**God Behaving Badly - Week 2 - Sexist or Empowering?**

**Message Big Idea:** When we read certain stories in the Old Testament, it’s hard not to wonder… Is God sexist or empowering?

**Scripture:** Genesis 19:1-11, Genesis 1:26-28, Genesis 2:18-23, Genesis 3:1-6, Genesis 3:14-19, Galatians 3:26-28

**Note:** With the video, this is a 30-minute message.

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**Introduction: Stories You Never Heard in Sunday School**

*(Series Graphic)* How many of you grew up going to Sunday School or confirmation classes or some kind of children’s ministry? *(hands)* There are certain stories in the Bible that are slam-dunk favorites for little kids. For example, Noah’s Ark. I can still remember the flannel graph pictures of all those animals, two-by-two, being loaded onto the giant ship. Or how about Daniel in the Lion’s Den? That was a popular one! God miraculously rescuing Daniel from being eaten by a pack of lions.

But there are other stories in the Bible that we never seemed to hear about in Sunday School. Stories that our teachers weren’t quite sure what to do with. Stories that sound strange, weird, or even downright alarming.

For example, there is a story in Genesis 19 that leads up to the destruction of the cities Sodom and Gomorrah. In the story, two angels are sent by God to see if the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are good people or if only Lot and his family should be saved. That alone makes the story hard to hear, but that’s not even the worst part of it.

*(Genesis 19:4-5)* The disguised angels find shelter at Lot’s house, and that evening the men of the city demand that Lot turn over the strangers for them to torture and rape. Lot tries to reason with the mob, but rather than just telling them to go away, *(Genesis 19:8)* Lot offers to send out his two daughters instead. Seriously. He offers his daughters to keep the visiting men safe.

It’s hard to know what to do with a story like this, and, sadly, it’s stories like these that have led lots of people to believe that the Bible is a sexist book and that God himself is sexist. If you’re disturbed by stories like this, know that you’re not alone. Today we’re going to wrestle with this question of sexism.

**Series Recap**

*(Series Graphic)* We are in Week 2 of our series, **“God Behaving Badly**.**”** During this series, we’re tackling some of the difficult and confusing passages we find in the Old Testament of the Bible trying to make sense of the seemingly contradictory pictures of God that we find there. And today we’re asking the question: Is God **Sexist or Empowering?**

As a reminder, during this series, we’re using the personal name for God, **Yahweh**, that is the primary way he is referred to in the Old Testament. We believe that it is significant that he is most often referred to as “Yahweh,” rather than “the Lord” or simply “God” because it tells us something about the kind of intimacy he desires with his people. There is something personal about calling someone by their first name, isn’t there? Yahweh desires *that* kind of intimacy with his people. And this is important because what we believe about God will directly affect how we either pursue him or avoid him. And our view of him certainly effects how we understand some of the more difficult passages of Scripture.

So with this understanding that Yahweh values relationships with his people, let’s tackle this question: Is Yahweh **Sexist or Empowering?**

**The Genesis 19 Story**

Before we examine the larger arc of this question, let me return to the disturbing story we started with. In trying to digest this story, there are a few things we should consider.

First, the culture in which the events in the Bible took place was a sexist culture. There’s no getting around it! But just because the culture was sexist and the Bible records a sexist story that happened in that culture doesn’t mean that Yahweh is sexist.

Think of it this way… Every day newspapers print all kinds of stories about murders and assaults and all sorts of crimes. Just because the stories are in the newspaper doesn’t mean that the editors of that newspaper condone the evil recorded there.

Just because a story is in the Bible doesn’t mean Yahweh approves of the actions described in it. In fact, you could make a strong case that the Scriptures reveal just the opposite. For example, in this story…

* Lot is never affirmed for what he did. In fact, he is consistently painted in Scripture as a negative example.
* *(Genesis 19:10)* Also, as the story goes on, the two angels sent by Yahweh act in a dramatic way to protect Lot’s daughters from the horrific experience their father proposed. They pull Lot back into the house and shut the door.
* *(Genesis 19:11)* Not only that, the men of the city are punished for their wicked behavior. First, by being blinded and later by having their city destroyed.

This is a terrible story from start to finish, and only Yahweh acts justly. There is nothing in this story that suggests that he condones the wickedness of the men or the sexist actions of Lot. In fact, if anything, this story is a great example of how far human beings have strayed from Yahweh’s dream.

**Yahweh’s Dream**

So what is Yahweh’s dream?

If you’ve been around churches and Christianity for very long, you know there are lots of different views about Yahweh’s dreams for women, specifically about whether women are allowed to lead and teach in the church. Many times when these discussions arise, people gravitate to two statements in the New Testament of the Bible that say that women should be silent in the church. I will acknowledge that these two statements, found in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, are confusing and troubling to many of us. But I will also say that we think it’s a mistake to try to understand how Yahweh views women by pulling out two verses and ignoring the larger arc of the story of the Bible. As respected New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight says:

**“It’s like asking about marriage in the Bible and gravitating toward the divorce texts.” –Scot McKnight, The Blue Parakeet**

These two New Testament texts are important. And we could spend our time this morning examining some of the cultural challenges they were addressing, but, like McKnight, we believe it is much more important to examine the whole of Scripture as we ask: What is Yahweh’s dream? How does Yahweh view women? Is Yahweh sexist or empowering?

So to begin, let’s start at another place that people on all sides of these issues go: Genesis. Let’s go back to the beginning.

After the universe was created, Yahweh created animals, birds, fish, and finally humans. *(Genesis 1:27)* From the beginning, humans were created unique. We were created with the capacity for wonder, for thought, for invention, for wit and cleverness. We were created in the image of God.

It is significant that the first thing that Yahweh says about women is that they are like him.

* Women are made in the image of God!
* Women are Godlike!

Now, guys, you are Godlike too, but most of you already think that anyway, right? ☺ What we see from the beginning is that both men and women are created by Yahweh to be a reflection of his Godliness.

Now, if we turn the page to Genesis 2, we find another account of the Creation story. *(Genesis 2:7 and Genesis 2:21-22)* In this account, we see that Yahweh creates the man first, and then, from one of the man’s ribs, creates the woman. Some people consider that this order suggests some kind of hierarchy, but that’s a difficult case to make. If the order of creation says something about position, then darkness is more important than light, and animals are more important than birds and fish, and all of it is more important than you and me.

Honestly, we see the order of creation getting more complex and more wonderful as the days went on with human beings being the crescendo of all of creation! So if you ever thought there was something significant to the notion that God created the man first and the woman second, well, you may be right. *(pause)* I’m just sayin’… which is typically better, the first draft or the second? ☺ I’m kidding, guys. Remember, you are Godlike… you’re doing just fine!

However, there is another reason some people are tempted to read a hierarchy into the creation story and it comes from this verse in Genesis 2:

**“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.’” -Genesis 2:18 NLT**

“Helper” doesn’t sound like a very empowering word, does it? “Helper” is the word I use when I coax my 7 year old into emptying the dishwasher. “Helper” can sound…sexist, like men need a good secretary or household manager to make the business or family run smoothly.

But it’s important that we understand what this word “helper” means. In the Hebrew language of the Bible, the word is **ezer** *(pronounced āzer).* Say that after me: ezer. *(ezer)* Ezer is used over 100 times in the Old Testament in its various forms and guess to whom it most often refers? Yahweh. It’s most frequent use is to describe Yahweh’s military or supernatural-type assistance. This isn’t a 7 year old emptying a dishwasher; this is Yahweh – God of creation!

Ezer is not a weak word. It’s a word that describes a warrior God who aids, comes to the rescue, and keeps nations safe! Ezer describes generations of women who persevere, endure, and are warriors in the line of Yahweh! Women who are worthy and dignified and capable in and of themselves. If there’s a woman sitting near you, turn to her and say, “You are a warrior!”

Still, when we turn the page to Genesis 3, this beautiful scene of Yahweh’s glorious creation comes to a screeching halt. The Fall. Yahweh’s dream for the world is shattered as this first man and woman make a tragic choice to distrust him.

You know the story, right? Yahweh gave people just one rule: Don’t eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. One day a snake comes and tempts the woman to question Yahweh’s goodness, and she falls for the deception. *(Genesis 3:6)* The woman takes a bite, and then hands it to the man who joins her in this rebellion.

There are some who look at this story and believe it says something about women. After all, the woman fell first. Doesn’t that make her responsible?

*(highlight “who was with her”)* And yet, notice that the man was with the woman during this encounter. He was right there when she ate the fruit and did nothing to stop her. And he, too, ate the fruit without any resistance.

Both the woman and the man chose to rebel against Yahweh, and both experience the consequences of their actions. When Adam and Eve sin, they shatter Yahweh’s dream for people. Not only did sin separate us from God, it had consequences for our relationships with one another. When Yahweh says to Eve…

**“Your desire will be for your husband,**

 **and he will rule over you.” -Genesis 3:16**

…he’s describing not what should be, but what has now happened. Having one gender “rule” over the other is not Yahweh’s dream for humanity; it is the result of the curse of sin. The systems of hierarchy began on this day. And I believe it broke Yahweh’s heart.

**Yahweh Begins to Restore His Dream**

If you’ve been around Community very long, you know that our mission is helping people find their way back to God. And one-way that mission is expressed is by restoring God’s dream for the world. As followers of Jesus, it is our mission to do whatever we can to help our world experience the dream Yahweh had from the very beginning.

As tragic as Genesis 3 was for humanity, Yahweh immediately begins to act to overcome the consequences of the curse. If you look at the words Yahweh speaks to the serpent, within them is a promise to the woman. God says to the serpent:

**“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” -Genesis 3:15**

Most consider this the very first prophecy of Jesus’ ultimate victory over the evil one through his death and resurrection. And while this promised victory over the serpent could have mentioned the man, since they were joint parents, Yahweh chose to focus this blessing on the woman.

If we look forward through the rest of the arc of the Old Testament, despite the sexist culture that emerged from The Fall, *(Yahweh Empowers Women)* we see Yahweh empowering women to play a prominent role among his people.

* Yahweh selected a female “president” - **Deborah** (Judges 4) to rule. She was both the political leader of Israel and a prophet who would have been viewed as the spiritual leader of the nation.
* Yahweh raised up **Rahab** (Joshua 2) to assist the Israelites in conquering Jericho.
* Yahweh used wise women like **Abigail** (1 Samuel 25)to advise kings and commanders.
* Yahweh blessed **Ruth** (Ruth 1-4) for her courage and devotion and used her to carry on the bloodline that would eventually lead to Jesus.
* Yahweh raised up **Esther** (Esther 4) to save her people when they were threatened with genocide.

*(Jesus Empowers Women)* And Jesus continued to empower women by honoring them and giving them opportunities that were seen as radical for his time.

* Jesus first **revealed himself as the Messiah** to a woman (John 4:25-26)
* In a culture where men didn’t speak to women in public, Jesus **consistently engaged women in conversation** (John 4:27).
* Women were included in his **expanded group of disciples** (Mark 15:41).
* Women like **Mary of Bethany** were permitted to sit at his feet, beside the men, learning as he taught, something unheard of in that culture (Luke 10:39).
* Following his resurrection, Jesus **first appeared to a woman** in spite of the fact that at that time a woman’s testimony held no weight in the court of law (John 20:1-16).

Jesus came to restore Yahweh’s dream for the world. The early Christian leaders recognized that. That’s why Paul declares:

**“For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus…There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.” -Galatians 3:26, 28**

Women like Junia (Romans 16) and Priscilla (Acts 18) and Philip’s four daughters (Acts 21) led and taught and prophesied in the early church.

And yet, despite all that Yahweh has done to empower women, in our culture and too often in the church, we continue to perpetuate the downward pull of the Fall. Yahweh and Jesus are incredibly progressive in how they honor women, but sadly too often we are not…

**Video: Women Who Have Experienced Sexism**

**Challenge: Join Yahweh in Restoring His Dream**

Yahweh’s dream has always been for both men and women to flourish in who he created them to be with all their gifts and talents and passions.

Jesus came to restore Yahweh’s dream for the world including his dream for men and women. But sadly, the restoration of Yahweh’s dream is both a now and a not yet…

That’s why we **all** have a role to play in restoring God’s dream for men **and** women. This is the responsibility of **anyone** who believes **all** people were created equally in the image of God. If you are a Christ-follower, the fact that women do not have the same opportunities as men and are often not treated equally to men is an injustice we are called to reverse.

So I want to call all of us today to help restore Yahweh’s dream for men and women. Here are a couple challenges:

**Challenge #1**: **Don’t Perpetuate the Curse.**

Listen and look for the subtle and not-so-subtle ways we contribute to prolonging the curse. Ignoring or diminishing the voices and accomplishments of women is one way we prolong the curse. Overlooking women when considering leadership opportunities is another. Let’s call out remnants of the curse when we see them in the church or in our culture or in ourselves and refuse to accept the curse as “just the way it is.” Let’s live according to Yahweh’s dream – let’s live as Yahweh originally intended.

**Challenge #2: Partner to Restore God’s Dream.**

To the **Women** in the room: Sometimes we are the ones living by the curse. That voice inside your head that whispers to you that you *can’t*, telling you that you *don’t* belong…that voice is not from God. My charge to you today is to step into all Yahweh created you to be. Stop carrying the limitations of the curse and don’t put those limitations on other women. Cheer for and encourage each other. Never ever forget…

* You are made in the image of God.
* You are gifted to carry out his purposes in this world.
* Step into all God created you to be!

To the **Men** in the room: It matters to women that you stand *with* them and stand *for* them like Jesus stood with the women in his day. Often in our culture and in the church, you hold many of the positions of power and influence. Will you use your position to help restore God’s dream? Listen to the women around you, speak up, advocate for your sisters. Why? Because that’s what Jesus did, and he calls all of us to follow his example.

**Conclusion: Vision for Our Church**

I am thankful that COMMUNITY is a place where both men and women can use the gifts God has given them to contribute to the mission. I’m also thankful for my “sister warriors” who God is using in a powerful way to lead here at the Yellow Box. *(Acknowledge women at your location…)* Warriors like…

* Sharie Behnke who teaches on weekends.
* Sue Ferguson who leads in our Small Group ministry.
* Kathy Ives who leads Kids’ City.
* Evelyn Cortazio who leads us in worship.
* The many women leading Small Groups and Ministry Teams.
* I could go on and on and on.

I am thankful for these leaders and the contributions they are making to the mission. I am grateful for the strides we’ve made in restoring Yahweh’s dream for men and women, but we also have a long way to go. Let’s not stop until every little girl that grows up in our church has the opportunity to fully develop and exercise the gifts God has given her and laughs at the notion that there was once a time when her gender might have limited her opportunities to contribute to the mission of Jesus.

Is God sexist? No. Yahweh is empowering. Jesus is empowering. Let’s join God in restoring his dream for the world.

As I close, I’d like for us to stand together and join hands as a community of people collectively reflecting the image of God and commit to partnering together to carry out the work of restoring God’s dream for the world. Would you stand and pray with me?

**Communion Idea**

If we back up just a few lines prior to what we read earlier from the Apostle Paul we find these words:

**“When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing.” -Galatians 3:13**

Sadly, we continue to experience the ramifications of the Fall. That’s what is meant when people say “We live in a fallen world.” But that’s not how Christ-followers are meant to live. Jesus last prayer was that his followers would live *in* the world, but through the power of his spirit may they not be *of* this world.

In Jesus death and resurrection he overcame the curse, the fall. And in communion we celebrate that victory that gives us what we need to push back against the fall and the injustices we see around us every day. The bread represents his body that was broken and the juice represents his blood that was shed. Let’s use this communion time as a moment of recommitment to following the path of Jesus and living out his redemptive mission of restoring our world and our relationships to the dream God had for them from the beginning.