

Jesus and Women

By D. F. Clark

How did Jesus view women? How did He treat women? How did they respond to Him?

The Gospel of Luke provides the answers to these questions. Twenty-four times in Luke, Jesus either met a woman, talked about a woman, or mentioned a woman in a parable. All of these 24 times are instructive and positive.

The words accepting, sensitive, and affirming sum up what Luke and the example of Jesus Christ teach us about Jesus and women.

Jesus was accepting

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

The Book of Luke is unusual among the ancient books of the world. Luke took great care to record the emotional and physical responses of a woman in her pregnancy. Luke detailed the account of Elizabeth's first encounter with Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus. Luke wrote, "*The babe leaped in her womb*" (Luke 1:41). Mary, responding to Elizabeth's remarks, proclaimed, "*My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior*" (verses 46,47). Luke also recorded the gentleness of Mary as she wrapped her newborn Jesus in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger.

I know of no other book in ancient history that is concerned about and cares for the feelings of a woman as she is carrying her child or cares for her child. But God thought these things were important enough to include them in His eternal Word.

Jesus' sense of manhood was never threatened by the tenderness of a woman. Luke told of a woman who came into a banquet, knelt, wept over Jesus' feet, bathing them with her



tears, and then anointed them with perfume before drying them with her hair (Luke 7:36–50). This was her act of repentance. Jesus allowed her to do this without any trace of disgust or embarrassment.

No rabbi of Jesus' day that I know about included women among his disciples. But Luke said that Jesus included women in His circle of followers—even women from questionable backgrounds.

Women ministered to Jesus in unique ways. Mary and Martha's house was a quiet place where Jesus retreated from the crowds who wanted the bread, the miracles, and the healings (Luke 10:38–42).

Luke wrote about the mob that herded Jesus toward Golgotha. The "daughters of Jerusalem" followed Him and wept for Him as they made their way down the Via Dolorosa (Luke 23:27–29).

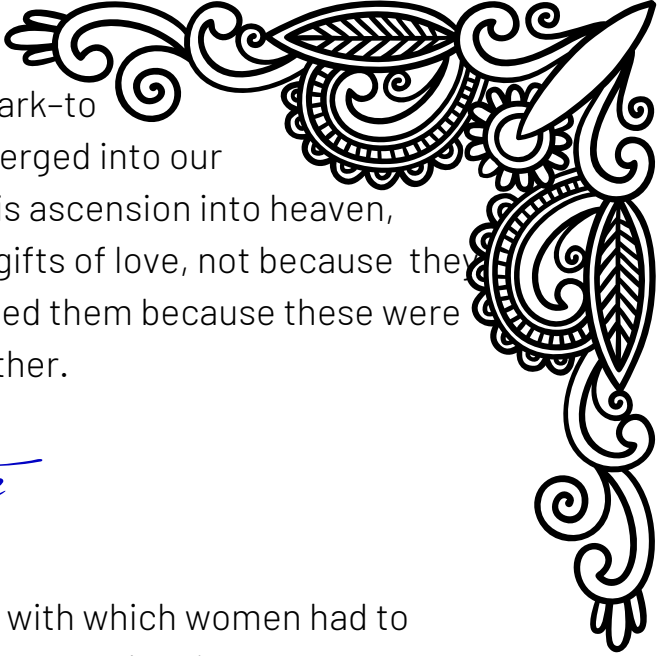
What happened at the Crucifixion? The disciples fled, including Peter—the one who said, "I will never forsake you; I will never turn my back on you; I will go with you even unto death" (Luke 22:31–34). But the women remained, silently standing watch at the foot of the cross. What else could they do? Absolutely nothing except be there.

Life hasn't changed. Many people feel they are on a cross—a cross of sickness; mental illness; physical, emotional, or financial difficulty. Sometimes the best thing you can do is just be there. The women were there for Jesus at that moment until death released Him.

Even after Jesus' death—while the disciples were hiding behind barred doors, afraid the Romans would find them and put them on a cross—the women prepared the spices to anoint His body for a proper burial. These women took the spices to the tomb, having no idea how they would move the stone. Nevertheless, they

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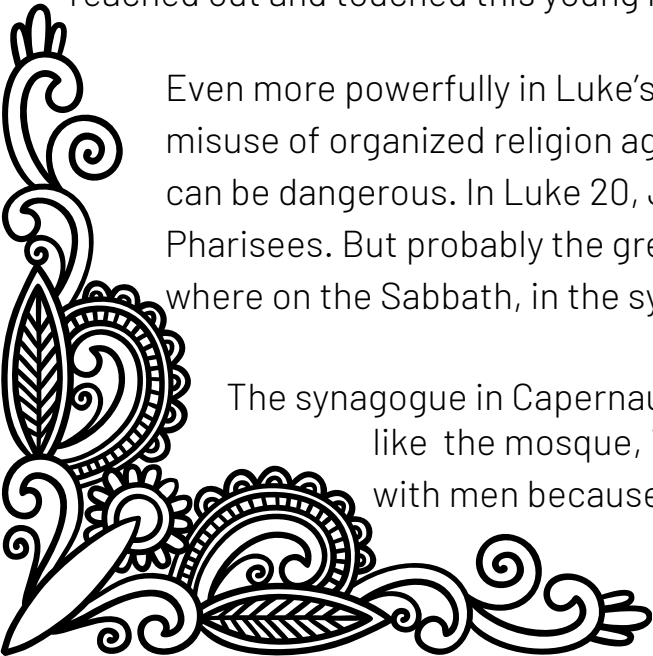
went in the early hours of the morning—while it was still dark—to do what they could. From the moment the Son of God emerged into our world as a tiny, helpless infant to the final hours before His ascension into heaven, women ministered to Jesus. And Jesus accepted these gifts of love, not because they were His God-given privilege as a man. Rather, He accepted them because these were gifts of intelligent and faithful service to the Heavenly Father.

Jesus Was sensitive

Jesus was sensitive to the social and religious handicaps with which women had to struggle, and He lifted those burdens. He was compassionate and caring.

One day Jesus visited Peter at his house, and Peter's mother-in-law was sick. 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, was not an ordinary guest. He was a rabbi, a teacher of God's law. He had the right to walk into the house, sit down, and ask, "Where's my tea?" But He didn't. Jesus refused to exercise His guest privilege. Instead, He went first to Peter's mother-in-law and laid His hands on her. He refused to allow her to minister to Him until He first ministered to her.

Another time Jesus raised the son of the widow at Nain back to life (Luke 7:11–17). The position of widows in Middle-Eastern culture is tragic if they have no male relatives to care for them. As Jesus watched this funeral procession coming out of Nain, He saw the few casket carriers and this one single woman walking behind it. He realized, There's no other male relative to care for this woman. Out of compassion for this poor widow, Jesus reached out and touched this young man and restored him to life.



Even more powerfully in Luke's Gospel we see Jesus opposing the prejudice and misuse of organized religion against women. In that part of the world, acts like this can be dangerous. In Luke 20, Jesus defended widows against the greed of the Pharisees. But probably the greatest and most beautiful example is found in Luke 13, where on the Sabbath, in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus healed a woman.

The synagogue in Capernaum was about 20 meters wide and 40 meters long, and like the mosque, it was a man's place. On the Sabbath it would be filled with men because Jesus the Teacher was there (Luke 13:10–17).



He was going to expound the Word of God. Everyone expected to hear great and revolutionary things from this brilliant new authority on the Law. But as Jesus took the scroll of the Law and began to teach from it, all of a sudden, in the back of the room, He saw a woman who was bent over. For many years she had been a prisoner of an evil spirit that had bound her and kept her a cripple.

Jesus then did five things that are astonishing because what He did broke through the cultural mold of that day. First, He called this woman forward from the place of the women (the back of the room) to the place of the men (the front of the room). He interrupted the teaching of the Word of God—the most sacred time in Jewish life—to minister to a woman.



"We honor all women by showing them the same love and respect that Jesus showed to women."

Second, Jesus broke culture by speaking to her. The Jewish writer Alfred Eidersheim wrote that there were rabbis who prayed every day: "I thank Thee, God, that I was not born a Gentile, a dog, or a woman." Isn't that a great prayer? (Do you notice the word order?) No wonder everyone was shocked as Jesus spoke to this woman.

Jesus broke culture a third way: He laid hands on her. Eidersheim explains that in Jesus' day some Pharisees were called "the black-and-blue Pharisees." Why? Because they 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 close their eyes tightly and walk straight ahead. Sometimes they would smack into a wall or fall over an ox cart and receive their bruises. Here, in contrast to the example of the "black-and-blue Pharisees," Jesus laid His hands on a woman.

Fourth, Jesus affirmed her worth in society. These men in the synagogue were



probably thinking, What is she doing in here? What is He doing? He's touching her. Look at what He's doing in God's holy place.

Jesus knew their hearts and said to them, "Don't you loose your ox or donkey and take it to be watered on the Sabbath?" (Luke 13:15).

They all knew they broke the Sabbath by watering their animals.

Jesus continued, "This woman is worth far more than any animal you have. This woman is not an animal; she is a "daughter of Abraham"" (Luke 6:16). By saying this, He restored her rightful position.

This episode is especially important because Jesus willingly risked His life for the sake of a woman. He humiliated His opponents in their own synagogue by ministering sensitivity, kindness, and mercy to a woman. It is for this act of kindness and divine love, and many others like them, that these men sent Him to the Cross.

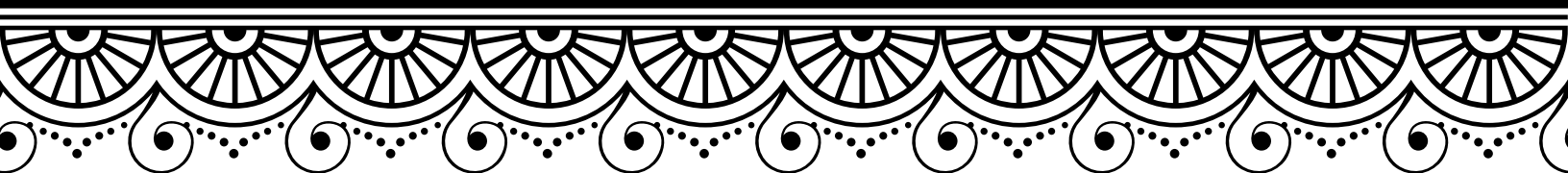
Jesus was affirming

Jesus let women know they were intelligent and intrinsically worthy of God's love and concern. Not one time in all four Gospels did He put down a woman. I wish I could say I've never told a joke that made fun of a woman, looked at a woman in an inappropriate way, or never said to a woman, "This is guy stuff; mind your own business." Most men, at some time in their lives, have put down women. But Jesus never did. From the earliest days of His life, to the time He ascended into heaven, Jesus exalted and affirmed women.

In Luke 1 and 2, Luke recorded the birth and the first days of Jesus' life. In Pakistani and Afghani culture (and in the Middle East), when a male child is born, the men gather around the father. The mother did all the hard work, but the men slap the father on the back and say, "Mashallah. Bless God. You did it. Aslanim, my lion."

But 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 the fault of her mother. Yet, in the story of Jesus' birth and His early days, Mary received equal, if not greater recognition than Joseph. Joseph almost faded into the background. It was

Mary who took center stage in this wonderful drama.

At Jesus' dedication in the temple, Anna the prophetess had center stage (Luke 2:36–38). The Word of God recognizes her life of godliness and fasting and prayer.

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On Jesus' 12th birthday, Joseph and Mary took Him to the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41–52). This was Jesus' bar mitzvah—He would become a son of the Covenant, a man in the eyes of the Jewish law. He didn't have to listen to any woman the rest of His life. But as Joseph and Mary returned home, they realized Jesus was not with the rest of the family. They rushed back to Jerusalem and found

Jesus in the temple. He was exchanging questions with the teachers of the Law in the debating style common in those

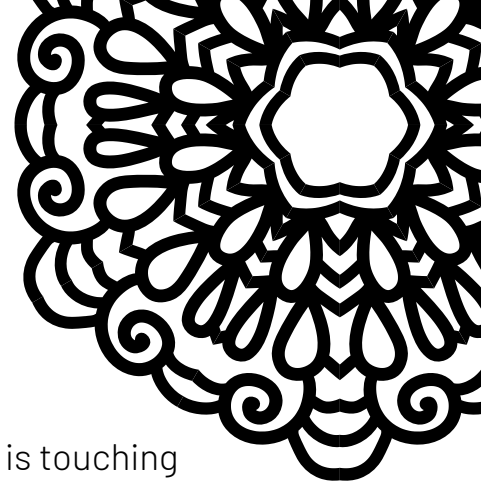
"days. Mary said to Jesus, "Where were you? We were afraid when we couldn't find you" (verse 48).

Jesus (now a son of the Covenant, a man) only had to turn to his mother and say, "Woman, leave me alone." Instead He said with great love and respect, "Didn't you know that I must be about my Father's business?" (verse 49).

Jesus often went out of His way to praise women as examples of faith. Jesus went to Simon the leper's house (Luke 7:36–50). There were tables in the center and couches around the table. The important men of the town—Simon's specially invited guests—were reclining on these couches, eating from the table. But there was one person at the table who wasn't eating—the Teacher, the honored guest. He was unwashed; His hands and feet were still dirty. If He touched the table, He would make it unclean for everyone else.



The meal continued. Suddenly a woman of the back streets came into this banquet. She knelt, wept over Jesus' feet, then let down her hair and dried His feet with it. Finally, she poured ointment over Jesus' feet. It was a shocking scene. Every man around that table knew what kind of woman she was. Everyone had seen this disgusting display and waited to see what Jesus would show this sinful woman how holy He was. Simon, thought, 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 a Teacher from God. Now we know for sure He is a fraud. If He were from God, He would know what kind of woman she is. He would never allow her to do the things she has done (verse 39).



From a Middle-Eastern point of view, this is an absolutely unbelievable scene.

There are two things wrong. The first is that the host—Simon—had deliberately insulted his guest. He had intentionally left Jesus, his honored guest, in an unwashed condition to humiliate Him and to show how superior Simon and his friends felt they were. Middle-Eastern hosts never insult their guests. They bring out the very best they have to share with their guests—even if it's only bread and water, and even if it leaves them penniless.

My wife and I once visited a home in Beirut, Lebanon. We were with some friends, and the lady of the home was showing my wife Ruth some beautiful lace pieces she had crocheted for the table. I said, "Oh, they are beautiful. 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 the home that night, there stood our hostess with a little package in her hands. She presented it to Ruth, and inside were a couple of those beautiful lace pieces I had praised. I was a guest, and she wanted to honor me. Whenever I look at those, I feel a sense of embarrassment and shame, because I did something that no Middle-Eastern guest would ever do.

Simon had done what no Middle-Eastern host ever did. But Jesus did something in this passage that no Middle-Eastern guest ever did; He criticized His host. Jesus stood up, looked at the woman, and spoke to Simon. Jesus turned His back on the host in front of all the men at this banquet. Looking with compassion on the woman, Jesus rebuked Simon, saying, "You have treated me with contempt ever since I entered your home. 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." (Luke 7:44-50).

Luke 10 tells about Jesus going to Mary and Martha's house to rest. Martha was bustling around--a typical Middle-Eastern woman. She wanted to spread the best table she could for Jesus. And as the work tired her, she became angry with her sister, Mary, who was sitting and listening to Jesus. Jesus' message to Martha was, "Come and sit down for a minute. 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 with the right to know the Word of God. You, Martha, and every woman like you, have that same right, too" (verses 41, 42).

Several times Jesus told parables about women and always elevated their status. Luke 15 contains the parable of the woman who lost the coin. What kind of woman was she?


Was she the stupid woman who couldn't keep track of her money? No. She was the intelligent and resourceful woman who lit lamps.

In the Middle-Eastern homes of Jesus' day, the windows were close to the ceiling, to keep the inside dark and cool. She lit a lamp and looked everywhere for the coin until she found it, because it was part of her dowry.

Luke 18, a widow came back again and again to an unjust judge. What kind of woman was she? The stupid woman who didn't know when to give up? No. She was the woman who was persistent. She knew what her rights were under the Law, and she kept on and on until she obtained them.

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In Luke 21, Jesus and the disciples were in the temple. The disciples were watching the rich people drop their bags of gold into the treasury. Suddenly Jesus said, "Did you see that?"

They asked, "What? Was there someone with a really big bag that we missed?"

Jesus said, "No, did you see that little old lady?"

The disciples answered, "Yes, we saw her. She only dropped two coins into the offering."

Jesus said, "You don't understand. You really don't get it, do you? The others have given out of their abundance, but she gave everything she has."

An unnamed widow became an example of the generosity that God expects from all of us.

In contrast to the attitudes of our day, Jesus is never exploitative of women. He's the one man who dared to talk openly with the woman at the well in John 4. He breached every standard of His culture by doing that. And yet the woman, even while she was being exposed for everything that she was—a woman with multiple marriages and a sordid life—was never threatened. Jesus never humiliated her. He simply lifted her out of her filth and gently clothed her in the righteousness of her Heavenly Father.

Jesus' disciples came back to the well and found their honored teacher talking with this woman. John recorded, "No one dared ask, 'Why are you talking with her?'" (NIV). Why didn'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 women down to prove that He is a man.

Jesus never intimidated or sexually threatened a woman, and He was never threatened or intimidated by a woman. There was no lewd look, no coarse jesting with Jesus. He didn't have to prove anything—because He's 100-percent man.

That's why both men and women are equally attracted to Jesus. Jesus lifted and affirmed every woman who came 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.

Conclusion

We live in a world that sentimentalizes mothers and women in general. On Mother's Day we send cards, give gifts, and maybe take our wives or our mothers out to a restaurant. But what do we do the day after that? We treat women as if they are inferior creatures who are only good for cooking, cleaning house, and having babies.

The United States has one of the highest rates of violence against women and abuse of young girls. We are one of the world's deepest cesspools of pornography. In many ways, we have little room to criticize or condemn the Muslim world.

Jesus, on the other hand, treated His mother and all women with the deepest respect. We honor all women by showing them the same love and respect that Jesus showed to women.

Women have been abused and put down by men—sometimes very crudely and cruelly. But Jesus is the perfect man, the man God wants every man to emulate. This is the kind of man God wants every woman to know in her life.

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Endnotes

1. Some Scriptures used in this article are paraphrases by the author.
2. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983).

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Say Hello
Serving Muslim Women

