

How Jesus' Attitude Toward Women Defied Cultural Norms

As a former schoolteacher who stumbled into studying theology almost by accident, I will never forget my initial shock at encountering a Jesus in the Gospels with whom I was totally unfamiliar. This Jesus had a revolutionary attitude towards women that transcends time and place. My theological journey quickly turned into a quest to find out how a first-century Palestinian Jew could relate to women in a way that obliterated all forms of sexism.

First-century Jewish culture was extremely patriarchal, and women were unapologetically considered to be inferior to men. A woman's place was exclusively in the home, and women were not allowed to leave their homes unless accompanied by a male relative. Whereas men were required to study Scripture, women were not allowed to study the sacred texts. Education at a higher level was under the tutelage of a rabbi, surrounded by disciples. Needless to say, women were even more vehemently excluded from education at this level, for the temple of Jerusalem and synagogues were segregated. Jesus radically subverted all of these norms by publicly interacting with women and, most shockingly of all for His time and place, allowing women to travel with him and accepting them as His disciples. Jesus's empathy for women was evident even in the patterns of His speech. Across all four Gospels, in metaphor, imagery, sayings, parables and teachings, the words of Jesus reflect a keen awareness of women's work, joys and tribulations. It is notable that Jesus appreciated the dignity, gifts and personhood of all women, whatever their status in society. He clearly did not perceive them either as inferior to men, or through the lens of a double standard.

The sexual double standard resulted from the fact that higher standards of chastity were expected from women than from men.

Its enshrinement in Jewish Law is especially notable in Deuteronomy 22:13-29, the section that deals with sexual relations. A newly married husband was entitled to demand evidence of his wife's virginity from her parents. If, however, the evidence was not found, the young woman was to be brought to the entrance of her father's house where the men of the town would stone her to death. There was no similar concern for the virtue of the husband, nor did the woman have any right to defend herself. In similar fashion, men's need for extramarital sex was accommodated by legalized prostitution. Although her profession was licit, in the culture of ancient Israel the harlot was ostracized and treated as a social outcast. By the same token, "respectable" wives and daughters who indulged in premarital or extramarital sex were classified as criminals and risked the death penalty.

A striking illustration of the way in which Jesus views women in the fullness of their dignity and personhood can be seen in the story of "A sinful woman forgiven" (Luke 7:36-50.) The dramatic action takes place during a meal to which Jesus has been invited by Simon, a Pharisee. Shortly after Jesus has taken his place at the table, "a woman in the city"—a prostitute—enters the house uninvited. Such an entrance would have created an immediate stir; it was highly inappropriate for a woman who was a known "sinner" to come into the house of a respected Pharisee. Showing great courage, the weeping woman makes straight for Jesus and, standing behind him, begins to bathe His feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. She continues kissing His feet and anointing them with ointment.

Meanwhile, the Pharisee is dismayed to see that Jesus allows Himself to be touched by a sinful woman; he decides that such a man cannot be a prophet. Sensing His host's unease, Jesus tells the Parable of the Two Debtors to illustrate that those who are forgiven of the greatest sins will have the most love for the one who forgives them. Before teasing out the full implications of the parable, Jesus says, "Do you see this

woman?" (v. 44), forcing Simon to acknowledge her. To the Pharisee and the dinner guests, she is something to be ignored, something less than human. Her tenderness and courage are irrelevant, negated by her shameful occupation. Jesus, however, sees her in her totality as a person. Her "many sins" do not detract from her great courage and her "great love" is acknowledged and praised by Jesus before everyone.

Theologians argue that Jesus' revolutionary attitude toward women is the reason why, from the beginning, women were allowed into the Christian liturgical space on an equal basis with men, and that this laid the foundation for the significant rights and freedoms that have been gained by women in the Judeo-Christian West. The recent #MeToo movement has demonstrated, however, that we still have a long way to go. Indeed, it could be argued that the freedoms we have gained have brought us to a phase in our journey toward equality that permits deeper insights than were possible before into the societal structures that place women at a disadvantage in relation to men. In addition, the relatively new discipline of evolutionary biology can shed light on how and why these structures have evolved.

In my forthcoming book *Jesus and Women: Beyond Feminism*, I argue that our hard-won freedoms, combined with new insights into the evolution of patriarchy, facilitate a perspective on the Gospels that reveals Jesus' relationships with women to be so unique they provide further persuasive evidence of His divinity. Though political feminism can tackle the symptoms of inequality between the sexes, I believe that only greater theological understanding and awareness of the behavior and consciousness of Jesus can point us towards a restoration of the harmony between the sexes described in Genesis. This is a theological path that will get to the root of the problem, taking us beyond feminism and political notions of "equality" to the realm of relationships and the healing power of grace.

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