Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History

In 1976, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich set out to uncover the history of ordinary, virtuous women in the colonial United States. In her article “Vertuous [sic] Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668–1735,” she lamented the fact that history has deemed well-behaved women uninteresting or unimportant, and has largely ignored them: “Hoping for an eternal crown, they never asked to be remembered on earth. And they haven’t been. Well-behaved women seldom make history.”

Her phrase “well-behaved women seldom make history” quickly gained popularity. You can now find it plastered across everything from T-shirts to my neighbor’s bumper sticker. No longer a call to remember the pious, forgotten women of history, it has acquired a new meaning. It now serves to inspire women to transcend cultural expectations in order to accomplish good in the world. It hints at a world in which women no longer face barriers that limit their contributions.

As I reflect on this issue of Mutuality, I’m reminded of both the original and contemporary applications of this slogan. We should heed the call to remember the virtuous women of the Old Testament who served God faithfully with no ambitions for fame. We sometimes forget about women like Hannah, who is noted not only for her famous son, but also for her fervent prayers and faithfulness. And there are others we might not even notice, such as King Lemuel’s mother, whose wisdom is recorded in the book of Proverbs. God has recognized the faithfulness and wisdom of his daughters. We ought to do the same.

On the other hand, the women of the Old Testament illustrate that obedience to God often requires us to break the rules imposed on us by our cultures. The Old Testament women we most easily recognize were not “well-behaved.” Deborah, Jael, Bathsheba, and Esther all violated standards for acceptable female behavior in one way or another. Rahab and Ruth were gentiles, and were therefore thought to be beyond the reach of God’s covenant love. Sarah, Hannah, Rebecah, Rachel, and others were barren—a condition believed to be a sign of God’s disfavor. Yet these are the women God handpicked to be instruments of mercy, agents of justice, and models of faith.

The observation that well-behaved women seldom make history isn’t just a statement of fact, but a call to action. Likewise, the women of the Old Testament are included in the Bible for more than their amazing stories; they should motivate us to action. Through these women, God challenges the social order and demonstrates his desire for women to serve alongside men. Their stories show us that God wants to see women changing the world in small and large ways. It’s our job to tear down the barriers that prevent them from fulfilling God’s calling. Women are instrumental to God’s redemptive work in the world. God seldom changes history without employing the agency and gifts of his daughters.

This issue of Mutuality features some of the less prominent women of the Old Testament—women who might easily have been forgotten had God not preserved their stories in Scripture. You’ll be inspired by women like Jehosheba, Shiphrah, and Puah, whose courage saved countless lives, but who are often overlooked. You’ll gain insights into the lives of unnamed women who may be entirely unfamiliar to us, but whose faithfulness, courage, and obedience was noted by a society that placed little value on women. We’ll delve into the lives of women like Hagar and Hannah, whose names are more familiar, but whose stories are deeper and more inspiring than many of us realize. I hope you’ll join us in reflecting on marriage and gender stereotypes in light of Proverbs 31, and take time to appreciate the God who treasures women and who chooses the barren, the poor, and the outcasts to accomplish his purposes in the world.

Like most of us, the women of the Old Testament had no ambitions for fame; they did what needed to be done to get through life while serving their Lord. But God chose them to play crucial roles in history, stirring up trouble when necessary. Women have been essential to God’s work from the beginning and remain so today. My prayer is that these women will motivate us to tear down barriers, combat abuse, and insist upon the mutual service of women and men in every area of our lives.

In Christ,

Tim Krueger