

“Breastfeeding Boys and Gladiator Girls”

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Is Christianity good for women? Is Christianity good for men? For humanity? If you're a Christian, then you are assuming that, yes, Christianity is good for humanity, and therefore for men and women both.

If you're here and you're not a Christian, then maybe you're still asking yourself this question. Is Christianity good for women? For men?

I think that Christianity is not only good, but it is true and beautiful. And I have come to believe that Paul's vision of what women and men can become when they are changed by Jesus Christ, is good, and true, and beautiful.

Let's read twelve of my favorite verses of his.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

Here's a group of Christians who were living in the Greco-Roman world, in the city of Thessalonica. Paul came to them and shared with them some crazy news: The fact that God had become a man. That in Jesus Christ, God had won a victory over evil and death by dying on the cross, and then rising again three days later. That Jesus was the beginning of a whole new way to be a human being. That being true women and men meant to trust in God, to follow God's Spirit, and to become more and more like God's Son in every possible way, for the good of the whole world.

They say that no teacher had a better student than Plato had in Aristotle, and no student had a better teacher than Aristotle had in Plato.

I'd say no parent had better children than Paul had in the Thessalonian church, and no children had a better parent than this little church had in Paul.

And in this letter, he celebrates the experience that he shared with this church in Greece, back when he first helped form them into a community of people following Jesus.

What's marvelous is this: Paul tells us a LOT about his vision for renewed women and renewed men as he re-tells the story of his time with this church.

In other letters, Paul is addressing specific problems in specific churches, and giving his guidance on what women and men ought to do in those situations. And because there are specific problems and instructions for women and men, we have to figure out what exactly those problems were, and whether Paul (and therefore God's Spirit, who inspired Paul!) wanted every church in every culture forever to follow this specific guidance---whether it's that men alone should be the overseers, and women alone should cover their heads, etc.

But here he's just remembering his times with a church he loves. With lots of joy! And that means we can sit back and hear him marvel and rejoice as he writes about women and men and gender and new creations in Christ.

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How's Christianity good for women? For men? Let's see how Paul, changed into a new creation in Christ, bursts the gender stereotypes of his time with the gospel.

Paul preaches the good news to both men and women (2:1).

This word adelphoi is masculine plural. Kind of like “Menschen” in German. It includes women, when the context includes women. Paul says he came to women and men alike, and (2) had the courage to tell them all the gospel.

This is a big deal. In the Greco-Roman world, it was men who were told important things about the world of men. Politics, war, philosophy, business---this was stuff that impacted women. But it was men's stuff. So the men were the first to know.

Paul says that he and his colleagues preached the gospel even though it was dangerous to do so (2). In other words, he risked his life to give women as well as men a chance to hear and learn this news first-hand. He faced great suffering in order to speak to the hearts and minds of women, not just men. So, just like it was women who first witnessed the empty tomb of Jesus that first Easter, Paul preaches not just to men, but to women. This is women's business— this new-creation-in-Christ stuff.

Paul ignores the conventions of public rhetoric in the GR world.

The men's world of public speaking had its typical techniques. But Paul wasn't going to follow those “manly” ways of persuasion. Other male speakers might have impure motivations (3), but not him. He's not going to do whatever it takes to please people (4), like flattering people or being fake (5). He's not going to tell people they must believe and obey everything he says, because of how important and respected he is (6).

In 1 Corinthians, he says more things like this. He didn't speak to women and men showing off his eloquence, pretending to be wise or strong. Greek men wanted philosophers, or at least eloquent speakers, from the men they listened to. Jewish men wanted powerful, strong men who could stand up to their Roman oppressors. Paul says: no, I'm not going to be your typical Jewish or Greek male speaker.

Paul adopts feminine stereotypes in his preaching!

In 1 Corinthians he says he came, speaking to them in weakness, fear, and trembling. In 1 Thessalonians 1:7 he says he came in gentleness, or like a child. The men in charge of the GR world believed that women were absolutely weaker than men, in every way. They weren't brave, but fearful. They weren't calm, but trembled. They were not tough, but gentle. Paul says, basically: I'm not ashamed of the gospel, and therefore I'm not ashamed of my own frail, broken, humanity. Call me a pathetic woman if you want. I'll tell you that women and men in a broken world are weak. When I'm weak, Jesus is strong.

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Paul adopted feminine stereotypes in his pastoring!

This might be my favorite verse in the whole Bible. In 1 Thess 1:7b, Paul says “don’t forget, I was like a nursing mother with you.” It was like I fed you from my own breasts. I held you in my arms and rocked you and made sure you had both physical touch and comfort and nutrition. In verse 8 he says that he shared not just the good news, but his very life!

A breastfeeding mother gives her own body for a baby---first for 9 months, carrying the baby around. Then for many more months, making and giving breastmilk to the baby. Paul’s own body, his own life, was his gift---not just his sermons! And he’s proud to be a breastfeeding mother to this infant church. Know what, guys? It would be the biggest compliment in the world if someone you taught or led or parented said “you know what your leadership reminds me of? A breastfeeding mother.”

Paul transforms masculine stereotypes in his ministry

Finally, Paul gets around to saying how “manly” he was in his ministry. He was like a father, he says. Great! Patriarchy at last! Fathers rule, give orders, make great demands of their children, and provide them with the best tutors they can afford, who not only teach them how to read and write and speak, but how to be tough like men. Right?

Well— that’s not how Paul describes his “fatherhood”! He says that his attitude and words and actions among them were “holy, righteous, and blameless” (10). And that means that before he spoke or acted, he recognized that he was set apart for God’s purposes. That he had to model God’s own attitudes, words, and actions in the way he treated the people there.

Paul is saying “forget everything you know about typical GR gods. Forget everything you know about typical GR fathers. I’ve got a God and Father who is the kind of father that every one of you needed, but most of you never had.

Because God the Father (12) encourages rather than frustrates and discourages, that’s what I was like with you. Because God the father comforts you instead of telling you to stop being such a girl, then I’ll comfort you, too. Because God the Father has a great desire for you to be both useful to his kingdom, and to become the glorious person you were meant to be, I, too, as your spiritual father, am urging you to dedicate your lives completely to God.”

There’s 5 things for you. 5 gender stereotypes that Paul smashes. Just from one passage. I could give you more. Like how Christian women bear armor like a gladiator and defend themselves in Galatians. Or like how Christian women compete like Olympic athletes---despite the fact that the Greeks only thought of men as athletes, since women were “weak”---in 1 Corinthians.

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Is Christianity good for women? I think Christianity calls women to be thinkers and not just feelers; spiritual fighters and athletes and not just spectators; deciders and not just bystanders. I think Christianity restores women to the dignity that secular ancient culture reserved only for men. I think Christianity dignifies women better than secular contemporary culture does.

Is Christianity good for men? I think Christianity calls men to be providers of loving physical touch, and not just financial providers, to their kids. I think Christianity calls men to be feelers and not just thinkers; to speak with conviction and feeling, and not with false motivations and emotional and intellectual manipulation; to be nurturers and not simply disciplinarians. Christianity calls men to say “I love you” to their wives, children, and friends, and not just to “take action”.

But the reason that I think Christianity is good for women, for men, for humanity, is not first and foremost because it messes with our stereotypes. The reason Christianity is good for us is because Jesus Christ, the human who represented God, and who was and is God, did and does everything that is necessary to redeem women and men. And Jesus redeems women and men without a care in the world if people are going to slap gender stereotypes on his attitudes, words, and actions.

The Paul we see — motherly, fatherly — in this passage? He is just trying to be as much like Jesus as he can.

It was Jesus who came to both women and men (2:1) and called them to follow him. It was Jesus who refused to manipulate people with his words in order to gain power, but instead spoke as the very Word of God (4). It was Jesus who came to earth not to give us what we wanted, what would please us, but what we really needed (6): a chance to be saved from our sins and to be completely transformed into the humans we were meant to be. It was Jesus who was gentle (7), even while he was bringing justice: he didn't break tender reeds or snuff out a candle that was barely burning. It was Jesus, God in a body like ours, who set aside his strength and became weak, all the way to the point that he gave up his life. It was Jesus, who nursed us and fed us with his own body (7), sharing his very life with us by dying for us (8).

I've been wanting to get a tattoo of a pelican. The pelican is an ancient Christian symbol. For a long time, people thought that pelicans would pierce their own breasts with their beaks and feed their little baby pelicans with their blood. Paul was a pelican. Because he saw Jesus as this kind of pelican. Giving of his own body and blood that we might live and live abundantly.

Christian theology insists that God is not a male, or a female. God reveals himself to be “Father.” But he transforms every bad stereotype about fathers. Jesus is male. But even as a man, he represented the very character of God in ways that we might sometimes think of as “feminine”. And he doesn't care. He'll do whatever it takes to

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represent God the Father, and to love and nurture and save us, and to make sure that we feel and are encouraged by God’s love. Paul does the same.

You want to be a Christian? Then your culture doesn’t get to tell you what you are or how you should behave based on your gender. Jesus has claimed you for his own. And if you’re a woman, he’s going to make you into the kind of woman who is like Jesus. If you’re a man, he’s going to make you into the kind of man who is like Jesus. Tough and tender. Encouraging and understanding. A thinker and a feeler and a doer.

And he’s going to do this by saving you from your sin through his toughness and tenderness. He’s going to keep doing it by making you more truly human and holy, through his nurture and his challenging words.

When we are fully his, and completely holy, in our everlasting, resurrected, glorified bodies, we will be so glorious as women and men that we won’t even remember the silly stereotypes we are caught up in now. If you’re a Christian woman, or man, Jesus is good for you: in the way that he loved you. In the way that he loves you now. In the way that he will love you forever. He stays close enough to keep challenging you to grow, and close enough to assure you that he’s not leaving you -- - not now, not ever --- while you’re growing into the fullest person you were meant to be as a woman or man.