Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 10:31** (*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*), formulate the wider "mission statement" as priests of God.

Peter's words are hardly an exhaustive listing of the glorious details of our royal priestly "job description." Part of the picture of priesthood means to live as heavenly "aliens and strangers" in the midst of the unbelieving culture around us. Peter gives further details about our priesthood in **verses 11-12**. He mentions that we are "aliens and strangers in the world." This is a theme that runs through his whole book. In what way are priests of God "aliens and strangers in the world"?

Examine the passages below and the activities implied. Express how they unfold more facets of this priesthood for men and women.

Romans 12:1 (NIV) Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Ephesians 6:18–20 (NIV) And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Galatians 6:1–2 (NIV) Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ² Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

James 5:19–20 (NIV) My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

At times we wrestle with ideas similar to the monks of Luther’s day. They believed that deeds done for Christ within the monastery walls (church and school) are much more holy than the other pursuits of life. We have often created a false barrier between “sacred” and “secular” as we live out our priestly role. How does each of the following passages broaden our understanding of where we live out our royal priesthood? Discuss one passage at your table.

Ephesians 5:22–6:4

Colossians 3:22–4:1

2 Kings 5:1-3

Jesus shakes up the way the world measures the most important tasks and people. How do the following passages help us define what service and people are important to God?

Mark 9:33-37, 41

Mark 10:35-45

The whole world of our lives becomes the grand and glorious venue for our royal priestly service to God. By the world's standards, much of what a Christian may do in service to Christ will be considered to be "unimportant" service given to those who are "insignificant." What might be some of examples of that?

Since women are often specially gifted by God in the nurturing of relationships (in particular with children), how will our society's attitudes about what is important prove to be a special challenge for Christian women?

In future lessons, we will be developing a deep appreciation for the unique differences in our callings as men and women—including how it relates to working together in the ministry of the church. As we consider all that our calling as royal priests includes, how does that help keep in proper perspective future discussions about unique roles in public ministry?

How foolish it is if we begin to envy or boast about particular areas of public ministry that God may have uniquely assigned to others or ourselves. Aren't we right back to where the first disciples often were: arguing about positions that they determined were "greater" or more "glorious"? Once we learn to see every task in life as glorious service to the God who has saved us, many of these arguments fall to the ground of their own weight. Who gets to do the "important" service? We all do!

Our calling as God's royal priesthood is lived out in everything we do and everywhere we are. While making sure God's people are encouraged to use their talents, how do we ensure that it is "balanced"?

Our calling to faith in Christ gave us the calling of royal priests of God. But our common calling to faith that made us royal priests is lived out day by day in many different callings in which God places us. We live out our common calling as royal priests in the midst of many unique callings, such as husband or wife, parent or child, employer or employee. Those unique callings God gives us will often impact exactly how we exercise our priesthood for the benefit of others. However, no matter what our particular unique callings may be, we still remain royal priests of God in all of them with the privilege and responsibility that brings.

Living It!

As male and female who are heirs together of God's gracious gift of life, what truths do we want to treasure in our hearts from this third lesson of our study?

List at least two ways your words and/or actions will be affected by what we have learned today.

As we close our lesson, for what does this lead us to pray?



For Further Study Christianity and Slavery

Slavery as an institution was not in God's design for a perfect world. Human sin and its consequences are always involved when one human becomes the "property" of another. While Scripture repeatedly establishes head and helper as part of his perfect plan, there is no such defense of slavery.

Yet it is also noteworthy that neither the Old nor New Testament directly sets out to dismantle this part of the prevailing social order. Scripture understands that the real problem in this life is not corrupt social structures but the corrupt hearts of sinners, who distort every social structure that exists. That's why the goal of the kingdom of God for this life is not a futile attempt to re-establish the Garden of Eden. Christ's kingdom is not of this world (**John 18:36**). Only God's destruction of this present world on the Last Day and the glorious re-creation of his new heaven and new earth (**2 Peter 3:10-13**) will accomplish the outward restoration of perfection.

Until then, the kingdom of God is about inwardly changing hearts one by one by the power of the Spirit through the preaching and teaching of the gospel in Word and sacraments. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking [or other merely outward things of this life], but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (**Romans 14:17**).

However, once hearts have learned to know that inward righteousness, peace, and joy, they also seek to reflect that more and more in every part of their lives. As we rejoice in our status as God's children in the kingdom of heaven, we also remember that we are salt and light in the midst of the earthly kingdom in which God has also placed us.

All of that helps us understand why Scripture's words to Christian slaves are not about how to organize a mass revolt. Paul certainly does encourage those who could gain their freedom to do so (**1 Corinthians 7:21**). Yet more than anything, Scripture urges Christian slaves to offer service to their earthly masters as if they were serving Christ himself (Ephesians 6:5). For Christian slaves serving unbelieving masters, what rich opportunity for a witness to the truth of the gospel that would bring (**Titus 2:9-10**)!

Perhaps even more interesting are Scripture's words to Christian masters. Nowhere is there a universal call to all Christian masters to immediately free their slaves. In the society of that day, such a well-intentioned action would often have freed people for nothing but abject poverty. There was no parallel "employer-employee" system waiting for an eager workforce. What Scripture does is remind Christian masters that they and their slaves have a common

Master in heaven (**Ephesians 6:9**). While not instantly dissolving the master-slave relationship, the gospel enables them to recognize and serve one another as equal members of the same spiritual family.

Particularly fascinating to consider is Paul's encouragement to Philemon to receive back his runaway slave—Onesimus—no longer as a slave but as a dear brother in Christ. While this is an encouragement given in a specific setting, wherever more and more Christian masters followed suit, slavery often collapsed under its own weight.

Rewards of Grace

In **Matthew 6:4** Jesus comments on the rewards of grace. At times we are hesitant to preach and teach about how God remembers and rewards the faithful service of his people. We certainly don't want to create a "work for wages" spirit that would distort grace. And promised rewards aren't our motivation or strength to produce fruits of faith. Yet "rewards of grace" are a biblical encouragement that God's Word does give to his people. The world laughs at, ridicules, and devalues the service that Christians give to one another. But God wants his people to know, for their encouragement, that he thinks quite differently! We risk saying less than God's Word says if we ignore these statements of Scripture.

If we could see the headlines of the *Heavenly Tribune*, we would realize that what God considers headline news is far different from the stories that make front-page news by the world's standards. Wouldn't they be headlines like these: "*Father and Mother Work Extra Hours to Pay for Children's Christian Education*," "*Christian Friend Helps Discouraged Fellow Believer to Find Strength in God*," "*Church Maintenance Man Cleans Up Cheerios in the Back Pew for the Hundredth Time Without Complaining*"?

Who Is in Full-Time Service of Christ?

God has established both the priesthood of all believers and the public ministry of his church. While every Christian is called in the water of Baptism into the royal priesthood of all believers, it is Christ's call through his church that places some royal priests also into the public ministry. It has been very difficult in the church to maintain a proper biblical honor for both the priesthood of all believers as well as the public ministry. Often the church errs by exalting one at the expense of the other.

For example, we sometimes speak about those in the public ministry as those who are in the "full-time service" of the Lord. That certainly can be understood properly. Those serving in the public ministry earn their living from gospel work. (**1 Corinthians 9:14** says, "Those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.")

Yet that can also give the impression that being a royal priest of God is not “full-time service” to the Lord. That we don’t want to say! Every royal priest, wherever she or he is, is always involved in “full-time service” to the Savior.

It is tempting to import the world’s ideas of “important” and “lesser important” into the picture. Instead, what it is really all about is rejoicing in whatever callings God places before us and serving in them with all the strength his grace gives us. We would do well to consider carefully how we speak about this biblical distinction. We do not want to downplay either the royal priesthood or the public ministry.

What’s Wrong With This Picture?

Consider the following quotation from an article in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* written by Ken Cherney, Jr. (“Hidden in Plain Sight: Luther’s Doctrine of Vocation”). As you read, prepare to answer the question he asks at the end: Was something wrong here? And, if so, what?

My practical introduction to Luther’s doctrine of vocation took place during my vicar year. Among the saints whom I was serving there was a middle-aged lady whose life reflected the love of Christ in a hundred different ways. She was the church secretary, and no church ever had one more dedicated. She was active in several church organizations. She raised three daughters to be active, professing Christians. She kept a neat and comfortable home from which no one ever went away hungry. One day, as part of a program sponsored jointly by the congregations in our area, a high-powered speaker from synodical headquarters came to town. His topic was personal evangelism. After his energetic and compelling presentation, our canvassers hit the streets with enthusiasm, and the lady I mentioned was among them. We talked afterward and compared our canvassing experiences. As I recall, they were typical: warm receptions in a few homes, polite disinterest in most, open hostility in one or two. But what bothered this lady most wasn’t the apathy or the resistance she’d encountered. It was the fact that she, a middle-aged Christian, was just now doing this for the first time. “Vicar, I can’t help feeling that I’ve been wasting my life,” she said. All because she hadn’t been out on the street, pushing doorbells. Something was wrong here; but at the time, I wasn’t sure exactly what. (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 98, #4, p. 278)



Lesson 4: All God's People Possess Spiritual Gifts for the Common Good

Psalm 139:14 David exclaims to the Lord, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." How right David was to be astounded at the wonder of the human body. It is an amazing unity with an astounding diversity of perfectly arranged parts! Every cell of our body shares a common DNA, yet each cell is uniquely arranged and equipped to carry out its particular God-given function for the benefit of the whole body.

So it is also in the body of Christ. Each one of us has been added to that glorious body by the Spirit's gift of faith in Christ. We have much in common as those who share a common spiritual DNA in Christ. Yet we also are uniquely gifted by Christ to carry out our unique callings as his children.

The Calling Above All Callings

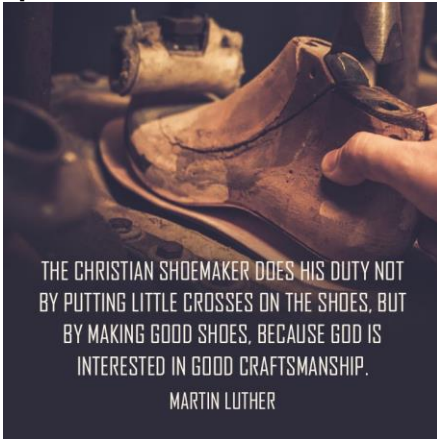
Luther spoke much about the glorious privilege of being tools and representatives of God in the various **vocations** or **callings** that God gives us in this life (mother, father, husband, wife, daughter, son, employer, employee, friend, neighbor, etc.).

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the most common, and by far the most important, New Testament use of the term **calling** is the use Paul makes of it in **Ephesians 4:1**. When Scripture mentions our **calling**, the Holy Spirit is almost always speaking of that powerful call to faith we received in the gospel. That **calling** comes to us, first of all, with the glorious "not guilty" verdict God has spoken to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. That calling also comes with the Spirit's power to work faith in our hearts through that same gospel (**Romans 1:16-17**).

It is alone because of the **calling** that worked faith in our hearts that we can see tasks in our lives as God-given high and holy **callings**. Because unbelievers do not know the joy of God's **calling** to faith in Christ, they cannot see the tasks of their lives as **callings** from their gracious God. Apart from faith in Christ, unbelievers cannot see their tasks in life as glorious opportunities to be channels of God's grace to all whom their lives touch. Where there is no understanding of God's **calling** to faith, there are no true **callings**.

But in and through our **calling** to faith in Christ, a whole new gracious vista is opened to us to see high and holy **callings** from our God in **every** task given to us in life (**Romans 12:1-2**). Many examples of what this means will come in future lessons of this Bible study!

Spiritual Gifts We Share in the Body of Christ



Of all the letters of Paul, no letter more beautifully holds before us the glory of Christ's holy church than Ephesians. In chapter 4, Paul speaks about the unique gifts the ascended Lord gives to every part of his body. But he begins that chapter by reminding us of what we have in common. What we have in common is always far greater and more important than what is different about each of us as Christians.

In speaking of unique **callings** for Christian men and women rather than speaking of unique **roles**, this Bible study seeks to renew the use of a term that has a long history in the Lutheran church.

Read Ephesians 4:1-6. Ephesians 4:1 is Paul's introduction to the rest of his letter: "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." Why is this such a powerful gospel encouragement for our lives?

Recall Paul's analogy of the human body. Why do you think Paul begins with his listing of shared blessings before moving on to unique gifts?

Often Scripture uses the number seven as a symbol of perfection and completeness. The number seven is also accepted as the number of the covenant: God's unbreakable commitment to restore the original glorious relationship between God and humankind. In Ephesians chapter 4, with a powerful sevenfold brushstroke, Paul paints a picture of the perfect and complete blessings we share in the Holy Christian Church. How does each of the seven shared blessings he lists add to the beauty of the picture Paul paints about what we have in common?

One Body

One Spirit

One Hope

One Lord [Jesus Christ]

One Faith

One Baptism

One God and Father of All

Before moving on to unique spiritual gifts, read **Galatians 5:22-23** where Paul lists another spiritual gift held in common by every part of the body of Christ. *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”* This fruit of the Spirit—all nine things mentioned—is a crop produced by the Holy Spirit in every believer’s heart and life. Why is it important to note that God intends each of us to possess everything listed here as “the fruit of the Spirit”?

Clarify why focusing on the gifts we share as members of the one body of Christ helps us relate to one another as Christian women and men.

Spiritual Gifts Unique to Each of Us in the Body of Christ

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul asks us to picture the hopeless state of our physical body if the whole body were only an eye. What potential for amazing vision we would have! Except for the fact that we wouldn’t have an optic nerve to transmit what we have seen...or a brain to process the wonder of what we’re seeing...or the ability to move from place to place to see new sights...or...well, you get the idea. While the unity of our physical bodies with its shared DNA is a rich gift to us, so is the diversity God has designed—each part equipped just so, not for service to itself, but for service to the rest of the body.

Read Ephesians 4:7-16. Jesus, as our risen and ascended Lord, is pictured as richly and royally distributing gifts to his church from his position of rule and authority at the Father’s right hand. The “measure” of our unique spiritual gifts comes just as Christ has apportioned them. How is that a comfort to us?

How does **Ephesians 2:10** “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,” add to our appreciation of this picture?

In **Ephesians 4:11** Paul begins to talk about the unique gifts our Lord has given his church. He mentions first of all some offices Christ has given to his church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers. We could summarize this gift that Christ gives for the benefit of his church with the term “public ministry” (or representative ministry). Notice that it was “[Christ] who gave some” for these various tasks of public ministry. We are dealing with this gift from Christ whenever we as royal priests of God ask (“call”) another priest to serve us in Christ’s name in some special way within the body of Christ. We call that person to oversee a specific part of the common gospel ministry entrusted to us all as royal priests.

Look also at **Acts 20:28**. *“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”* How is the importance of those serving over God’s people stressed?

Go back to **Ephesians 4:12**. Put into your own words the purpose Paul lists for Christ’s gift to us of those serving in the public ministry.

Read **Ephesians 4:12b-13**. Define God’s goal of equipping of his people.

How does this purpose put into proper perspective the importance of the unique gifts that God has given to each of us?

Look at **verse 14**. Here Paul shows us what happens when we fail to help one another grow to maturity in Christ. Into what grave spiritual danger does this place us?

Look at **verses 15-16**. What happens as we put our gifts to work in service of the gospel and for the benefit of the body?

Paul understood that a two-edged temptation comes with the unique gifts Christ has given to each of us. On the one side is the temptation to envy when we conclude that our gifts are inferior to a fellow Christian's. On the other side is the temptation to pride when we are convinced that our gifts are more important than the gifts of others. Read **1 Corinthians 12:14-20; 21-26**. How does Paul answer both temptations?

How do Paul's words in **Philippians 2:1-4** and **1 Corinthians 4:7** also help us combat both pride and envy?

There are four significant listings in the New Testament of unique spiritual gifts with which Christ through the Spirit graces his Church. In fact, the most common term for spiritual gifts used in the New Testament is "charisma," which can mean "grace at work." Take 7 minutes with people at your table or another table near you and read **Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; 27-31; Ephesians 4:11; & 1 Peter 4:10-11**. Below, mark was is similar and different about the various gifts.

Similarities	Differences

The Bible does not give us a separate “men’s” and “women’s” list of spiritual gifts. What does that tell us?

Recall how Paul, in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, deals with envy and arrogance in regard to spiritual gifts. How can this help us in relating to one another as Christian women and men?

Why is it similarly foolish to debate whether the public ministry or the priesthood of all believers is more important to the proper functioning of the body of Christ?

God, who has given all these gifts to each of us, has the right to define how such gifts are to be used. What happens, however, when we fail to make full biblical use of **all** the gifts God has given to **all** his people?

Living It!

As male and female who are heirs together of God’s gracious gift of life, what truths do we want to treasure in our hearts from this fourth lesson of our study?

List at least two ways your words and/or actions will be affected by what we have learned today.

As we close our lesson, for what does this lead us to pray?



For Further Study

This Is Not Popular Culture's Faith and Hope!

If we are working with different definitions, it is easy to talk right past one another, even when we use the same terms. The biblical definitions of *faith* and *hope* are vastly different from how those words are used in popular culture. Our popular culture has "faith" in "faith." It doesn't matter who or what that faith is in. You just "gotta have faith." Faith becomes a meritorious deed that we do no matter what it is in, just as long as it's strong and sincere. As long as you have faith, it doesn't even matter if that faith is a blind leap into the unknown.

How different is the "faith" spoken of in Scripture! First of all, faith is not a work of man but a gift of the Holy Spirit. What is more, far from some kind of meritorious work that is praised because of its quality, faith is prized because of its **object**. Faith itself is not of primary importance, but that to which faith clings: Christ's mercy, his forgiveness, his salvation. Faith is a meaningless and empty delusion unless it clings to Jesus. Faith is not a blind leap into the unknown. It is a Spirit-worked certainty that the real things of life are the unseen blessings of God that can't pass away. Such a biblical definition of faith can be seen in verses such as **1 Corinthians 12:3; Hebrews 11:1; & Romans 4:18-21**.

Popular culture and Scripture also define hope in a vastly different way. In our culture, hope is often little more than a fond wish—with little or no reason supporting it—that somehow things will get better.

In Scripture, hope is the assurance of a blessed outcome to all things that is founded not on some empty wish but on the certainty of the unfathomable depths of God's grace to us in Jesus. Hope is the certainty that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (**Romans 8:28**). Hope is faith looking forward with confidence. Perhaps no passage of Scripture more beautifully captures the certainty of our hope better than **1 Peter 1:3-5**.

Who Is Called Into the Public Ministry?

The first unique gift Paul mentions that Christ gives to his church is the gift of the public ministry (representative ministry) and those who serve in it. The public ministry is a rich gift that Christ has instituted in his church. We are dealing with this gift from Christ whenever we as royal priests of God ask ("call") another priest to serve us in Christ's name in some special way within the body of Christ. We call them to oversee a specific part of the common gospel ministry entrusted to us all as royal priests. While an inner desire to serve in this public ministry is a good thing (some refer to this as the "inner call"), no one is in the public ministry without the "outer call" that comes from Christ through his royal priests (**Hebrews 5:4-5**).

“Self-appointed” public ministers violate the rights of the priesthood of all believers by taking to themselves work that neither Christ nor his church has given them.

Sometimes this call into the public ministry comes from Christ through his royal priests in a formal way (call list, call meeting, formal document) and asks those receiving it to devote their “full-time” working hours to this task (such as a teacher, pastor, or staff minister). At other times, the call comes more informally (phone call from the pastor or board of education chairman) and asks the one receiving it to serve in this office (part-time staff minister, Sunday school teacher, vacation Bible school coordinator) in addition to another “full-time” occupation. Yet in one important way, it doesn’t matter whether the call comes in a formal or informal manner or whether the call will take 60 hours a week or six. Whenever Christ through his royal priests asks someone to oversee a specified part of our shared gospel ministry, that is service in the public ministry. Passages such as **Acts 20:28** and **Hebrews 13:7** help establish why Christ gave to us the gift of those who serve in the public ministry.

Charisma—Spiritual Gifts

The term “spiritual gifts” comes from a Greek word—*charisma*—which often has a meaning of “grace at work.” “Spiritual gifts” is a very broad term in the New Testament. It is a biblical concept broad enough to include gracious gifts we have in common (saving faith, eternal life, etc.) and gracious gifts that are uniquely distributed according to Christ’s perfect measure to each of us. It includes sanctified “natural talents” now pressed into glorious service to Christ as well as special gifts given through the gospel to believers after their conversion. It includes particular persons (particular leaders given to the church such as Paul), tasks, and offices (the office of apostle, for example), as well as specific talents and abilities that can be used in many different callings. It includes more outwardly “ordinary” gifts that will always be found in every age of the church (teaching, shepherding), as well as the more “spectacular” gifts (workers of miracles, speaking in otherwise unknown languages) that God has not promised in every age or place (nor certainly to every Christian). It is vital to remember that the more “ordinary” gifts are actually the more necessary gifts for the building up of the church (**1 Corinthians 14:19**).

It should not surprise us that God’s grace is so rich and free. He pours out a wide variety of “spiritual gifts” to meet the needs unique to every time and place in which his people will find themselves this side of heaven. In every age and in every place, we will always be able to say to God’s gathered people what Paul once said to the Corinthians: “You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed” (**1 Corinthians 1:7**).



Lesson 5: Equal in Status but Unique in Calling

Where in the world do you see people holding equal status and yet having unique and valuable callings?

God Reveals in the Garden Our Unique Callings as Men and Women

In literature or movies, it is called a flashback. In sports it's a slow-motion replay. In both cases the story or the game is interrupted for a look back. The purpose of going back is to gain a new perspective or insight. New attention is brought to some previous detail of the story or game that may not have been fully appreciated.

In **Genesis 1:27** we saw a clear and powerful statement of the equality of man and woman. There the Bible clearly tells us that male and female share the gift of God's image. But in that same verse, Moses' inspired pen also provides us with the first hint of unique callings. As Moses speaks of their creation, we notice a progression in each line of that verse. We move from "man[kind]," to "him," to "them." By that, Moses begins to prepare us for what we will read in much more explicit detail in chapter 2.

In many ways, Genesis chapter 2 is a flashback or slow-motion replay of Genesis chapter 1. The creation of Adam and Eve was passed over quite rapidly in Genesis chapter 1, but in Genesis chapter 2 we go back for a detailed look at precisely how that took place. As we go back, we gain a confirmation of the *equality in status* we share as women and men in God's world. But we will also be given a more detailed look at the high and holy *unique callings* God had in mind for men and women. This, too, was part of God's plan from the very first moment of the existence of Adam and Eve.

For each part of Genesis chapter 2, we will look for details that help us see the unique callings God has given to us. As we do this, we will want to remember that both our equality in status and our unique callings are good gifts. They are just another glimpse of how God has designed his church, the body of Christ, with a glorious unity (one body that shares a common Savior and purpose) in diversity (many distinct parts with unique gifts to serve the Head and one another).

Moses has a subtle but beautiful way of emphasizing that what we read in chapter 2 is a listing of gifts that come from a faithful and loving Father. In Genesis chapter 1, the Creator is identified exclusively by the name "God." That name stresses the awesomeness of his power as the infinite divine being. However, beginning with **Genesis 2:4** Moses almost exclusively uses God's special name of covenant faithfulness: "the LORD God." This name for our Creator emphasizes his goodness and faithfulness to his promises. Remember that in this section of Genesis we have only the actions of the perfect "LORD" God shaping his perfect creation. No details of this narrative happen without divine planning and purpose. No human sinfulness is around to mar his work. Nothing is contrary to his will. God is setting the foundations for how he designed human beings to live in his world.

In each of the following segments, list items that hint at or state what is unique to our callings as women and men in God's world.

Genesis 2:4-7

Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17

Genesis 2:18-25

*For clarity, it is also important to note that the term "helper" in and of itself does not imply a unique or subordinate role. In fact, "helper" is a term most often used in the Bible to describe God himself as he supplies what is lacking for us and on whom we depend (for example, **Psalm 33:20**).*

Where in **Genesis 2:4-25** do you see Adam recognizing that Eve is someone of equal status with him?

Read Genesis 3:16-19 to understand more insights into their uniqueness. God's words to Adam and Eve after the fall into sin mark changes sin will bring into God's perfect plan for men and women. God isn't stating what **should be** with these words but what often **will be** because of the addition of human sinfulness. We'll talk more about the changes human sin has brought when we discuss male and female interaction in marriage two lessons from now. However, we notice a clear difference in the focus of fatherly discipline that the Lord first speaks to Eve and then to Adam. Consider the unique categories of the discipline for Eve and then for Adam. In what way may those reflect some created differences between male and female?

Some Christians hold the opinion that any unique callings for men and women are only the results of the fall into sin. How does a careful study of Genesis chapter 2 help you to answer their concerns?

The Bible Interprets the Bible to Confirm Our Unique Callings

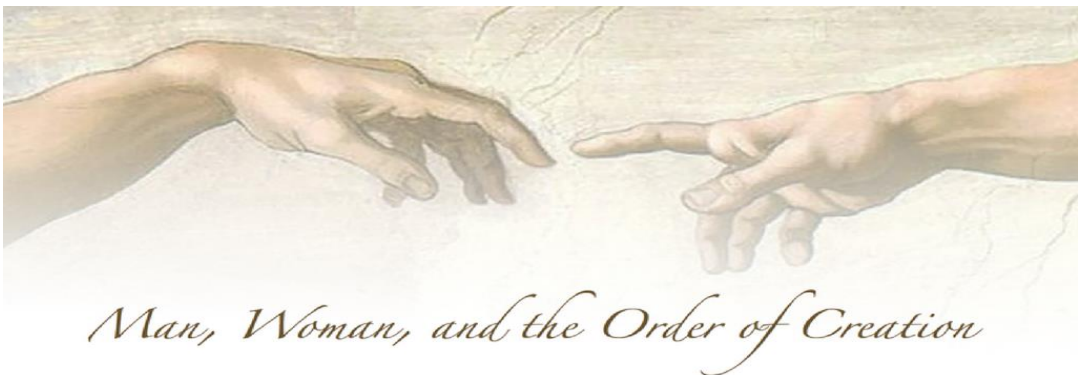
While the narrative of Genesis chapter 2 itself reveals our unique callings as men and women, some might wonder if we are legitimately getting that out of the Bible or illegitimately reading it into the Bible. Therefore, we turn to a New Testament passage which confirms that we have not misunderstood Genesis chapter 2. In that way we let Scripture interpret Scripture.

Some context is needed to set the scene for the verses we will look at from 1 Corinthians chapter 11. In the culture of Paul's day, even pagan societies showed that they recognized by nature that there were important distinctions to make about the interaction of women and men. This was acknowledged even in the unbelieving world by the fact that the custom was for women to wear a head covering. Some women in the Corinthian congregation appear to have assumed that their Christian freedom ("Everything is permissible!" **1 Corinthians 10:23**) gave them the right to ignore that cultural custom. They failed to consider the message such a rejection of social custom would send about their God-given callings as women and men.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:7-12. As we look at **verse 7**, we need to let the Bible interpret the Bible. Paul is not saying that only Adam was created in the image of God. That would be interpreting this verse in a way that contradicts the simple and clear message of **Genesis 1:27** ("In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them"). Paul would also be contradicting himself, since elsewhere he speaks of the new self of the believer (both in men and women) as the re-creation of the image of God within us (**Colossians 3:10**). In context, Paul himself tells us what he is emphasizing in **verse 7**. In **verses 8-9**, how does Paul show that the Corinthian Christians were in danger of rejecting far more than a social custom of the day?

Paul's use of the Genesis chapter 2 account confirms that we were not misreading that chapter as we saw clear indications of our unique callings as women and men. What specific points from Genesis 2 does Paul emphasize?

Paul stated the principle of our unique callings in **verses 8-9**. How does Paul help us to stay "balanced" by what he adds in **verses 11- 12**?



God's Well-Ordered Creation

What we have studied today is **one part** of what students of God's Word have often called **the order of creation**. The order of creation is the grand and beautiful design for how God "ordered" his entire universe. His universe is an interlocking interdependence of equally wonderful yet different parts.

A key aspect of that order of creation is God's design of the crown jewel of his creation. God created male and female in his image as unique but interdependent creatures to work and interact with one another as they care for his world and so bring honor to his name.

Our creation as male and female is not some afterthought or needless duplication in his created order. God designed both male and female to contribute what is unique to our callings. In that way we carry to completion the task he has given us to reflect the glorious image of a gracious God to a now fallen world. We ignore our unique place in the order of creation to the harm of our own and others' physical, emotional, and spiritual welfare.

One part of the order of creation is the "order" in which God first created Adam and then Eve. Scripture specifically calls our attention to that point. But that "order" in which God first created Adam and then Eve is not the whole story of the order of creation. That chronological order is only one thread of the beautiful tapestry God wove into his entire creation.

Why is it important to understand the concept **order of creation** as God's wise and overarching design for his entire universe? What can happen if we think too narrowly of this concept only as the "order" of Adam and Eve's creation? We can easily fall to the temptation to distort order of creation as if it were a convenient phrase to hurl at others to keep them "in their place."

But the order of God's creation is really a comforting truth for us all to ponder. It speaks about the unique place for which God perfectly fitted each of us. The order of creation is a powerful reminder to every Christian to assist one another to live out the unique contribution God designed us to have in his world.

It is really awesome to consider that our unique callings are part of the intricate tapestry God has woven into the fabric of his creation. We are all created equal, but that does not mean we were all created to be identical.

Some would suggest that the unique callings about which Paul (and other biblical authors) speaks reflect only temporary societal norms. They suggest we are free either to copy or ignore such unique callings in our culture. What have you discovered in this study?

How would you answer those who hold that equality of status is incompatible with uniqueness of calling?

Living It!

As male and female who are heirs together of God's gracious gift of life, what truths do we want to treasure in our hearts from this fifth lesson of our study?

List at least two ways your words and/or actions will be affected by what we have learned today.

As we close our lesson, for what does this lead us to pray?



For Further Study

Feminism: You Can't Tell the Players Without a Program

Radical feminism refuses to grant that there are any inborn differences between men and women other than obvious biological ones. All other differences between men and women are only cultural creations rather than intrinsic differences (“nurture,” not “nature”). Radical feminism tends to treat scriptural statements about unique callings for men and women as evidence of the cultural bias of the authors of the Bible. This perspective is almost always accompanied by a “low” view of Scripture that severely limits or completely denies the God’s control of the writing and transmission of the Bible.

However, there are some among those who claim to take the Scriptures seriously who state that the Bible establishes no distinctions in calling between men and women. They are often called **evangelical feminists** or, more commonly, **egalitarians**. Egalitarians believe that equal status as children of God is incompatible with distinctions in calling. Egalitarians claim the first two chapters of Genesis know nothing about distinctive callings for men and women in a perfect world. They claim these unique callings are an accommodation to the fact that women and men now live as sinners in a fallen world. They believe it is a fruit of the gospel that any such distinctions disappear as Christians live and work with each other at home, in the church, and in the world.

By contrast, the approach of this Bible study—and what its authors are convinced is the clear teaching of Scripture—is often called **complementarian**. Complementarians are convinced that there is no contradiction between equality of status and uniqueness of calling. Complementarians believe that unique callings are established already in the perfection of the Garden of Eden as a beautiful part of God’s creative plan. The gospel does not cancel these unique callings. What the gospel does is begin to overcome the sinful distortions of these unique callings about which God spoke in Genesis chapter 3.

The Corinthian Situation Reversed? Something to Ponder!

In Corinth, in order to maintain the biblical principle of unique callings, it was important that the Christians not act in a loveless manner by using their Christian freedom to ignore the societal custom of head coverings for women. Even though Scripture neither commands nor forbids such head coverings, for the Christians to discard that custom would give the impression to the culture around them that they were abandoning the principle itself. The Corinthians Christians would appear to be subtracting from Scripture.

In our culture's rush to establish equality of women and men, many similar societal customs have changed. Some of those changes were positive, since some societal customs actually spoke against the biblical concept of equality of status before God. Among those positive changes is the concept of equal pay for equal work. However, in the rush to establish equality, many societal customs have been discarded that reflected an understanding of unique callings for men and women.

For a Christian congregation to follow suit and throw aside customs that reflect the unique callings of men and women would send a confusing message. We would seem to be rejecting that we believe unique callings exist. Like Corinth, we would be in danger of **subtracting** from Scripture.

However, **the opposite danger** from Corinth may also be present. If we don't analyze our customs regularly in the light of the principles of Scripture, there is the danger that we may appear to be **adding** to Scripture. We need to be asking: Do any of the customs we have maintained unintentionally signal inequality of status rather than simply reflecting uniqueness of calling? We cannot by a careless clinging to custom give the impression to the culture around us that Lutherans believe in the inequality of women and men. That would be constructing a manmade barrier in the path of the gospel.

Biblical principles never change. But our customs that seek to reflect such principles, and the impressions they give to a changing culture around us, may change. This is something every congregation of believers must wrestle with regularly. When this sends us back to the Scriptures to grasp ever more firmly the biblical principle behind our customs, then such wrestling is always profitable. Only then will we have the spiritual wisdom to keep or alter customs so that we reflect that scriptural truth as clearly as possible to the culture around us.

An Example of a Necessary Change?

A specific example of the danger of seeming to "add" to the Scriptures might be helpful. Two generations ago our congregations would have had few if any mixed (male and female) committees. This reflected the practice of society around the church as well.

However, much has changed in our society. Today men and women serve together in almost every workplace or community group. If our congregations refuse to consider where women may serve with men on task forces and committees—without violating the principle of the unique callings of head and helper—we may be saying much more to our society than we

may realize. We may in fact be confirming in the minds of those “on the outside” that we believe not only in unique callings but also in inequality of status between men and women.

Are we ever unintentionally implying that the women of our congregations have little or no wisdom or insight to contribute beyond what the men of the congregation possess? We may be communicating that women are not really the suitable helpers God created them to be. In fact, analyzing such customs carefully will not only send a clearer impression to the world, but we will also learn to treasure even better the gifts and talents God has richly showered on both the men and women in the congregation.

An Illustration From a Grandfather Clock

The following paragraph help illustrate the biblical concept of equality in status yet uniqueness in calling. Is there any place this analogy “limps” and seems to say more or less than Scripture does?

Picture a beautiful grandfather clock. Think of its many carefully designed and crafted pieces: the face of the clock, the hands, the gears, the pendulum, and finally, the case. Which is more important? They are all equally important to a functioning clock. But does that make equally important parts interchangeable? Hardly! Just try to substitute the gears for the pendulum or the case for the hands. A beautiful and intricate creation of the clockmaker will grind to an abrupt halt if the equally important parts are treated as identical in purpose and therefore interchangeable.

So it is with male and female. God has fashioned us as equally important parts of an interdependent whole. Yet that does not make us interchangeable as men and women. As women and men embrace not only our equality of status but our uniqueness of calling, we are able to grasp how we fit together in God’s world. This is not a matter of inferiority or superiority in value. Christ ended the need and purpose of all such debate at his cross. This is a matter of equally valued children of God living out unique God-given callings for unique contributions to the good of God’s kingdom and the glory of his gracious name.



Lesson 6: The Beautiful Biblical Concepts of Head, Helper, and Calling

In the fall into sin, Adam and Eve rejected God's rule of their lives. They ignored the specific command God had given them not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. They rejected the cardinal truth at the heart of God's order of creation: Human beings were designed to live under God as his creatures, not next to God as his equals.

However, the fall into sin did not just affect their relationship with God. Whenever human beings step out of line in their relationship with God, it always distorts their relationship with each other as well. Ever since, sinful human nature has struggled against God's design for the callings of head and helper. As sinful creatures we abuse, distort, or ignore the high and holy callings God had in mind when he first designed the concept of head and helper.

In this lesson, we seek to recapture from Scripture the beauty of how God designed our unique callings to work to his glory and our service to one another.

Redeeming the High and Holy Calling of Head

Luther maintained that sinful human nature resembles a drunken person riding a donkey. After that person falls off one side of the donkey, he picks himself up, brushes himself off, gets back on the donkey, and then proceeds to lean too far to the other side, and in so doing, falls off in the opposite direction. When many think of headship, they immediately think of those who have abused the power of that position in the course of history. The examples could be endless. However, the "overcorrection" that often occurs is to cancel any idea of authority from the concept of headship and think of it only from the perspective of service. If only someone could show us the middle ground of perfectly balancing both aspects of being a head!

That is precisely what we have in our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the perfect head of his church. He sets the example for all who would serve as heads under him. But even more importantly, by his saving grace he accomplishes for us two gifts of his grace. He forgives the abuses of those he calls to be heads, and he empowers them to function as head in balanced authority and service. In **Ephesians 1:15-23** we have a powerful witness to the beauty of true headship lived out by our Lord.

Read Ephesians 1:15-23. In this section Paul is praying for the Ephesian Christians (and therefore also for us). As he mentions in verse 18, he is praying that our eyes of faith may be opened to see the true glory of what it means that Christ is our Head. From these nine verses, list what it means that Jesus is our Head.

Your table will be assigned to read one of the following passages. Take 3 minutes to answer how your passage fills out the concept of headship as we see it in perfection in Christ?

Matthew 28:18-20

Ephesians 4:7-13

Mark 10:45

Philippians 2:5-11

Now let's turn our attention to human beings serving as heads. How do each of the following passages give us a glimpse of what it means to imitate Christ's headship for his church? Take 3 minutes to read the passage assigned to your table and be ready to share with the class.

Hebrews 13:17

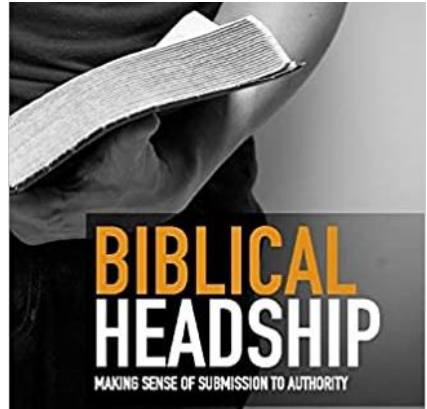
Ephesians 4:11-16

Acts 20:28

1 Peter 5:1-4

A Biblical Definition of Head: *Head is a high and holy calling from God in which he entrusts a bit of his authority to someone who is to exercise that calling in a spirit of humble servant love for those under the head's care.*

One whose calling is head serves under God's blessing with God-given gifts and talents. The head is God's visible tool to bring physical and/or spiritual blessings and protection to those placed under the head's care. That head is ultimately responsible to God for faithfully carrying out the assigned task. A wise head carries out that task in partnership with those God has given as helpers. That may also often include equipping those helpers so that they can make the most of their gifts.



Please note two things:

1) In the New Testament, the most common use of the Greek term for head (kephale) is for the part of our body on top of our shoulders. When the term is used figuratively, it is most often used of Jesus. When it comes to human beings being in a position of head, the New Testament uses it exclusively of males called to positions of headship. In particular the New Testament uses it of the husband as the head of the wife.

*2) The Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew (the Septuagint) broadens the use of the Greek word. The Septuagint uses head for other leaders of the people (**Judges 11:11**). When treated as a broader concept, the calling of "head" is not categorically limited to someone who is male. For example, a woman teaching a women's Bible study is serving in the position of "head" for that group whenever that group gathers for study. However, in this study, as we deal with the relationship of man and woman, we will be speaking primarily of the calling God has given to men.*

Evaluate the **bolded** definition given of the concept of biblical headship at the top of the page. Does it capture what the Bible passages we read were emphasizing? What would you change? What would you add?

Sinners called to positions of headship by Christ can abuse that calling in one of two ways. On the one hand, they can exercise their authority harshly and dictatorially so that the whole concept of "loving servant leader" is distorted beyond recognition. On the other hand, they can abdicate their position of head by refusing to use their authority to serve the physical and/or spiritual benefit of those under their care. How does each of the extremes listed above miss the purpose of headship?

Which of those two would you consider to be the more damaging distortion of God's calling to headship?

Is it possible for someone who is an unbelieving "head" to fulfill this role well?

It has often been said that in the church's struggle to understand the unique callings of man and woman in God's world, the most important task is to help Christian men grasp the concept of being Christlike heads. In what ways would you agree with that statement? In what ways would you disagree with that statement?

For what reasons is it essential for any Christian called to a position of headship to regularly ponder Christ's headship of his church?

Rescuing the Joyful Dignity of the Beautiful Calling of Helper

Head and Helper are both vital to the functioning of any relationship among people. Yet sinful human nature believes there is much greater glory and prestige in positions of headship than in supportive positions. But it is not so in the kingdom of God. Equal status and value are already guaranteed to us by the blood of the Son of God. God's calling of a believer to a position of either head or helper always has the joyful dignity of being an important calling from the gracious God to his dearly loved child.

The Hebrew word meaning "helper," used twice for Eve in Genesis chapter 2, is found 31 times in the Old Testament. It is interesting to note that in 16 of those times the word is used for God. Here are some examples. (In each passage the English word that translates the Hebrew word for "helper" is italicized.)

Deuteronomy 33:29: Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and *helper* and your glorious sword.

Psalms 33:20: We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our *help* and our shield.

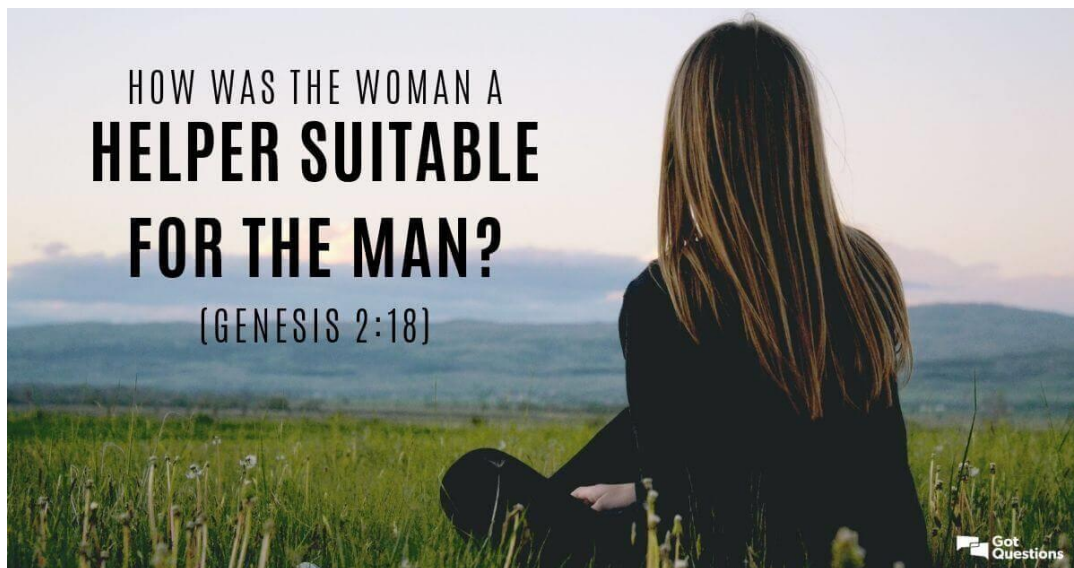
Psalms 70:5: Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay.

From the fact that God is repeatedly called our "helper," what does that tell you about the importance of the person who is "helping" and the dignity of that task?

Read **Hebrews 13:17**. *"Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you."* Without losing any dignity of the calling of helper, what do we owe those who are our heads when we are serving as helpers under them?

Read **1 Corinthians 12:21-26**. What insights does this give us as far as the relationship of the callings of "head" and "helper"?

Read **Mark 9:33-41**. In these verses how does Jesus show that he rejoices in the often “behind the scenes” nature of the help his people provide one another?



A Biblical Definition of Helper: *Helper is a high and holy calling modeled after God’s own saving help to his people.*

Those he calls to that position serve as God’s visible tools with their God given gifts and talents together with, and under the authority of, their head(s). Those who are helpers are also responsible to God for the faithful use of their gifts and talents. Helpers work in partnership with the head(s) God has given to equip them to accomplish the God-appointed task.

Note: *The calling of “helper” is not categorically limited to someone who is female. For example, a man serving as a member of an evangelism committee is serving as a helper under the headship of his evangelism chairman and/or pastor. In this study, however, which deals with the relationship of man and woman, when we speak of helper, we will be speaking primarily of the calling that God has given to women.*

React to the **bolded** working definition of the biblical concept of helper on the previous page. Does it capture what the Bible passages above were emphasizing? What would you change? What would you add?

In Genesis chapter 2, when God speaks of Eve as a helper, both times he uses the phrase "helper suitable." What is the beauty of the word *suitable*?

What about our culture tends to denigrate many of the tasks done by those called to a helping role? Answer those attitudes with insights from the passages we've studied.

How does a Christian woman answer those who consider her "weak" or "naïve" for accepting the calling of being a "helper suitable" to her husband?

In what ways can those serving as heads assist those partnering with them as helpers to find greater joy in their high and holy calling?

Living It!

As male and female who are heirs together of God's gracious gift of life, what truths do we want to treasure in our hearts from this sixth lesson of our study?

List at least two ways your words and/or actions will be affected by what we have learned today.

As we close our lesson, for what does this lead us to pray?



For Further Study Functioning as a Christlike Head

As Head of his church, Christ is first and foremost Savior of his body. But in his redeeming service as our Head, he is also an example for all to whom he will give the responsibility to serve as heads under him. For those called to exercise headship like Christ, it is important to ponder three key aspects of our Lord's headship.

First of all, the fact that Christ is our Head certainly includes the authority he possesses as our Lord and Savior. It is a bit of that very authority that he entrusts to everyone who serves as any kind of "head" under him.

However, it is important to remember that in Christ's kingdom, authority is not selfish perk and privilege but privileged responsibility (**Matthew 20:25-27**). That's why it is equally important to note that Christ lived out his calling as "Head" of his church in humility and service to his body. Though he was Lord of all, he did not come to be served, but to serve (**Matthew 20:28**). That leads us directly to a third key aspect of being a Christlike head. As "Head" of his church, Christ always exercised his authority for the benefit and blessing of those under his care.

In all this, we focus on Jesus' earthly ministry because it is his state of humiliation that we imitate now. Our time of exaltation—because of Jesus—will occur in eternity. In heaven we will be like him in his glory (**1 John 3:2**), just as now by his grace we seek to be like him in his service.

Jesus as Example Is *Not* the Gospel!

When we think of Christ as our example, that is a message of law, not gospel. In fact, since Christ is a perfect example, that example will expose our sin more powerfully than any sinned human example ever could.

While we may think we are encouraging people by holding up the example of Christ, we can very easily be driving them to despair as they make the comparison between Christ and their record as a head.

How important that any mention of pondering Christ as an example be paired closely with pondering Christ as our Savior. Only there will I find the comfort of Christ's forgiveness for my "headship failures" as well as the power to follow his example.

Love, Honor, and Submit

In **Hebrews 13:17** the inspired author calls us to obey those who serve as our heads in the church. While we are called to "obey" those in positions of leadership over us in the church, nowhere does Scripture use the Greek verb for "obey" as a command to a wife toward her husband.

In **1 Peter 3:6** the verb is used as it describes Sarah's obedience toward Abraham. Sarah's example is certainly being held up as beautiful and exemplary. However, Peter has stopped short of using the verb "obey" as a command for all believing wives.

The word "obey" is used as the regular word for what is commanded of children toward their parents and members of a congregation toward their spiritual leaders. However, when it comes to the wife toward her husband, Scripture regularly uses the words "submit" and "respect." If we ignore that distinction, we fail to recognize the important insight that the relationship of head and helper can be different depending on the setting in which it is being lived out.

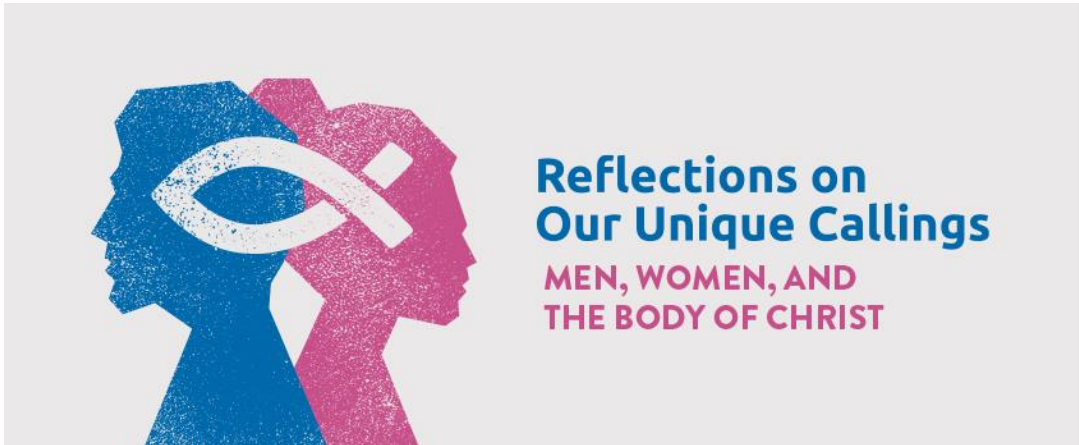
The Who, What, and Where of Royal Priestly Service

We will want to be very clear as we speak of how Christians serve as God's royal priests as they live out their various God-given callings.

We don't want to give the impression that the only "active" royal priests are those who become involved in specific organized ministries at church. In fact, most of those tasks are not even royal priestly service but public ministry. When someone serves because he or she was called to teach Sunday school, for example, that is not the exercise of the priesthood of all believers. That is a call (with a unique scope) into the public ministry of the congregation. This is an issue of **who** is serving in the royal priesthood (**We all do!**).

Closely related to this is being careful not to set priestly service at church against service rendered in our other callings as Christians. We confuse God's priests if we act as if tasks listed in the church newsletter are holier and more pleasing to God than the tasks of their callings at home or work. By such a false division of life into sacred and secular, we end up with a curious version of Lutheran monasticism. The sincere Christian may begin to wonder whether he must leave behind home and world if he really wants to serve Christ. As important as service carried out at church and school is, every vocation to which God has called us in life is carrying out royal priestly service. We are not engaged in something less holy when we are living our faith in service to others outside the ministry of our church. This is an issue of **where** we live out our priesthood (We all serve **wherever we are!**).

The third way we don't want to confuse the issue would be by exalting one particular gift as if it were the only gift really worth having. For example, we are all called to be ready to give the reason for the hope that we have. Yet not everyone is gifted by God with the gift of evangelism. Only some have the ready ability to turn every conversation with an unbeliever into an opportunity to share law and gospel. By focusing on this one gift as if it is the pinnacle of all gifts that every member should have, we can easily act as if the whole body was intended to be the mouth. Instead, we are to value all the different gifts that God spreads about in unique abundance to every one of his royal priests. This is an issue of **what activities** are valid service for royal priests (We all serve wherever we are **with whatever gifts we have!**).



Are women today still called to fulfill the role of helper—a role first applied to Eve in Genesis 2:20? Can women serve in leadership positions in the church? Should a woman hold a job where she has men working under her?

As members of the body of Christ, men and women are privileged to share blessings and responsibilities in partnering together to serve their Savior. But men and women also have unique callings—callings that can be misunderstood, that sometimes feel out of step with our world today.

Reflections on Our Unique Callings is a series of twice-weekly devotions from WELS Women's Ministry that explores biblical principles and applications, poses thoughts and questions for further reflection, and encourages conversations on how these unique callings find their fulfillment in the home, the church, and the world.

Read this devotional series here: wels.net/devotions/unique-callings/



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