**MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM**

**PART V**

**THE ESSENCE OF FEMININITY: A CHRISTMAS PERSPECTIVE**

**Luke 1:26-56**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 1. We are in the middle of a series called “Male and Female He Created Them”, where we look at what the Bible teaches about gender and sexuality. Given that the calendar has officially turned to December, and we’re all eagerly looking forward to Christmas, I have decided to add a Christmas twist to this sermon.

In 1953, a young man named Jim married a young woman named Elisabeth. They had many things in common. They went to the same school, shared the same passion for Jesus Christ. But the thing that distinguished them as a couple was their common burden for missionary work among the Auca Indians in Ecuador.

The Auca Indians were known to be fiercely hostile towards outsiders. Indeed, they were so hostile that no outsider had succeeded in meeting them without being killed. But Jim and Elisabeth resolved together to bring the good news of the gospel to these precious people.

Initial contact was promising. Jim and four other missionaries were able to pass on small, token gifts to a small band of Auca Indians, first from the safety of their airplane, and then on the ground. The Auca Indians seemed to greet them warmly. But when they landed for their next meeting, a group of ten Auca warriors rushed at them and speared all five of them to death.

One would not be surprised if Elisabeth gave up her missionary call to the Auca Indians at that point. She could have returned to the United States and lived in the relative safety and prosperity of western culture for the rest of her days, and no one would have blamed her. Indeed, she could even have abandoned her faith and accused God of being unfair, unjust, and evil, and we would sympathize with her. But she did neither.

Elisabeth returned to the Auca Indians as a missionary and lived among them for three years. One of those years was spent in captivity. But slowly, the gospel began to take root among the Auca Indians, and over time, many of these once savage people finally came to know the peace of Christ.

I am speaking of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, the missionary couple who inspired an entire generation of international missions work in the 20th century. While Jim’s loving sacrifice for the cause of the gospel is worth much attention, I want to turn our attention today to Elisabeth.

Elisabeth Elliot wrote over twenty books and was one of the most sought after speakers in the United States. She wrote one of the classic books on marriage, *Passion and Purity*, and had her own radio program for 13 years called “Gateway to Joy”. She passed away last June after a long battle with dementia. She was a remarkable woman who lived a remarkable life.

Some might point to her and use her as the poster child of the new feminist model for women: the intelligent, eloquent, inspiring “wonder woman” who travelled across the country speaking to thousands at a time, showing women all around the world the endless potential and limitless opportunities for empowered women. But that is not how Elliot would have described herself.

In 1991, Elliot wrote an article titled *The Essence of Femininity: A Personal Perspective*. In that article, she laments the fact that everyone seems to be talking about *feminism*, but no one is talking about *femininity*. She perceived that women had advocated so much for equality with men that they had forgotten what it meant for a woman to be a woman. She describes this as a “flattening” of “all human beings to a single level – a faceless, colorless, sexless wasteland…” Rather than “flatten” gender differences, Elliot believed that we needed to celebrate gender differences, not the *stereotypes* of the macho man and the sensual woman, but the *archetypes* contained in the Bible.

And where does she look for the archetype of femininity? She looks to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and rightly so. That’s what we’re going to do today as well. In honour of Elisabeth Elliot, I have titled this message **The Essence of Femininity: A Christmas Perspective.**

We will have four points today:

1. Mary’s Example
2. Mary’s Thoughtfulness
3. Mary’s Surrender
4. Mary’s Joy

(1) **MARY’S EXAMPLE**

Our text begins with an angelic appearance to a young girl preparing to get married. Verse 27 tells us that this girl’s name is Mary, and she is a virgin betrothed to Joseph, who is a descendant of King David. A “betrothal” was like “an engagement”, except it was a formal, witnessed agreement. It conferred legal status that entitled Joseph to call her his wife. The text doesn’t tell us how old Mary was, but betrothal in the first century could take place starting at the age of twelve. Christian tradition holds that Mary was anywhere between 12-15 years old when the angel Gabriel appeared to her. She’s only a teenager, raw and inexperienced, full of innocence and simplicity.

And yet, there was something special about this young woman. She possessed godly qualities that are worthy of imitation. And God, through the writer Luke, wants us to follow her example.

The context of our text will help us to see this. Luke tells us why he writes this gospel in 1:1-4. He is writing to a man named Theophilus, who was likely a non-Jewish Christian from the upper classes of society. In verse 4, Luke tells us why he wrote this amazing account of Jesus’ life for Theophilus: “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” Theophilus was a Christian who was struggling with believing the truths of the gospel. He was beginning to doubt. Luke wanted him to have *certainty*, so he wrote what we now known as the Gospel of Luke.

Luke then begins his gospel with an angelic announcement, not the one to Mary that everyone knows, but a lesser known announcement to a priest named Zechariah. Gabriel tells him that his elderly wife, barren all her life, would finally conceive and give birth to a baby boy named John. This John would be John the Baptist, and he would prepare the hearts of many for the coming of the Messiah, the one who would bring God’s salvation to earth. It is after this announcement to Zechariah that we reach our text for today in the announcement to Mary.

And so the gospel of Luke begins with two angelic announcements about two births of two boys to two people who never would have expected to have a baby at that point of their lives. As we will see throughout this message, Luke deliberately contrasts Zechariah’s response to his good news with Mary’s response to her good news. And the point Luke is making to Theophilus, and now to us, is that we should respond to the good news of the gospel like Mary, not like Zechariah. Zechariah displays the uncertainty that Theophilus had, but Mary displays the certainty that Theophilus needed.

This is important for us to know as we seek to understand what the Bible teaches about gender. We’re looking to Mary today as an example of godly femininity, but that doesn’t mean that she can’t be an example to men as well. Indeed, Luke holds up this teenage girl from a small country town as an example for noble, *male* Theophilus to follow. The Bible’s teaching on gender is really quite nuanced. There aren’t two separate lists of masculine and feminine qualities that have no overlap.

The Bible doesn’t just say “men are bold” and “women are gentle.” Instead, you have a verse like 1 Peter 3:4 that describes a woman’s “imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit”, but then at the same time you have a verse like Galatians 5:23 that says that the fruit of the Spirit’s work in every believer, men and women, will include gentleness.

The same goes for other qualities, like strength. People tend to think “men are strong” and “women are weak”. But what about Proverbs 31:17’s description of the excellent wife? “She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong.”

No, there aren’t two different, mutually exclusive lists for men and women. Instead, there is one list of godly qualities that men and women will express differently. There is a *masculine* gentleness and a *feminine* gentleness, a *masculine* strength and a *feminine* strength. But it is one quality expressed in two ways.

So as we look at Mary’s example, let’s not *just* look at her as an example of godly femininity. She certainly is that, but she is also much more. She is an example of *godliness*, period. So if you’re a man, I don’t want you to listen to this sermon and just think that this is for *women*. I want you to listen and think about how this can also be for *men*.

(2) **MARY’S THOUGHTFULNESS**

The first quality we see in our text is Mary’s thoughtfulness. We see that in her response to Gabriel’s angelic announcement in verse 28: “Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!” What exactly does this mean, that Mary was God’s favoured one? Could it mean that she had earned God’s favour by the way she lived her life? Or could it mean that God had simply chosen to set his favour upon her? It’s not clear at this point, and it’s not clear to Mary either. That’s why verse 29 tells us that “she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.” She’s trying to figure out what it means to be favoured by God.

The word “discern” here is important and reveals something important about Mary’s response to the angelic announcement. In his new book, *Hidden Christmas*, Tim Keller helps us understand what the word “discern” means:

“The Greek word means ‘to make an audit.’ It is an accounting word, and it means to be adding things up, weighing and pondering, to be *intensely rational*.”

When Mary tried to “discern” Gabriel’s greeting, she was engaged in this precise sort of careful consideration. “What does the angel mean? Why am I favoured? Am I favoured because I’ve done something special? Or am I favoured because God has something special for me to do?” It’s crucial to see the difference here. Did God choose her because she was favoured, or was Mary favoured because God had chosen her?

Gabriel tells her what he means in verses 30-31: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” The favour God gave her was not because of what she had done in the past. It was a favour given to her because of what God would have her do in the near future. In other words, Mary was favoured because God had assigned a special task to her, not because she had already done special tasks for God. It was not a favour that was deserved. It was a favour that was freely given to her.

Think about it. Could anyone ever *deserve* to do what she was called to do? She was called to carry the Son of God in her womb, to give birth to the Saviour of the world, and to raise him up to die as the sacrificial Lamb of God for our sins. No one else in the history of mankind has been or will be called to do anything remotely similar. It is completely and utterly unique in its responsibility and honour, and there is nothing that any human being could do to make themselves worthy of.

Mary knew that she was a sinner, just like any of us, and so when she heard the words, “Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!” she didn’t just jump to the conclusion that God favoured her because she was special. She knew that it was entirely possible that she was special because God favoured her.

This weighing, this careful consideration, this discerning of truth is part of the essence of femininity. Godly women are thoughtful women. They don’t rush to judgment. They aren’t driven by impulse. They’re not reckless or naïve.

This quality of thoughtfulness is made even clearer when we contrast Mary’s response to Gabriel’s greeting in verse 29 to Zechariah’s response in verse 12: “And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.” Both Mary and Zechariah were *troubled* by Gabriel’s appearance, and rightly so! Having an angel suddenly appear before you would be a terrifying experience. But where Mary used her brain to try to discern what the angel was saying, Zechariah merely cowered in fear.

A few years ago Nina and I were involved in a big chain-reaction car collision on the 401. I vividly remember ramming into the car in front of me. Suddenly there was smoke in the car, the airbags had all deployed, and little Lily and Athan were wailing in the back. I just sat there in shock and disbelief, unable to act, unable to think… until Nina calmly said, “Ok Josh, you need to pull over to the shoulder.”

It’s commonly said that men are primarily driven by logic and women are primarily driven by emotion. Some would say that women are irrational, that they act on instinct, not principle. While it may be true that women are emotional beings, it is not true that women are *only* emotional beings. Indeed, some of the most careful thinkers I know are women. Most people would know that I’m the logical one in our family, and Nina is the instinctual one. And yet, when it mattered most, it was her rationality that protected our family from further harm. Careful thoughtfulness is part of the essence of femininity.

 (3) **MARY’S SURRENDER**

There is an important distinction, however, between thoughtfulness and assertiveness. Mary may have weighed what was said carefully, but she knew when to rely on her conclusions and when not to. This leads to the next quality: Mary’s surrender.

After the angel Gabriel tells her that she will give birth to the one who will be called the Son of the Most High, the one who will reign on David’s throne forever, Mary is left with more questions. “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” she asks in verse 34. She’s been told what her task is, but she hasn’t been told how she will accomplish it.

Contrast this with Zechariah’s question in verse 18: “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” On the face of it, Zechariah’s question looks similar to Mary’s. The difference, however, is that Zechariah’s question expressed doubt, while Mary’s question expressed faith. We see in verse 20 that the angel Gabriel makes Zechariah mute, unable to speak, “because you did not believe my words.” Mary, on the other hand, is declared “blessed” by her relative Elizabeth in verse 45, for she “believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” Zechariah wanted evidence. Mary only wanted an explanation.

The angel Gabriel gives her this explanation in verse 35, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” Now try to put yourselves in Mary’s shoes. She knows she’s a virgin, and she knows that virgins don’t have babies, and yet she’s going to have a baby, but how? The only explanation she is given is that, in some mysterious way, the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and then she would become pregnant. It’s not much of an explanation. She’s not told what it will feel like. Will it be painful, pleasurable, or imperceptible? She’s not told when it will happen. Right now? Immediately after Gabriel’s gone? In a couple weeks? And, perhaps, most importantly, she’s not told what it would be like raising a child under the stigma of illegitimacy.

You see, Mary wasn’t supposed to have children yet. She was betrothed, but not yet married. If she became pregnant now, sooner or later someone would do the math and conclude that she had either slept with Joseph before marriage or had been unfaithful. Either way, her friends, family, and community would forever brand her as a sinner and her son as illegitimate.

But what is her response to all these questions without answers, this potential future under a cloud of condemnation? We see it in verse 38: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

Now I’m going to sit back and let Elisabeth Elliot speak to you about this verse in her trademark careful, discerning, thoughtful way:

“This is what I understand to be the essence of femininity. It means surrender.

“Think of a bride. She surrender her independence, her name, her destiny, her will, herself to the bridegroom in marriage…Then, in the marriage chamber, she surrenders her body, her priceless gift of virginity, all that has been hidden. As a mother she makes a new surrender—it is her life for the life of the child. This is most profoundly what women were made for, married or single (and the special vocation of the virgin is to surrender herself for service to her Lord and for the life of the world).

“The gentle and quiet spirit of which Peter speaks, calling it “of great worth in God’s sight”, is the true femininity, which found its epitome in Mary, the willingness to be only a vessel, hidden, unknown, except as Somebody’s mother. This is the true mother-spirit, true maternity, so absent, it seems to me, in all the annals of feminism.

“Femininity *receives*. It says, “May it be to me as you have said.” It takes what God gives—a special place, a special honor, a special function and glory, different from that of masculinity, meant to be a help. In other words, it is for us women to receive the given as Mary did, not to insist on the not-given, as Eve did.”

Elisabeth Elliot demonstrated this *surrender*, this *receiving*, in accepting the sovereign will of God in the tragic death of her beloved husband. Mary demonstrated it too when she gave up her own dreams of raising a pious, well-respected family and surrendered to God’s call on her to bear the Son of God under the dark stigma of illegitimacy. And every time a woman sets aside her own preferences to follow her husband or to submit to God’s will, she is displaying the essence of true femininity.

Some might decry this description of women as implying that women are *weak*. All they do is give in and give up. But I would say that those who would say that have never experienced true surrender. True surrender takes *strength*. It is infinitely harder to surrender the things that you want, the things that you care about, than to insist on your own way, your own priorities, your own values. True surrender takes *courage*. It says, “I don’t know what’s going to happen next, and the uncertainty is frightening, but I surrender to your will.” That’s what a godly woman looks like.

(4) **MARY’S JOY**

Mary has one last quality to teach us, and it is the quality of joy. After the angel Gabriel departs from her, Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, and finds her pregnant just as Gabriel had said. Elizabeth then declares that Mary is blessed, because she is carrying the mother of her Lord in her womb. And she knows because the baby in her own womb, the one who was destined to prepare the way for Jesus, leaped in her womb with joy at the sound of Mary’s voice. It was like Elizabeth received a prophetic word, a revelation from God to Elizabeth to strengthen Mary’s faith.

And that is precisely what happens. Just a little earlier, Mary surrendered to the will and leading of the Lord, leaving her many questions unanswered. But now, with the confirmation from Elizabeth that she was indeed carrying the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, her surrender erupts into joyful praise in verse 46. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

Mary was brought to her knees in awestruck wonder at the reality that God had chosen her for this most holy of tasks. “He who is mighty has done great things for me”, she sang out. In verses 50-53 she expresses amazement at the fact that God would choose her, a teenage girl from an obscure little town, and not someone stronger, more reputable, more impressive. “I was lowly, but you lifted me up. I was hungry but you filled me. You didn’t choose the proud and mighty. You chose me.” Her wonder at what God had done for her then expands to an even greater joy at what God would do for her people, the people of Israel, in verses 54-55: “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” She didn’t know exactly how this Messiah, this baby Jesus, would help Israel, but she knew that he would fulfill all the promises made to her forefathers.

And what of Zechariah? How does his story end? Up until now, we have only had contrasts between Zechariah and Mary, the priest who doubted and the girl who believed. But where there was only dissonance, now we finally hear resonance, for his story also ends with a song of praise. After his son is born, God lifts his muteness, and the first thing he does is he joyfully praises God: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people.”

As the angel would declare to the shepherds just one chapter later, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Christ has come to bring joy to all peoples, not just to women, not just to priests, but to all peoples.

He has come to fill those who hunger for meaning with the fullness of his presence. He has come to exalt those who are of lowly estate. And he has come to help those who struggle with the power and condemnation of sin with the grace and mercy of the cross. For the cross is what gives the cradle its joy. Jesus came into the world not just to dwell with us, but to die for us, that we might be forgiven by God and reconciled to God in loving, personal relationship. But you must surrender, not with a mindless leap of faith, but with a careful weighing of truth that culminates in joyful surrender.

**CONCLUSION**

It is in this book, the Bible, that we find truth. Mary heard the words of God through the angel Gabriel, but we hear the words of God through the pages of Holy Scripture. The Bible tells us what our identity is as fallen, sinful human beings; the Bible tells us what our new identity is in Christ as justified, beloved children of God; and the Bible tells us what our gender identity is in being created male or female.

Don’t look to the world for its depictions of masculinity and femininity, these sad caricatures of what we were meant to be. Our culture laments gender stereotypes all the time, but it is in fact responsible for so many of them. Instead, look to the archetypes of the Bible, the holy examples of men and women who accurately reveal to us what it means for a man to be a man, and a woman to be a woman. It’s not always easy, for gender differences are more an art than a science. But if we would *discern*, and if we would *surrender*, and if we would willingly embrace the truth of God’s word with *joy*, we will with time learn how to be godly men and women.

Let me close with these parting words from Elisabeth Elliot:

“I would be the last to deny that women are given gifts that they are meant to exercise. But we must not be greedy in insisting on having all of them, in usurpring the place of men. We are women, and my plea is *Let me be a woman*, holy through and through, asking for nothing but what God wants to give me, receiving with both hands and with all my heart whatever that is. No arguments would ever be needed if we all shared the spirit of the “most blessed among women.”