



As part of our series on [criticisms against Christianity](#), I want to next give an answer to this question; is the Bible sexist? Does the Bible command women to be nothing more than submissive servants who should know their place, keep their mouths shut, and be barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen? Or is there actually a deeper message that gets missed more often than not?

History's Mysteries

Typically, when people criticize various cultural practices that are described in the Bible, they fail to fully see the context in which these events take place. Instead, they expect the people of the Bible to live just like we do today. Doing history this way is a shallow and uneducated approach. Unfortunately, it has become a more common practice. If you fail to understand the perspective and context, you fail to see how one thing is different from the other things around it.

Take, for instance, a 2D image of Mt Everest as seen from a satellite. Sure, you can kind of tell from other topographical features that it is a little bigger than other areas. But, if you want to see how much bigger Mt. Everest is than the other mountains around it, you need to change your point of view. You need to see it from the side and in relation to the other objects around it to see how different it is. You need to have a different perspective.

Understanding cultures in times long gone is just like looking at Mt. Everest from the side. Looking at how people behaved 4000 (or even 400 or 40) years ago and expecting them to behave like us today is looking at it from the wrong perspective. If you want to see if they improved a situation, you have to see it in the context of *that* time, not ours.

Because we use our current cultural norms to try and frame in what was going on 4000 years ago, we miss the ways that the Bible actually *improved* the condition of those who were of a lesser station in life; in particular women and slaves (we've already discussed [the issue of slavery in the Bible](#)).

A Special Creation

Genesis 2:19-23 gives an account of the creation of Eve, the first woman. For our purposes, whether you believe the creation account in Genesis to be history or allegory or legend or a fantasy story is irrelevant. We are trying to assess what the Bible teaches regarding the treatment of women and that all starts in Genesis.

When God created mankind, he created them in his own image. This doesn't mean in a



physical way; it means mankind (as a species, not just the male gender) was created with the same *traits* as God. Free will, love, a capacity for creation, etc. *Both* male and female were created in God's image. So, they have equal value.

There are a couple of interesting points regarding Eve that I want to bring up here. First off, every living thing - including the first man - was created from the dust of the Earth. Except for the first woman that is. She was created from the flesh of the first man. This is because man and woman were to be considered of one flesh - two parts making a whole. It's like a baker who bakes cookies and then breaks them in half. You can't join two whole cookies together. Nor can you grab a piece from another cookie and fit them perfectly together. You need the matching piece to make the cookie whole.

The second thing to recognize is what area of the man's body this flesh was taken from; his side. This is relevant because it denotes the point of connection between man and woman. They are side by side; on an equal level. God didn't create woman from man's heel, nor from his head. This would have denoted a different level of importance. No, the woman was created right beside the man. They were created in the image of God, as partners of equal value.

The Fall Corrupted Everything

God's original intent was for men and women to be equals. But, then Eve was talked into doing what she had been told not to do and so was Adam. Even though it was Eve who convinced Adam to eat from the tree, Adam is equally culpable because he was also told it was wrong. In other words, he knew better, too. So, no finger-pointing here.

I'm no anthropologist, but I would say that at that point, men overtook women in the power circle because they were physically stronger. Most of the jobs of the day demanded physical strength and involved some danger - hunting, controlling large animals, dealing with dangerous predators, lifting heavy objects, fighting with other forces for resources, etc. Because of the dangerous nature of life back in the beginning, the leaders were ones who could offer the best protection for the group. Combat was a very physical thing - you fought with your hands, you used heavy objects as weapons. Women could not compete with men in this way. So, men became the more dominant sex.

The Bible Is A Story Of Restoration

From the moment the Fall occurred, God set in motion His plan to restore the world back to the way He had intended it. If you study the story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation,



you will start to see this pattern. Women and men start out on equal footing, then the Fall happens, a power dynamic forms, God introduces many laws in the Pentateuch (first 5 books of the Bible) that help to protect and bring value to women, Jesus moves the value slider even higher with his interactions with women, and society under Christian principles has brought the two sexes to almost equal status (notice I said “almost equal”; I acknowledge there is still some work to be done)

Prescriptive vs Descriptive

One common criticism of the Old Testament is that many of its figures had many wives, had concubines, committed adultery, etc. This point is raised to show that the Bible is inconsistent on the topic of marriage and relationships. However, we need to keep in mind two of the different types of verses in the Bible. The first kind of verses are the *prescriptive* passages - those that give direct commands. The second type are *descriptive* passages - those that describe what is going on. Remember, among other things, the Bible is a book containing the story of a people. And, the people don't always do or live the way they are supposed to. God allows them to do many things he does not like and the Old Testament records the things they did - warts and all. So, just because someone does something in the Bible doesn't mean we are to do the same thing. We need to look for prescriptive verses to know what we should or should not do.

Women In The Old Testament

The Old Testament has many laws and traditions that, for us today, seem rather odd at best and very oppressive and barbaric at worst. But, keep in mind, the first 5 books of the Bible were written almost 3500 years ago for a group of people who were wandering around the Middle East trying to settle in their homeland. You need different rules to regulate that lifestyle than you do our modern highly civilized one.

Not only was the culture of the time different, so were the economics. Back then there were almost no job opportunities for women. The business of the day was hard labor - herding, building structures, farming, etc. It wasn't as if she could submit her resume to a company somewhere and become an accountant, HR director or even a company CEO to support herself. She needed a family to support her. And there was no welfare system back then, either, where she could get financial assistance from the government. Women needed to be married in order to ensure they were cared for and provided for.

Even though these books were written so long ago, that does not mean they do not speak to us now as well. So, rather than immediately compare a law from back then to our lives now,



the first thing you have to do as ask “what was the purpose/intent of this law in the context of the time it was written”? Remember, it’s all about perspective.

Let’s have a look at some of the passages in the Bible that talk about how women were to be treated. Keep in mind, there are quite a few examples and these are only some.

Slave Girls (Exodus 21:7-11): First off, let’s remember that [Biblical slavery was not what we think of as slavery](#); it was more like indentured servitude. In cases of extreme poverty, a man could sell his daughter into servitude for a period of 6 years. If the master decided not to keep her, then she was to be restored with the same honor and status she had before she became a servant. If the master’s son took her as a wife, then she would be a servant no more but have the status of one of his own daughters. He also could not trade her to foreign nations - she had to remain with the Israelites. If the master has taken her for a wife, and he ends up taking another wife, the servant girl must still be cared for and provided for as if she is his wife. If the man doesn’t live up to these commitments, then she is to be set free - her and her family’s debt considered paid and in good standing.

Many cultures of the time had slaves. Most of them were treated pretty poorly. But, the Israelites were commanded to treat them like people. If one of these men took a slave as a wife, he needed to treat her like a wife - with all the honor and glory and protection that entailed. If his son took her as a wife, then she was to be thought of as a family member - like his own *daughter*; not like a slave. Think about it - the girl came from a poor family (which is why she was sold in the first place), she was sold to a family who was better off and, after marrying someone in that family, she now was part of a better-off family.

Women Prisoners of War (Deuteronomy 21:10-14): After a battle, Israelite men were permitted to take prisoners as wives. But, before they were allowed to marry them and have sex with them, there were a few things they needed to let happen. First, she had to shave her head and pare her nails. This was likely done to make her less attractive for the time she was there. I get it; this sounds like a weird request. But, this was likely to make sure that the men were less tempted by the women. God wanted to make sure the men wanted to be with the woman as a wife and he wasn’t just taking her to feed his immediate desires.

Second, the girl needed time to mourn the loss of her family. She was given a full month. This was out of respect for what she was going through and also to make the man wait and be sure this was really a woman he wanted to be with. 30 days is a long time to let your jets cool and to ponder if this is the right woman for you.

Finally, if after the month of mourning the man decides he no longer wants the prisoner as



his wife, she must be set free. She is not to be kept as a slave, nor sold to anyone else. She is free to go where she pleases and do as she wishes. She basically becomes a member of the Hebrew society if she wants to stay. Otherwise, she is free to go.

I know this all sounds weird and maybe a little barbaric. But, this is because, in the West, we live in a time of relative peace - and have for hundreds of years. Our borders are established and we are not fighting for resources in the same way tribes did in ancient times. And, in that time, if women were captured as part of a war between people groups, their fate was typically to become slave labor. That's why the Israelites were given the laws they were given - to ensure they treated women better than the other nations around them. The captured women had value; they were not to be used as playthings.

Women In The New Testament

Even though the Old Testament had started women on the course of restoration, they still had a long way to go when Jesus arrived on the scene. 1st century Judaism was strongly patriarchal. Women were meant to be in the house mostly, caring for children and managing the household. Women were not to be greeted in public. Also, in terms of marriage, a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason by issuing her a writ of divorce. But, a woman could not divorce her husband. Through his actions, we will see that Jesus ignored many of the cultural norms regarding the treatment of women and moved the bar even higher on how women should be thought of.

Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42): In this passage, Martha has invited Jesus (and likely others in his entourage) into her home. She is cooking and cleaning like a madwoman! And she finds her sister, Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus - not helping. Usually, though, women were relegated to outer courts in the synagogue and not allowed to sit in the main area with the men. The important thing to pick up on here is that Mary was allowed to sit with the others as Jesus taught. Even though her cultural role in this scene would typically have been the same as Martha (in the kitchen cooking and cleaning) Jesus doesn't tell Mary to leave and go "do her job". Instead, he tells Martha to relax and not be so anxious. Mary has chosen the right thing to do - to sit and learn.

Jesus Talks About Lust (Matthew 5:27-29): In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the crowd that if you even *look* at a woman with desire in your heart, you are committing adultery. In other words, that woman has too much value for you to think of her as your sexual plaything.

Jesus on Divorce (Matthew 5:31-32): Jesus also tells the gathered crowd that divorce for

any other reason than sexual immorality is wrong. You chose this woman to be your wife; make it work. No more writs for random reasons. Women who had been married and then divorced had a much harder time making it in 1st Century Judaism. Jesus was telling the men that it was their job to care for the women they married because they have value.

Here are a few other general observations about Jesus and his interactions with women.

- Jesus never belittles or sidelines women in the Gospels
- Jesus openly engages with women in public – speaking, teaching, blessing and healing them for everyone to see.
- Jesus was friends with many women and they traveled with him and his entourage.
- Often times, women were financially supporting Jesus’ ministry. This would have been seen as very scandalous in that time

Submission and Love

I think no other verse draws more attention/ire regarding the topic of the male/female relationship than Ephesians 5:22. In this verse, Paul writes that women should submit to their husbands. In this day and age of gender equality, it seems pretty anti-equality asking anyone to submit to anyone else.

The relationship between Jesus and the church is oftentimes compared to marriage – Jesus being the groom and the church his bride. Jesus is the head of the church. In order for him to lead us, we need to *let* him lead; we need to submit to him. So, too, must the wife submit to the husband. To let him lead.

Now, this is by no means meant to be a license for tyranny. And, it certainly has been used that way in the past. In this context “submit” doesn’t mean get on your knees, grovel and obey every command. It doesn’t mean keep your mouth shut and only speak when spoken to. This doesn’t mean the person submitting has less value or that the person being submitted to has *more* value. It simply means let your husband lead.

One thing we have discussed before is the danger of reading verses like single pithy statements in an isolated manner. As [Greg Koukl](#) often says we should never read a Bible verse. What he means by that is we should always read before and after the verse to make sure we understand the context of what is being said. This verse is no different. It starts a 10 verse section on marriage where both women *and* men are given direction on how to have a happy marriage.



In this section, women are given one directive - let your man lead (which implies that the man had better step up, be a leader, and handle his business). All the *other* instructions are for the men. Truth be told, we *need* more instructions often times than women do. And we most *definitely* need more guidance when it comes to marriage! Add guess where a lot of that wisdom and guidance comes from. Our wives, of course!

The first command men are given is to love their wives as Jesus loved the church. And how did Jesus do that? He sacrificed himself for it. He gave his life for those who would follow him. So, just as Jesus did for the church, husbands are to lay their lives down for their wives. They are to sacrifice for them. And I'm not just talking on the heroic scale by taking a bullet or jumping in front of a moving vehicle to save them. I'm talking about sacrificing one's own needs and wants for the benefit of her. A football game on and your wife needs you to carry in the groceries? Guess you're going to miss a few plays. Your buddies want to hang out but you haven't spent time with your wife recently? Sorry buddies, my wife is more important.

Later on in the passage, we are told how much we are to love our wives; as much as we love ourselves. She has as much value as I do. When we were married, we became one. No part of my body is less valuable than any other part. And that whole thing about her submitting to me? I need to get in front and lead *because* of how much value she has; not because I am more important than her. I need to protect her. Sometimes that's physical protection against real danger, sometimes that's pulling her out of social situations that may be detrimental to her, sometimes that's bearing burdens she cannot bear alone or at all.

As we've seen, women were created with the same value as men since the beginning. After the Fall, that got all messed up. God gave the Israelites laws in order to make sure that women were better protected and cared for. When Jesus came, he showed the Hebrews - in a very public way - the value that women had in their society. These concepts moved the bar even higher and have led us to our modern view of male and female equality of value. Has the Bible been used in sexist ways? Sure. But, are the lessons presented within it sexist? Definitely not.

Share this:

- [Click to share on Twitter \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to share on Facebook \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to share on Reddit \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to share on Pinterest \(Opens in new window\)](#)



- [Click to share on Pocket \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to email this to a friend \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to print \(Opens in new window\)](#)