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Season 3. Episode 5. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 Some Women Overseers, by Bruce C. E. Fleming

Intro: Welcome to **The Eden Podcast** where we think again about the Bible on women and men and we start with a correct understanding of what happened in the Garden of Eden back in the beginning.

I'm Bruce C. E. Fleming, founder of the Tru316 Project and a former Academic Dean and Professor of Practical Theology.

The focus of this episode is:

1 Timothy 2:11-12 Correcting Some Women Overseers

1 Timothy 2:11-12 is an occasion where verse numbers prove to be the enemy of understanding. This is because at this point in 1 Timothy 2 one Greek sentence has been cut up and numbered 11 and 12. The main idea of this one sentence is in verse 11. The part numbered as verse 12 is subordinate to it. But people have been focusing on verse 12. The result? *Misunderstanding*. Bad theology. And bad practice. No good has come of it. And that's a shame.

The target group of verses 9-15: *Some wayward women*.

Some of the men among the overseers were injurious, or disruptors, as described in verse 8. *Some* of the women praying and prophesying "likewise" were injurious, or disruptors. Not *every* man nor *every* woman overseer was committing Paul's third sin of disrupting the church. It is not reasonable to assume that every woman at Ephesus behaved in a disruptive way. But at least *some* had gone astray. These wayward women overseers were the target of Paul's concern.

The Greek pronoun of 1 Timothy 3:1 ("anyone") anticipates the restoration that Jesus, the faithful Word, can provide for *the limited number* of wayward women just as for the limited number of wayward men. *They* can be corrected and restored:

3:1^bIf *anyone* aspires to oversight, that one desires a good work.

Acceptable and unacceptable. As part of his advice, Paul contrasts acceptable or proper worshiping and teaching with improper worshiping and teaching. He begins with proper comportment (in 9a). Then, he briefly describes *improper* behavior that needs correction in verse 9b. He resumes his description of *proper* ministry activity in verse 10, and, after giving some direct advice in verse 11, he adds more *details* to his description of improper activity in verse 12. This can be outlined as follows:

- (9a) acceptable adornment
- (9b) *unacceptable* adornment
- (10) acceptable professing
- (11) direct advice: let them learn**
- (12) *unacceptable* professing

Does this seem to be a tangle of back and forth ideas with a key idea stuck in the middle? Actually this is a well-constructed rainbow of ideas put together in typically Jewish fashion.

Direct advice. In the middle of these details Paul uses an imperative verb at the start of verse 11. That means it has an exclamation point! It is the only one in the passage: “Let learn!” With this verb, Paul puts an exclamation point on how he wants Timothy to correct the false teachers among the women overseers.

When I learned Greek I was told to look for the exclamation points, the imperative verbs. These verbs deserved the most attention from the reader. The presence of this imperative verb tells the reader that verse 11 is the most important in 1 Timothy 2:8-15.

Do most readers who use English translations realize the important place of verse 11? Probably not. But we need to get this right. The emphasis of our understanding needs to be focused on the imperative verb in verse 11.

The outline of what is going on in verses 9-15 is clearly an inverted parallel pattern in ABCB'A' form. In the *middle* of the pattern is the key point. The *words* in the *middle* are the imperative *verb*, “Let learn!”

Let’s look at the disruptive behavior described in verse 9*b* and verse 12. Some of the women overseers had gone astray in what they taught and what they did. In between the *good* behavior described in verses 9*a* and 10, in 9*b* Paul begins to describe the disruptive behavior of *these* wayward women overseers. In verse 12, Paul gives additional details of *incorrect* behavior.

According to the second half of verse 9, or verse 9*b*, *some* had made inappropriate use of their hair, of gold, pearls, and costly clothing. Some scholars note that pagan women, who served in the temples and mixed their teaching with ritual prostitution, dressed in this way. Were the women like this in Ephesus? Sadly, yes. Many such women were caught up into service in the huge temple at Ephesus.

Most women in Ephesus, however, could never afford to dress in such a lavish way. The expense was prohibitive. Gold and pearls? Gold was out of reach and a pearl was valued at three times the price of gold! A costly dress ran many times the typical wage. Very few of the women could have afforded to dress in this extravagant way. A large proportion of them were servants and slaves.

Let me paraphrase verses 8-12 from the Greek for you.

^{2:8}Timothy, I wish for the men to pray and prophesy correctly during worship lifting up holy hands without causing anger and disputing.

⁹Likewise, I wish the women who pray and prophesy during worship to adorn themselves with modest apparel that promotes self-control – not with improper

hair plaiting, along with its gold and pearls, and costly clothing – ¹⁰Women preaching godliness are adorned by their good works.

¹¹Let those women overseers who were wayward learn in quietness and with all studiousness. ¹²I am not permitting them to teach men in an incorrect way, but to learn in quietness.

The words in the Greek text. The most important words in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 are **in the main sentence** in verses 11-12. Combined with verse 8, they tell Timothy the “who,” “how,” “what,” and “why” of his assignment in Ephesus. The Greek sentence starts in verse 11 and ends with verse 12. The first part gives the main idea in verse 11. The second part adds details to it in verse 12.

The love of God for these women and for their ministry is Paul’s concern. His one command to Timothy is to let them learn!

“Woman.” This is Paul’s first word in verse 11. In the Greek text it is simply “woman.” It is not “women,” not “all women” nor “a woman.” There is no article in front of the word “woman” which is singular.

In Greek when a word is anarthrous, meaning it does not have an article, “a” or “the” or “all,” in front of it, the word can stand for a subgroup of people. Paul gives a command to Timothy for dealing with a subgroup of the women overseers, a smaller group of women inside a larger group of women.

Who can they be? They are not all women *overseers*. They are “*these* women,” a subgroup within the larger group of women overseers. *These* women have strayed from the truth and need to be corrected.

“In quietness.” This is how all students in Paul’s day learn. They study “in quietness.” This is how Paul learned from his own Jewish teacher Gamaliel.

These words, “in quietness,” are found close to the start of the sentence in verse 11 *and* they end the sentence at the end of verse 12. Placing words like this at the start and end of a sentence is a way of showing in Greek that there is just one idea in between the repeated words “in quietness.” It is called *inclusio*.

Lots of scholars can tell you this. But do they explain *why* this is important? All of verses 11 and 12 are just one sentence with one big idea in it.

“Let learn!” The next words “Let learn!” are Paul’s *command* to Timothy. Taken together all these Greek words mean “these women, *in quietness*, **let learn!** ..., *in quietness*.”

Paul doesn’t say, “Timothy, Gather together these women and *force* them to learn.” No. They already want to learn. While he was in Ephesus and before Paul had written him, Timothy had the time to put a stop to the false teaching that had been going on. Those who had been stopped

wanted to do better. What was he to do with them? Dared he set about retraining them for restoration and renewed service? Should he let them learn? Yes! Emphatically so!

The Greek word for *this* kind of learning is not the harsh “education through punishment” that Paul handed out to the blasphemers Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20). This is a different Greek action word.

“Let *learn*” is a familiar verb. It was used for student *teachers* at their lessons as *they* learned. The Jewish teachers wondered about where Jesus had learned like this in order to have known so much (John 7:15).

“In all subjection” or “Paying attention.” The Greek words for this come next in the word order of verse 11. “Paying attention” is another way to say “in all subjection.” Paying attention to the teacher is an important part to learning. It has nothing to do with all the ideas commonly associated today when these words are translated as “in all subjection.” The correct train of thought is “learn in subjection to your teacher.”

Who were these students learning from? Who were they paying attention to? Their teacher would have been Timothy himself, or Priscilla, or another teacher. Above all, Jesus was their highest Teacher.

The Jewish teachers described a teacher-in-training as someone who “learns in order to teach and that learns in order to practice” (~~m.~~ *Abot* 6:6). Timothy was to be retraining these willing learners in order that they might resume service as active overseers and teachers of the Word.

Verse 12. No *improper* teaching. In verse 12, Paul uses two action words, one common and one rare, to describe the kind of improper behavior he is not permitting. New Testament scholar Dr. Philip Payne has explained that these two words are linked together in Greek. Paul has only *one* activity in mind.

These Greek verbs are *didasko* and *authenthein*. Taken together they mean, “I am not permitting any *authenthein*-type of teaching,” or “teaching in an improper way.”

All teaching by *all* women overseers is not forbidden. Teaching *in this improper way* is forbidden for *those* who are doing it. Of course, all false teaching should be forbidden.

Not every woman overseer *wore* inappropriate clothing *and* the expensive jewelry described in verse 9b. Not every women overseer was teaching false doctrine in the inappropriate way referred to in verse 12.

Authentein, the second Greek verb, is largely a mystery word to us. It is used only this one time in the entire Bible. Its meaning can’t be determined by comparing how it is used in other Bible passages.

To make understanding its meaning even more difficult, it is a rare word outside of the Bible in Greek literature at the time of Paul!

Hundreds of years before Paul, the word had something to do with a murderer. Years after Paul, it has something to do with pagan doctrines and sexual practices.

Paul, Timothy and the Ephesians were from Asia Minor where pagan practices abounded. Some of the educated women converts at Ephesus could have been wealthy enough to afford the expensive accessories frowned on in verse 9*b*. Perhaps some of these women had tried teaching the inappropriate way it was done in the pagan temple.

From today's point in time the meaning is hazy. The general idea, however, is clear. It was not the right way to teach. Paul stopped it where he was. Timothy was to stop it in Ephesus.

A Time to Correct. During our first years of marriage, while Joy finished her degree in seminary, I had graduated and I worked at *starting a new church* in a working-class, river town in Illinois. I got a job as a school bus driver to earn some income and to get to know the area.

I thought I would get to know the families of the children on my bus routes and our congregation would grow from them. But it didn't work out that way.

School bus drivers spend much of their time parked outside school buildings, waiting. After they get pre-positioned they wait for the students to come out. Since I had three afternoon routes, I found myself waiting with my bus in a line with other buses in school parking lots three times a day, five days a week. Often, a bus driver would park and climb into another bus to chat and pass the time. Frequently, the subject turned to complaints about everyday problems.

By the grapevine, everybody knew I was "the preacher" and they often unburdened themselves to me. I would listen and pray for them right there in the waiting bus. Several of them gave their hearts to Christ! *That* was the first step in addressing their problems.

Before I knew it, we had a new and growing church made up of converted school bus drivers! Many of the people I worked with had lived hard lives and many still were living in difficult situations. Christian growth for them was often a case of "two steps forward and one step back," or worse.

To help these new believers grow, a ministry team was assembled, consisting of Joy and myself and several mature believers, one each from three sister churches in the area.

One of the most active of the new Christian bus drivers had been a hard drinker. She had a very loud voice and had been known in town for having the foulest vocabulary around. Her conversion to Christ was glorious! The difference in her life was evident to all.

She began to treat her colleagues with respect. She lavished care on her previously neglected family. She became involved in the ministry team of the new church. She did all she *could* to help it grow. And grow it did!

Just before our first Easter service she organized a children's choir. One of the choir members was her daughter. She taught the children songs and bought bolts of beautiful golden cloth that she made into lovely robes for each child. Then, she took a big step back.

Late the night before Easter, she called our house. She was drunk and depressed. She was angry, loud, and out of control. Worst of all, she had just gone out into her own back yard and had made a bonfire ... out of all the children's lovely new choir robes!

Easter Sunday morning she had a terrible hangover. The children were devastated not to have the robes they had hoped to wear. They could hardly sing.

More disruptions occurred in the months that followed. Time and time again, she would fall. Each time we prayed with her and helped her get back on the right track, she made progress and ministered to others in her vast circle of friends. But then, in one way or another, she would *disrupt* the church mightily.

A mature Christian from a sister church advised us to restructure our ministry team and assign her to a quiet period of probationary discipline.

Late one afternoon *after* our school bus routes were over, our ministry team huddled with her in a quiet corner of a local restaurant and explained to her that we wanted her to spend a quiet period of time on the sidelines receiving further training, while others carried on the ministry. Our hope was that, eventually, she *could* minister again.

Back to 1 Timothy 2:11-12. In Ephesus where Timothy was improper teaching and preaching of any kind, whether by wayward men overseers or by wayward women overseers had no place in the church in Paul's day. It should have no place in the church in our day. All teaching and all preaching by all men and women overseers in the church must be based on the Bible.

As Paul later writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: *All Scripture* is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness; so *that* the man or woman of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work.

Study Guide material:

It is helpful to see an overview of these two verses in outline form, word for word as in the original Greek. (The underlined compound verb in verse 12 will be explained in the pages that follow.)

11 "woman" (subject: a certain group of women)

