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Why Gender Matters (Matthew 19:1-12, ESV)

INTRO:

Last week we started a new series based on Psalm 139. Psalm 139 says God knit us together in our mother's womb; we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Last weekend we highlighted our Special Connections ministry, which serves children, students, and adults with special needs. Next weekend, Father's Day, we'll be talking about "Embracing Your Age." God has a reason for each season of life and that when we attempt to live outside of that season, pretending to be older than we are or perhaps younger than we are, we miss out on a lot that God has for us and even run the risk of dishonoring God. The last week of June we'll talk about how God has a purpose for all personalities. He has given each of us unique temperaments and gifts to build up His church. And then we'll end the series 4th of July weekend by talking about the sanctity of human life. Psalm 139 is an important passage when arguing for personhood in utero.

Today's sermon was not initially intended to be part of this series, but in light of recent cultural events and the many questions people have asked, as I prayed it seemed clear this was a topic God would have us discuss. Today we're going to talk about why gender matters—God's purpose for creating us male and female and how that relates to the transgender movement taking place in our culture. If you have young children, you may want to consider checking them into our Kids programming. If you have Middle School age children or above they should be okay, but I would ask that you still use your own discernment.

We're limited on what can be accomplished in one setting, but today we'll be talking about things like gender distinction (what is sometimes called the male/female binary), gender roles, people who's experience of gender doesn't match their biological sex, those whose biological sex is ambiguous (the term sometimes used is "intersex"), and even those who have taken steps to change their biological sex.

Some of you may wonder why we're talking about this at all. First, we believe God's word speaks to all matters so we want to come to Him for wisdom on all things. Second, you or someone you know may be asking these questions. We want to know how to process, respond to, and care for them. And third, to say this has been a hot topic of late would be a bit of an understatement.

- * In 2014 Laverne Cox, star of *Orange is the New Black*, appeared on the cover of TIME magazine. The cover article in that edition identified transgenderism as "the next civil rights frontier."
- * In June 2015 Bruce Jenner, former Olympic Decathlete, appeared on the cover of Vanity Fair after his sex change surgery with the title, "Call me, Caityln."
- * In the past few months (transgender bathroom) Target created an uproar when they announced they'd be letting customers use the public restroom that matched each person's felt gender rather than their biological sex.
- * That was followed in March by North Carolina's governor signing a bill that effectively blocked its cities from allowing people to use the public restroom corresponding to their identified gender.
- * That was followed by rock stars and celebrities declaring they would no longer hold concerts in North Carolina as a means of protest.
- * That was followed in May by President Obama sending a letter to every public school in America strongly suggesting they allow students to use the restroom of their choice. And letting them know failure to comply would mean risk of losing federal funding. And other responses have followed ever since.

The world is talking about this issue, which means we need to talk about it. But as followers of Christ, we need to approach the conversation in a different way than what's being modeled for us.

Gender
Distinction

Gender
Deconstruction

Let's start by acknowledging the opposite ends of the spectrum. On one side you have those who argue for **gender distinction** on the basis of biblical passages like Genesis 1-2; Genesis 5:1-2; Ephesians 5; Matthew 19 (we'll come back to the Matthew passage later). To be clear, I agree with this side of the discussion. God did

create what we call the male/female binary, meaning there are two categories of gender—male and female—with clear distinctions between each gender. I believe these gender distinctions hold meaning even today. That said, most of the discussion I hear coming from this side of the spectrum is rooted in fear. *What about the man who pretends to be a woman so that he can use the public restroom to lurk on my wife? What about the predator coming after my daughter?* I'm not saying those questions are invalid. But I am saying they're rooted in extreme examples that show our contribution to the conversation is coming from a place of fear. And the Bible tells us when we live from a place of fear we don't do much good for ourselves, for others, or most importantly for God.

On the other side of the spectrum, you have what you might call **gender deconstruction**. These are the people and/or groups who want to redefine gender or eliminate it all together because they see the categories of male and female as oppressive structures designed to inhibit individual freedom. Most people coming from this side aren't necessarily speaking out of fear, but they are guilty of what you might call fanaticism. Based upon the experience of a small percentage of the population they want to flip the whole social order upside down. And for that reason they at times can be difficult to converse with as well.

The point is both sides are having the same conversation but they're speaking different languages. You've got to understand—there is nothing simple about this topic. This side is true—God did create a male female binary. You don't need the Bible to tell you that's true. Every society throughout history has recognized this fact. And yet this side is happening with increasingly regularity—people are redefining gender for personal and political purposes.

Here's the thing: **life inevitably is done somewhere in the middle.** What do I mean by life happens somewhere in the middle?

There are some who believe this (gender distinction) but their experience tells them otherwise. They believe God created people male and female. However, they were born as biological male and yet emotionally and psychologically they feel more like a woman. Or they were born as a biological female and yet they relate more to the male gender. There's a chance you may know someone who is going through this. Some of us in this room may have or be going through this. You're wondering how to navigate what you believe the Bible says and yet what you're experiencing, psychologically and emotionally, regarding gender.

Statistics suggest as many as 1 in 300 people experience some sort of gender confusion or participate in gender bending activities. That's a small percentage, about 1/3rd of 1% (and that's a high estimate), but that number will only grow as transgenderism grows in acceptance. I heard about a school in Britain who recently dedicated a day to celebrating gender diversity. They put a line on the whiteboard. They put the word "male" at one end and the word "female" on the other end. Then they had each child come mark where they believed they fit on the continuum. That is redefining gender as no longer a male-female binary but a sliding scale, a moving target. Things like this are raising questions and doubts among children, the vast majority of whom before would never have asked the question. Now it's on their mind. Similar to as if I said, "I'm not feeling very well today; I feel like I may be coming down with something." And now all the sudden you feel like you may be coming down with something too.

On the other end you have people who believe we should do away with all forms of gender and create a gender fluid society. But they have to deal with statistics that suggest a large number of people who choose invasive treatment options, such as hormone therapy or reconstructive surgery, designed to change gender later regret the decision and want to go back. There is also a higher percentage of suicide and psychiatric care for those who facilitate gender transformation.

Both sides have to recognize the conversation is more difficult than we want to admit. Mark Yarhouse, a Christian psychologist, writes, "*The Christian community faces a unique challenge in rising above the culture wars and these symbolic dimensions as we think about how to engage both the broader culture and the individual who is navigating gender identity questions.*"

When we fail to do this people get crushed in the middle. Recently a 23-year-old transgender activist in Pakistan was shot at a transgender rally. According to reports, when she arrived at the hospital there was debate whether to treat her in the men's ward or the women's ward. She was born a biological female, but she identifies as a male. Every time a decision was made, someone complained. Hours passed before she received treatment. She died a few days later.

Whatever your perspective on gender stories like this aren't funny; they're a tragedy. We must remember there is the *issue* and then there are the *individuals*. Too many people are being crushed between two sets of convictions. People God loves. People Jesus died for. We want to know how do we teach truth *and* practice grace? This is what Jesus did. We want to know how do we love God by upholding His plan *while also* loving people? This is what Jesus called us to do.

Now because I'm coming at this from a Christian perspective and because this message isn't just about transgenderism or bathrooms or legislation, but it fits under the broader umbrella of God's design for gender, I want to make a small stop on the way to the transgender and intersex questions. First, we have to look at the bigger question of God's purpose for creating us male and female in the beginning and how we as the church are to acknowledge that reality today.

About once/month someone asks me about our church's position on women in ministry. Their question is almost always unrelated to transgenderism. And I get it. We wouldn't necessarily think the topics were related, would we? I want to show you how both relate to God's purpose for gender. And I'd ask as I address this question that you hear my pastoral heart in this.

We have hundreds of women at OCC who serve in ministry—some work on staff, others lead ministries within the church, some lead worship, teach in Next Gen, or occasionally teach topical adult classes. But there are roles and responsibilities at OCC women do not hold, namely that of an elder and the lead or teaching pastor. Our position as a church is what's known as the complementarian position. The complementarian position says God created men and women equally. Men and women are each created in the image and likeness of God and thus equal in worth, equal in value, and equal in ability. However, they are *distinct* in role and responsibility. *Equal* in worth, value, and ability, *distinct* in role and responsibility. If you're a visual learner, picture it this way. God didn't pull Eve out of Adam's back so that she might blindly follow him. He didn't pull Eve out of Adam's front so that she might lead him. Where did He pull Eve from---Adam's side, i.e. complementary.

The other way to look at this is called the egalitarian view. The egalitarian view holds that there should be no distinction between women and men in terms of their roles and responsibilities even within the church. From a social standpoint, the egalitarian position makes sense. We live in a society women can and do hold the same roles as men. They *should* make the same money for the same work. Title IX affords women equal rights with men. The Bible would affirm all of these things. As you study history, you discover advancements for women are the direct result of the Christian worldview. Greeks weren't arguing for the advancement of women. Rome wasn't fighting for women's rights. Progress for women has come from the Christian faith. However, God designed the church to be the one place in society that uniquely reflects His image. It took both the man and the woman to reflect God's image. Man couldn't do it alone. Woman couldn't do it alone. Society often sometimes view gender as a limitation to discard; God celebrates both genders. They are complementary. Because God is One yet exists in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Equal* in worth, value, and ability, *distinct* in role and responsibility.

You might ask what do you mean men and women are distinct in role and responsibility? Go back to Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve sinned. God came to find them (both had sinned), but for whom did God call? He called for Adam. Have you ever wondered where Adam was when Eve was going toe to toe with the serpent? That's the question. Where was the guy? I'll tell you where he was. He was in his version of a man-cave, probably slipping in and out of a nap watching *Breaking Bad*. He was on the golf course with his buddies. He was at the office working late yet again.

The core sin of men is abdication, failure to fulfill a duty or responsibility. In our weakest state, men we are prone to shirk our fundamental responsibilities. This is why we have more single moms than single dads. Why we have more female volunteers in our church than male. Why we have 30-year-old boys living in their parent's basement playing X-box. Because the primary sin of a man is abdication. Where do you think that comes from? From our first father.

God established a pattern of male spiritual leadership at creation and carried that pattern throughout the ministry of the **Tabernacle, Temple, Apostleship, and now Church**. God's Word allows women to have leadership responsibilities. There are wonderful examples of women like Deborah, Ruth, Lydia, Priscilla, and Phoebe. The New Testament talks about women deacons. Women can and should have influence, lead ministries, counsel others. The Bible teaches that within the church the *one role* God reserves for a man is shepherd Elder, which includes the pastor-teacher who serves as an elder. And that doesn't mean that women couldn't do the job. Of course they could. Women have the ability, they have the wisdom, and they have the intellect. But God wants the church to acknowledge gender distinction. One, because it better reflects Him image to the world. Second, it makes sure the church always upholds the importance of gender. The Bible says men and women are equal in terms of creation and salvation, but also insists they are also distinct. When the church abandons this idea and says, "No, male and female really doesn't matter," we have no ground to stand on when we try to tell the culture that yes it does matter.

Some of you came today believing gender matters in regard to sex but not in regard to service. The Bible says both matter. And once we suggest gender distinctions no longer matter in the church we have no ground to say gender distinctions still matter in culture. God gave us distinctions for a reason. Can we all admit this conversation is stickier than we often give it credit for?

Let's see that slide again **(distinction & deconstruction)**—we want to know how to dialogue from these two sides without crushing people in between. How do we love people who are experiencing gender dysphoria while upholding God's intentions for gender? Thankfully, Jesus gives us a starting point—**Matthew 19**.

TEXT:

Before we read, let me be clear, this passage is about marriage, divorce, and remarriage NOT transgenderism or intersex. But Jesus does make two points here that are helpful for the bigger discussion of sex and identity—*1 Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. 2 And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." 7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8 He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." 10 The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." 11 But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs*

by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matthew 19:1-12, ESV).

Jesus makes two important points.

- * The first comes in v. 4 – **4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female.** Jesus answers their question with a question. This is one of his favorite things to do. He answers their question about divorce by asking, "Have you not read?" It's almost as if Jesus is offended. Surely you've read, haven't you? In the beginning God created them male and female. This is where Jesus starts—with God's good creation. God made human beings male and female (the male/female binary). It's obvious—haven't you read. This is the whole gender distinction argument we made earlier. God created it; it's good; we're not free to mess with it. That's point #1.
- * But now his second point comes in v. 12 – **12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."** Eunuch here means someone who is genetically male but they do not have the organs of a male. Jesus lists three types of eunuchs. Those who were made that way by men. Sometimes a king would castrate the men in his court so they wouldn't mess with his harem. This could also happen to prisoners in times of war. So some are made eunuchs. Jesus says, **second**, there are some who make themselves eunuchs. That doesn't mean they castrate themselves, but in the context of marriage and divorce, this means someone who renounces marriage for the sake of the Kingdom. These are people who choose not to marry so they can focus on serving God. This was Jesus' story—he never married. The same is true, as far as we know, with Paul. And then Jesus says, **third**, there are some eunuchs who are born that way.

This last category—those born as eunuchs—is important for our discussion. Again, Jesus isn't talking about transgenderism. But he does say there are a few people who don't fit the male-female categories through no fault of their own. They're eunuchs. It was unclear at birth what gender they were. They didn't have the full organs of either gender or had some combination of male-female organs. This is called "intersex" and it can happen for a number of reasons.

So Jesus affirms two things in this passage. First, he affirms that yes, God made them male and female, that's His design. It's good. We shouldn't mess with it. But he also says there are occasionally exceptions to the rule. He affirms both—the male-female binary and the occasional exception. He's not saying the creation is unimportant. He's not saying we should do away with gender distinction and the deconstructionists are right. But he's also saying there are times the conversation is not going to be as simple and clean as we'd like it to be.

This is where we can begin to make an application to the topics of gender and transgenderism. We don't know what causes gender dysphoria and confusion. There is no scientific consensus. Some argue it has to do with the brain's development in the womb or perhaps the presence of testosterone during the embryonic stages; others say the research is limited and inconclusive. Some say transgenderism is a psychological disorder; others push back at that idea.

What's safe to say is that already Christians don't affirm every birth experience is a reflection of God's will. The child born with spina bifida. A person with schizophrenia. Even someone with a biological predisposition to addiction. My point is it's incorrect to suggest everyone who faces confusion about their gender identity chooses to do so or is intentionally being rebellious against God. That God has a purpose for gender is true (Jesus affirms it) but there will be some, for whatever reason, who struggle to navigate these distinctions (Jesus affirms this too) and as the church we must be there to help.

So how do we respond to the individual going through this confusion? We respond, in part, by providing them a sense of community. One of the main draws to the LGBTQIA movement is the sense of belonging the community provides. The draw is not always affirmation of behavior but a feeling of safety.

Someone who struggles with alcoholism doesn't go to the bar simply because they like how they feel afterwards. They may not like how they feel afterwards. They go, in part, because of the relationships. The thirty-something who wastes away playing computer games doesn't play just because they enjoy the game; they play because of the community they find online.

You serve the person wrestling with questions of gender identity by letting them know, "God loves you; I love you; would you be willing to tell me your story." The first question that comes is doesn't that mean we're saying transgenderism is okay? No, it means we're practicing what Richard Mouw calls "convicted civility." Mouw says many Christians are strong on expressing convictions but weak on displaying civility. Other Christians are remarkably civil but know very little about why they hold certain convictions. We must commit to love and care for others while stopping short of compromising our convictions. Again, this is what Jesus did. We have to have a compassion for someone's circumstances while also demonstrating the courage to not bend on God's created order.

Some of you may remember **Rachel Dolezaz (picture)**. She was the President of the NAACP in Spokane, Washington until it was discovered she lied about her racial identity. You can see the difference in the two pictures. She was born to white parents but identified as black. Does that make her black?

Richard Hernandez identifies as a dragon. He has the corresponding tattoos, horns, and nails to prove it. He has had his ears and nose surgically removed. Those who want to eliminate categories in the pursue self-expression would say is he seems himself as a dragon let him be a dragon. But that wouldn't be the loving thing to do, would it? Sometimes it's okay to admit what's happening isn't healthy, that there may even be a psychological disorder at play.

For some reason we've bought into this idea that our mind (feelings) should dictate what we do with our body. I *feel* like a dragon or I *feel* like a woman or I *feel like* an African American, so I will change my body to fit the feeling. But there are times when the loving thing is to help someone see that his or her body is a better indicator of reality. You wouldn't encourage someone with anorexia to keep exercising and avoid food because they believed in their mind they were overweight. You would say whatever your mind is telling you; whatever you feel like, the reality is you are too thin; this isn't healthy. The loving thing is not to say yes you're fat when in fact they're thin; or yes you're black when in fact you're white; or yes, you're a dragon when in fact you're not; but to help them see a clearer picture.

This is where we get down to the identity issue. Our biggest takeaway from Matthew 19 is about identity, particularly sexuality identity. The popular idea today is that if I can't express my sexual desire or preference or felt gender than I'm not being true to myself. That's making sex an idol. It shows you have decided who you are sexually is the most important thing that can be said about you as a human being. Jesus tells us in Matthew 19 that's simply not the case.

From this vantage point of sexual identity the conversation is no longer just about transgenderism or intersex or even homosexuality. It's also about people who laugh at the thought of abstinence until marriage. Or monogamy. Or those tied to sexual addiction and porn. Or those who after divorce marry immediately jump into another relationship or marriage without any reflection on the Word of God because they can't bear the thought of being alone.

Remember, the context of Matthew 19 is marriage and divorce. Jesus says some are made eunuchs; they'll never have a fully expressed sexual identity. Some choose a path of singleness to better serve God; they're sexually beings but they'll never have a fully expressed sexual identity. Some are born eunuchs; from birth they will struggle navigating their gender and sexuality in what's predominantly a male/female world. None of them are less human. None of them are less loved by God. All of them are welcomed by Jesus.

The identity piece is pertinent for all of us. We all have some disconnect between our identity and Christ's identity. 2 Corinthians 5:17—*if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone the new has come.* And yet we're still tied up in our appearance; our work; our sexuality, as if that were the most important thing about who we are. God is constantly taking us back to the Gospel and reminding us of our identity in Christ. There may be something we struggle with or experience where we say this is "how I am" but it is not "who I am." Who I am is a child of God by the blood of Jesus Christ. **"Who I am" is stronger than "how I am" when my identity is in Jesus Christ.**

C.S. Lewis once said, "If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

As we love those who are having a hard time navigating gender we do so not with arrogance but with humility, knowing we, at times, have difficulty navigating our own desires. That we too have settled for mud pies over God's magnificent promises. That's why it's important as we talk with others that we don't only ask them to share their story, but that we share our story—and the hope of the Gospel—that all of our longings will one day be filled by Christ. We explain, "This may be how I am (I'm tempted by this or that) but it's not who I am." **Again, "Who I am" is stronger than "how I am" when my identity is in Christ.** Jesus is the one who gives us the strength to follow him obediently.

Psalm 139, which this series is based upon, begins, *1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me! 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. 3 You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways (Psalm 139:1-3, ESV).*

The Psalm acknowledges God made us and knows us. It also acknowledges He searches our ways in the present. Asking God to search us means asking Him to help us bring our identity in line with His will. It also means asking God to find out if our attitude and response towards those who aren't living in line with God's Word is the response He desires from us. Dishonoring God in the process of defending God runs the risk of discrediting God to those He wants to reach. That's not what God hopes to find when searching us either.

So when you're speaking with someone wrestling through sexual identity questions and gender dysphoria, what you say is "God knows; God loves you; I love you; help me know you—tell me your story." We listen; we learn; and we point them to Jesus Christ. We share our own stories of redemption. As we gain trust, we help them find the least invasive option for walking obediently with Christ. Some may be able to walk obediently with Christ through grace and sheer will. Some may find the need for Christian counseling. Some may utilize the help of medication, much like some of us may take medication to help with ongoing anxiety or depression. Some may discover it wasn't the sexuality they were longing for but a sense of belonging. When they see how they are embraced by God and the church they may be able let go of their sexual idols. As a church we need to be willing to provide a sense of community where people know they can find Christians who will encourage and support them as they walk the road ahead of them.

If you are wrestling with a question of gender, sexual orientation, or any other sin or struggle or identity piece, I challenge you to lay that before the cross, and find your fullest identity in Christ. We're going to end our time together by taking the Lord's Supper. This is appropriate because the Lord's Supper is a moment of waiting. Sometimes we think of it only as remembering, and it is remembering what Christ has done, but it's also anticipating what Christ will do. He tells us he will not drink of this cup again until he shares it with us in His Father's Kingdom. As we take this meal together, we declare that we're waiting for Christ to provide a future beyond our present pain and suffering. **Prayer**

Resources

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