

Jesus and Women

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What did Jesus think of women? Everything else Jesus did, said or thought is important to us. Shouldn't this question be important, too?

A few years ago, while driving to a church in Oakland, California to speak on the work of God's Spirit in the Muslim world, I was listening to National Public Radio. Fatima Mernissi, Moroccan writer (*The Harem Within*) and professor of sociology, was being interviewed.

The interviewer asked Dr. Mernissi how much life had changed in the generation between her mother and herself. Having read Dr. Mernissi's book, I already knew she grew up in a wealthy family that kept a huge house where *harem* — separation of males and females — was practiced. Some areas were women-only. The women of the house only went out on the public street on rare occasions, and only when accompanied by a male family member.

Dr. Mernissi didn't hesitate. She said, "When my mother was nine, she was wearing *hijab* (traditional Islamic women's dress, defined variously according to culture). When I was nine, I was wearing a mini-skirt!" In a single generation, life in Morocco — at least for her family in her segment of society — had undergone a revolution.

Those of us who work in the Muslim world, however, know that, for many Muslim women, life has scarcely changed at all. I recalled visiting the home of a single woman missionary in Islamabad a few years earlier for tea. When we arrived, we found she had also invited another foreign friend: a Finnish woman previously married to a Pakistani man. Soon we begin talking about life for women in Pakistan, and the other lady said, "You know, if I were a Hindu and believed in reincarnation, I would pray that in my next life I would come back as a man in Pakistan."

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I asked why. She replied, "Because men in Pakistan can do anything at all and get away with it!"

If there is a place where a woman needs to know who she was created to be, that place is the Muslim world. But whether a woman is of the East or of the West, the question of "Jesus and Women" is still critical. How did Jesus treat women? How did He relate to women? What did He think of women?

Let's look at the Gospel of Luke for those answers. Yes, the entire Gospel of Luke. Because twenty-four times in that gospel Jesus speaks with a woman, ministers to a woman, or uses a woman in a parable or as an example. All of these twenty-four encounters are instructive and positive.

Three words sum up what the Gospel of Luke teaches us about Jesus and Women: ACCEPTING, SENSITIVE, and AFFIRMING.¹

Jesus was Accepting

Jesus accepted the gifts of loving service that women offered Him.

The Book of Luke is unusual among the ancient books of the world. Luke takes great care, for example, to record the emotional and physical responses of a woman in her pregnancy. In the account of Elizabeth's visit from Mary (who is pregnant with Jesus), Elizabeth exclaims, "The babe leaped in my womb!" (Luke 1:44). Mary responds to Elizabeth's joy, breaking out in the beautiful song we call "The Magnificat": "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord / How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (1:46-47). Later, Luke records the gentleness of Mary as she wraps the newborn Jesus in swaddling clothes and lays Him in a manger.

No other book in ancient history is so concerned about the feelings of a woman in her pregnancy, or as she cares for her newborn child. God, however, thought these things important enough to include in His eternal Word and bring them down to us through history.

Jesus' sense of manhood was never threatened by the tenderness of a woman. In Luke 7:36-50, a woman comes into a banquet, kneels, weeps over Jesus' feet, bathes them with her tears, and then anoints them with perfume before drying them with her hair

as an act of repentance. Jesus allows her to do this without any trace of disgust or embarrassment. (We'll come back to this story a little later.)

In a milieu where rabbis only taught male students, Luke says Jesus included women among his disciples. But Luke says that Jesus included women—even women from questionable backgrounds—in His circle of followers.

Women often ministered to Jesus in unique ways. Luke tells us that Mary and Martha's house was a quiet place of retreat from the crowds that demanded bread, miracles and healing (Luke 10:38—42).

Luke also describes for us the mob that herded Jesus toward Golgotha. It was the "daughters of Jerusalem" who followed Jesus and wept for Him as they made their way along the Via Dolorosa (the Street of Sorrows; Luke 23:27—29).

When we finally come to the Crucifixion scene, what do we find? All the disciples have fled, Luke says (22:31-34), including Peter—the one who boasted, "I will never forsake you; I will never turn my back on you; I will go with you even unto death" (Luke 22:31—34).

Luke paints a grim post-crucifixion scene: the women remaining—silently standing watch—at the foot of the cross. In honest reflection we must ask, What else could they do? Absolutely nothing . . . except be there.

In this way, life hasn't changed much in 2000 years. When people feel they are "on a cross"—a cross of sickness, mental illness, physical, emotional, or financial difficulty, children emotionally in the wind—sometimes the very best thing one can do is just "be there." As the women were there for Jesus until the moment He released his spirit in death.

And even after Jesus' death—while His hand-picked "men" were hiding behind barred doors, terrified the Romans would find and crucify them too—Luke tells the women were busy preparing spices to anoint Jesus' body for a proper burial the Jewish holy days had denied him. It was the women who took the spices to the tomb, having no idea how they would move the stone. Nevertheless, they went—in the early hours of the morning, while it was still dark—to do whatever they could.

So from the moment the Son of God emerges into our world as a tiny, helpless infant, all the way to the final hours before His ascension back into heaven, we find Jesus was ministered to, comforted, rested, and encouraged by women. And Jesus accepted these gifts of love, Luke tells us, not because they were His God-given privilege as a man, but rather because they were gifts of intelligent and faithful service to the Heavenly Father.

Jesus was accepting of every gift of ministry that women had to offer.

Jesus was Sensitive

The second word that describes Jesus' attitude toward women is sensitive. Jesus was sensitive to the social and religious handicaps under which women struggled in His day, and He lifted those burdens. He was compassionate and caring.

Luke touches several times on the social life of women in Jesus' day. Take, for example, the day when Jesus visited Peter's house, and Peter's mother-in-law was sick.

In nearly forty years I've lived in Arab and Turkish culture, I've seen what life is like for too many women. In the Middle East, even if a woman of the house is sick, she gets up to take care of a male guest. Jesus, of course, is not an ordinary guest. He is a rabbi, a teacher of God's law. He has the right to walk into the house, sit down, and immediately be served tea. But Jesus refuses to exercise His guest privilege. Instead, He first goes to Peter's mother-in-law and lays His hands on her. He refuses to allow her to minister to Him until after He has ministered to her.

In Luke 7:11-17, Jesus raises the son of the widow at Nain back to life. The position of widows in Middle-Eastern culture — even today — can be tragic if they have no male relatives to care for them. Jesus watches a funeral procession coming out of Nain. A few men carry the bier, and a lone woman walks behind. Jesus understands. There's no other male relative to care for her. She has no one else. So out of compassion He reaches out and touches the shroud, restoring the young man to life. Not out of compassion for him, but for his poor mother. For a woman.

Even more powerfully in Luke's gospel, we see Jesus opposing the prejudice and misuse of organized religion against women. In Luke 20, for example, Jesus defends

widows against the greed of the Pharisees. But the most beautiful example is found in Luke 13. There, Luke tells us that on the Sabbath, in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus healed a woman.

The synagogue in Capernaum was is 60' wide and 120' long (the foundations still stand). And like the mosque today, the synagogue was a man's place of worship.

On the Sabbath that Luke describes, it would have been filled with men. Jesus the Teacher is visiting (Luke 13:10—17)! He's going to expound the Word of God. Everyone expects to hear great and revolutionary things from this brilliant new authority in the Law. Jesus takes the scroll of the Law into his arms and begins to teach from it. Suddenly, in the back of the room, He sees a woman walk in, all bent over. We have no idea how old she is. Luke only tells us that for many years she has been a prisoner of an evil spirit that has bound her and kept her a cripple.

According to Bailey, Jesus now does five things that are astonishing because they break the cultural patterns of that day. First, He calls the woman forward. He calls her from the place of the women (the back of the room) to the place of the men (the front of the room). He interrupts the teaching of the Word of God – the most sacred time in Jewish life – to minister to a woman.

Second, Jesus breaks culture by speaking to her. In his blog *My Jewish Learning*, Rabbi Eliezar Siegal confirms that there were observant Jews who rose every morning and prayed: "I thank Thee, God, that I was not born a Gentile, a dog, or a woman."

It's hard to imagine a more despicable prayer to begin each day. Do not overlook the word order. No wonder everyone is shocked as Jesus speaks to this woman.

Jesus breaks culture a third way: He lays hands on her. According to William Barkley, the Talmud listed seven categories of Pharisees, the third category being the "bruised" (black-and-blue) Pharisees. These men were so strict in their observance of the Law, they would not even look at a woman. If they sensed that a woman was going to cross their path, they would simply close their eyes and continue walking straight ahead. Of course, you end up walking into walls and ox carts that way. But here, in contrast — rebuke? — to the "black-and-blue Pharisees," Jesus lays His hands on a woman.

Fourth, Jesus breaks culture by affirming her worth. These men in the synagogue are silently taking Jesus' measure. "What is she doing in here? What is he doing? Look how he's touching her. This is God's holy place!"

Jesus knows their hearts (Luke 13:15), and says to them, "Let me ask you a question. If you had an ox or an ass, would you let it out and lead it to water on the Sabbath? Do you violate the Sabbath and make yourself unclean? Or do you let the animal die of thirst?"

Jesus' hearers are trapped. They know exactly what they would do: break the Sabbath to save a valuable animal, and be holy next week.

Jesus says, "Listen to me. This woman is worth far more than any animal you have tied up in your stall." Jesus affirms her worth in human society.

Finally, Jesus breaks culture by reminding these men, "This woman is not an animal; she is a 'daughter of Abraham'" (Luke 6:16). And by saying this, He restores her rightful title to her.

In this incident, Jesus willingly risks His life for the sake of a woman. He humiliates His opponents in their own synagogue by ministering with sensitivity, kindness, and mercy to a woman. Among many reasons, it is for acts of divine love like this that men will one day send Him to the Cross.

Jesus was Affirming

We've seen that Jesus was accepting of the gifts that women had to offer. We've seen that He was sensitive to the social and cultural handicaps they had to live under. The third thing we can say about Jesus is that He was affirming. Jesus let women know that they were intelligent and intrinsically worthy of God's love and concern.

As we read through the four gospels, never once do we find Jesus putting a woman down.

I wish I could say that about myself. I wish I could say "I've never put a woman down, told a joke that made fun of a woman, or looked at a woman in an inappropriate way." Or said to a woman, "This is guy stuff; mind your own business."

I wish I could say that, but I can't. Nor is there a man alive who can say it. All of us men, at some time in our lives, have done these very things. But Jesus never did. From His youth, all the way to His ascension into heaven, Jesus only exalts and affirms women.

In Luke 1 and 2, we glimpse Jesus' birth and earliest days. In Muslim culture, when a male child is born, the men all gather around the father. (The mother did all the hard work, but that's another story.) The men slap the new dad on the back and say, "*Mashallah*. Bless God! You did it. *Aslanim*, my lion!!"

What happens if it's a girl? The women gather around the mother and say, "You poor thing. Better luck next time!"

Tradition in much of the world says that a son is the natural product of his father's strength, but a girl child is (somehow) the fault of her mother. Yet, in the story of Jesus' birth and His early days, it's Mary who gets equal, if not greater recognition than Joseph. Joseph almost fades into the background, while Mary takes center stage in this wonderful drama.

On the eighth day, at the dedication of Jesus in the temple, who has center stage? the Prophetess Anna. Luke 2:36—38 recognizes her life of godliness, fasting, and prayer. And Luke specifically notes that both Joseph and Mary fulfill the requirements of the Law.

Later on, Joseph and Mary take Jesus on his twelfth birthday trip to the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41—52). This is Jesus' *bar mitzvah*. – He's going to become a Son of the Covenant, a man in the eyes of the Old Testament law and the Jewish community.

As Joseph and Mary return home, they become separated from Jesus. Two or three days later, they realize Jesus is not with the rest of the family. They rush back to Jerusalem and find Him in the temple, Bailey tells us, exchanging questions with the teachers of the Law. Jesus has learned this style of question-and-answer in the theological debating clubs that constitute evening entertainment for Galilean men.

Mary says to Jesus, "Where were you? We lost you! We were afraid when we couldn't find you anywhere!" (verse 48)

As a Son of the Covenant now, Jesus could simply say, "Woman, leave me alone!" Instead, with great love and respect, with compassion and kindness, he responds to his mother. "Didn't you know that I must be about my Father's business?" (verse 49).

Jesus often goes out of His way to praise women as examples of faith. Zarephath was a town on the Canaanite border of Lebanon and Israel. Most, if not all, of the people were pagans. Yet Jesus lifts up this woman of Zarephath as an example. He says in Luke 4, “I haven’t found faith even in Israel as great as the faith of this pagan woman – this Canaanite woman.”

In Luke 7, Jesus visits Simon the Leper’s house. Here, Bailey explains, a great crowd is in the courtyard. Tables have been laid down the center and couches arranged around. The important men of the town – Simon’s specially invited guests – are reclining on these couches, eating from the table. And around the edges of the courtyard stand the common people, there simply to hear the great new teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

But one person at the table isn’t eating: Jesus, the specially invited and honored guest. Why not? Ah, because He’s unwashed! His hands and feet are still dirty. If He so much as touches the table, He makes it unclean for everyone else. So where are the servants and the water to purify him?

The meal goes on. Suddenly, into the midst of this strangely uncultural banquet, comes a woman of the back streets. She kneels and weeps over Jesus’ feet. Then she lets her hair down, dries His feet with the hair of her head, and finally pours ointment over them.

It’s a shocking scene. Every man around the table knows what kind of woman this is. Everyone has seen her disgusting display of lust. And now everyone is holding their breath — waiting to see how Jesus the Teacher will teach her how holy He is and how sinful she is.

Simon, Luke tells us, is speaking to himself in his heart. Simon says, “Aha! Look how this woman is touching Jesus and behaving in the presence of good men. We invited this teacher here to see for ourselves if He really is from God. Now we know He is a fraud. If He were from God, He would know what kind of woman this is. He would never allow her to do the things she has done (verse 39).”

From a Middle Eastern point of view, Bailey points out, this is an absolutely unthinkable scene. Two things wrong in the picture. First, the host – Simon – has deliberately insulted his guest of honor. He has intentionally left Jesus in an unwashed condition to humiliate Him and to show to Him how superior Simon and his friends are.

No Middle Eastern host ever insults his guests.

Hospitality in a Pakistani or Afghan or Arab or Turkish home would never permit such an insult. Always the very best is brought out and shared with the guest. Everything possible is done to make the guest comfortable and welcome. Even if it leaves the family penniless.

My wife and I once visited some Lebanese friends in Beirut. The lady of the home was showing my wife Ruth the beautiful lace pieces she had crocheted for the table. I walked by, looked at them and said, "These are so lovely!"

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew I had said the wrong thing. When we left later that evening, our hostess stood at the door with a little package in her hands. She presented Ruth with the beautiful lace pieces I had praised. I was a guest, and Arab culture demanded that she honor me. Whenever I look at those lace pieces two decades later, I still feel a sense of embarrassment, because I did something no Middle Eastern guest would ever do.

Simon has done what no Middle Eastern host ever does: he has deliberately insulted an honored guest. And now, Bailey says, Jesus does something that no Middle Eastern guest ever does: He criticizes His host.

Jesus stands up and, **looking at the woman**, he speaks to Simon. In front of all the men at the banquet, Jesus turns His back on his host. He looks with compassion at the woman, and rebukes Simon. He says, "Simon, you have treated me with contempt ever since I entered your home. You didn't wash my hands and feet. You didn't send a servant to wash my hands and feet. You didn't even give me water so I could wash my own hands and feet. But this woman has not ceased washing my feet with her tears since the moment she came in. She has done what you should have done, and she – not you! – will go away justified tonight." (Luke 7:44–50).

In Luke 10, Jesus goes to Mary and Martha's house to rest. Martha bustles around – a typical Middle-Eastern woman. She wants to spread the best table she can for Jesus the Teacher. Eventually, the work tires her. She becomes angry with her sister Mary, who is simply sitting and listening to Jesus teach.

Jesus says, "Martha, come here. Sit down for a minute. Calm yourself and listen to me. The most important part of your life is not in the kitchen. God didn't create you

just to wait on tables. Scribes and Pharisees aren't the only ones who need to know the Word of God. You, Martha, and every woman like you, have that same need, too (verses 41, 42)."

Several times Jesus tells parables about women that always lift them up. Luke 15 relates the parable of The Woman Who Lost The Coin. What kind of woman was she? A stupid woman who couldn't keep track of her money? No. She is an intelligent and resourceful woman who lights a lamp and searches everywhere until she finds the coin because it's part of her dowry. If her husband divorces her or passes away, it will give her a fresh start in life.

In Luke 18, we read about a widow who returns again and again to an unjust judge. What kind of woman is she? A stupid woman who doesn't know when to give up? No. She's a woman who is persistent. She knows her rights under the Law, and she persists until she obtains them.

In Luke 21, Jesus and the disciples are in the temple. The disciples' eyes are big as dinner plates as they watch the rich drop their bags of gold into the treasury. Suddenly Jesus says, "Hey, guys, did you see that?" They say, "What? Did we miss someone with a really big offering?" Jesus says, "No! Do you see that little old lady who just walked by?" The disciples answer, "Yes, we see her. She only dropped a few coins in."

Jesus replies, "You guys don't understand. You really don't get it, do you? The others gave out of their abundance, but she gave everything she has." The selfless gift of an unnamed widow is recorded by God's Word, and passed down through history. For all believers in all times and circumstances, she becomes the model of the generosity God expects.

Can we step outside Luke for a minute? In contrast to the attitudes of our day, both in the Middle East and in the West, Jesus is never exploitative of women. In John 4, for example, He's the man who dares to talk openly with the prostitute at the well. He breaches every standard of His culture by doing that. And yet the woman — even while she is being exposed for everything that she is: a virtual prostitute with multiple marriages and now a live-in lover — is never threatened. She is never humiliated by Jesus in any way. He simply lifts her out of her filth and gently clothes her in the righteousness of her Heavenly Father.

Jesus' disciples come back to the well and find their honored teacher talking with this woman. And John records in his gospel, "No one dared ask, 'Why are you talking with her?'" (NIV).

Why don't they ask? Because in Jesus there is such perfect manliness, such perfect security in His own sense of manhood, that He is free from the "prison" of having to put a woman down to prove what a man he is.

We never find Jesus intimidating a woman. We never find Him threatened or intimidated by a woman. There's no lewd look, no coarse jesting with Jesus. He doesn't have to prove anything – because He's 100-percent man.

This may be why both men and women are equally attracted to Jesus. Jesus only lifts and affirms every woman who comes to Him. Women find in Him the man they wish every man could be. And men see in Him the man they know they ought to be.

A Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you know just where every woman reading these words has been touched and hurt, wounded and sometimes torn apart. I ask you, the Perfect Man: Reach out to each one today with the measure of healing they need. I pray that through the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit, You will restore a sense of pride in the person you created her to be.

"Lord, You created each woman reading these words as a unique individual, as one who has wonderful gifts to share with you and present to the heavenly Father. Restore their sense of wholeness and identity in you. We ask it in your wonderful name, Amen."

Lord Jesus, thank You for setting an example before us men of what you created men to be. You came among us and lived a life of purity and manliness. You are indeed a high priest who is "touched by the feelings of our infirmities." You know what a man's temptations are. And yet you lived as a perfect man among us.

Help us to become like You. Help us never again to put a woman down so that we can lift ourselves up. Help us to look at women – all the women around us – as you treated the women who came into your life. Amen.

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¹ This "scholarly reflection," in whole or in part, would be impossible without the decades of unique scholarship and reflection of Dr Kenneth Bailey on the intersection of Jewish culture in the New Testament, and the Palestinian Arab village culture he grew up in as a Presbyterian missionary kid. Please refer to the bibliography for a few of Dr Bailey's ground-breaking works in this field