

Christlike Responses to a Hierarchical World

Lessons from bold women.

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“ . . . be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

—Matthew 10:16

THE CHRISTIAN EGALITARIAN WOMAN IS IN A DIFFICULT position. If she truly believes God calls women to engage in the same types of ministries and offices of the church in which men engage, and if she is also committed to living a life that reflects God’s character, she is faced with a quandary.

Some women hesitate to fight actively for their rights, believing such attitudes and behaviors do not characterize the Christlike attitude to which Christians are called in Philippians 2. On the other hand, many women are not satisfied with the alternative of passively accepting marginalization by a male-dominated church.¹

Just how is a Christian egalitarian woman to live in today’s world? How can she respond to the hierarchical structures around her, and to the victimization that sometimes results, in a way that demonstrates the image of God in her life? In this article we want to look at Jesus’ responses to women who engaged him in ways that sometimes went against cultural norms and compare those responses to current psychological research in the area of overcoming victimization.

Beyond victimization

Some social scientists suggest that neither embracing the victim role nor denying experiences of victimization are psychologically healthy options for those systematically marginalized from society. When people embrace the role of victim, they may unwittingly perpetuate an undesirable condition. “Weakness, passivity, and unhappiness are all endemic to the victim role, and so people who identify with the victim role could conceivably sustain perceptions of self as having those disadvantages.”²

Baumeister and Bratslavsky³ cite an interesting study in which subjects were initially presented with sets of five words and told to make a four-word sentence from each set. By random assignment, half of the participants received sets in which the superfluous word had to do with victimization (i.e., *pain*, *abused*, *mistreated*, and *victim*). The other participants received affectively neutral words that had nothing to do with victimization. Following this, the subjects took tests to measure verbal and quantitative abilities. The result was that those who had been primed with victim-related words did significantly worse on their cognitive tests than the control group, even though there was no actual victimization occurring.

According to Baumeister and Bratslavsky, one implication of this research is that minor cues or daily events in a person’s life may serve to remind that person of her or his

victim status, and may have a negative affect on her or his ability to think and perform. In the church, this could have several results. Women who perceive themselves as victims of oppression and marginalization may find themselves in a kind of “self-fulfilling prophecy” in which their very awareness of that marginalization suppresses their abilities, thus “confirming” to those in power around them that women are not qualified to lead/teach, and so forth. Thus, we see that even the role, or label, of *victim* can be damaging to a woman.

On the other hand, denial of one’s experience of marginalization can also be destructive. For Christian women, suffering is often glorified in the church, so that oppressed and even abused women see this suffering as their cross to bear, and thus as a way to share in Christ’s suffering.⁴ This kind of forced submission can have devastating effects on a person’s self-esteem.⁵ Psychologists have learned, furthermore, that in the process of denying one’s feelings of victimization, one has the tendency to simply push one’s anger inward, forcing it to come out in disguise as passive-aggressive or self-destructive behavior.⁶

Sometimes, however, in the belief that it will help the cause of egalitarianism, a woman may feel the need to sustain the very role of victim that has been shown to be harmful to her self. For example, a woman may feel that if others do not see her victimization, there will be no impetus for change; therefore she feels compelled to maintain that victimization in a visible way. As we can see, the Christian egalitarian woman is faced with some complex choices: how and to what extent does she work for change within her sphere of influence, and how does she do this in a way that reflects the character of Jesus Christ?

Three women Jesus commended

I believe we can begin to find an answer to these questions in stories of Jesus and the women around him. We will look at three women Jesus commended for their controversial, countercultural actions,⁷ and two women he rebuked.⁸ We shall focus primarily on how these women engaged Jesus in relation to the social and ecclesiastical expectations of the day. From these women, we will discover some lessons on how we can live as Christians in response to the social and ecclesiastical expectations of our day.

1. *The Canaanite woman.* The Canaanite woman⁹ of Matthew 15 approached Jesus with a double disadvantage. In the ancient world, it was not uncommon for women in general to be despised,¹⁰ and this woman was a Gentile from a people who had a history of treating the Jews unfairly. It gave Jesus and his disciples every reason to

ignore her. When she approached Jesus and asked for healing for her daughter (from demon possession), the disciples sought to have her sent away. Perhaps their purpose was to maintain peace; perhaps they had their own prejudices.¹¹ Jesus, however, engaged her in conversation, for in her request that he give healing not only to Jews but also to Gentiles, Jesus saw a principle at stake: who was it that the gospel was for? He would not ignore that principle in favor of the line of least resistance, but chose instead to work it out.¹²

Lesson number one for egalitarians: *Sometimes there are principles that are worth working out, even if it takes rocking the boat to do so.*

Daniel Patte sees in this story two models of discipleship, both of them helpful to women in today's church. In Jesus' response, Patte sees a model for those in our society who hold power. "As Jesus recognizes and affirms the Canaanite woman's great faith and allows her to transform the understanding he has of his mission (15:28), so should we."¹³

Secular feminist Kay Leigh Hagan learned about this mindset when a mentor encouraged her to consider other forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, and able-ism. As a result, she suddenly found herself, as a white, middle-class, able-bodied person, on the other side of the picture of oppression. She goes on to say, "[W]hile I have honed with zeal the ability to detect the many ways I collide with my own oppression, I have a great deal of difficulty—or probably more accurately, resistance to—identifying the more subtle, daily practices of my privilege, both internalized and bestowed."

Hagan exhorts her readers to challenge those practices, and to make the choice to use our privilege with integrity.¹⁴ In his encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus gave us a model for doing this. As women, we can lift ourselves out of the victim role by recognizing, and being responsible with, our own areas of privilege, and by allowing those who are oppressed for different reasons to transform our own understanding of the gospel.

The approach of the Canaanite woman presents us with another model of discipleship, however, as she engages with Jesus and will not let him go until he sees her point. For those outside power structures, "encountering the Canaanite woman as a model of discipleship has a welcome and empowering effect: it teaches readers that it is appropriate, and even a mark of great faith, to struggle for God's justice."¹⁵

An addendum to lesson one: *The justice of God is one of those principles that is worth struggling for.*

Speaking in the context of nonviolent social action, Katz and Uhler point out that the exercise of power depends on the consent of the ruled who, by withdrawing that consent, can control or even destroy the power of the opponent.¹⁶ The struggle for a just cause can be an extremely empowering experience for a person who per-

ceives herself or himself as powerless.

2. *The mother of James and John.* In contrast to the Canaanite woman, whose quest for justice brings great praise from Jesus, compare the mother of James and John, whose story is told in Matthew 20:20–28. This unnamed woman comes to Jesus asking for her sons to receive places of honor alongside Jesus in his kingdom.¹⁷ Jesus rebukes her on grounds that she and her sons do not yet understand the nature of his kingdom. Their focus, according to Jesus, should not be on a quest for power, but rather on the suffering that is to come.¹⁸

Lesson number two: *It is not appropriate to struggle for a position of power over others; in fact, a quest for power turns one's focus away from the kingdom of God.*

It is noteworthy that this request for power is not in the least countercultural; it is exactly what our society (and that of first-century Palestine) upholds as worthy. In these two stories we see Jesus first give praise to a bold quest for God's justice for the marginalized, and then we see him rebuke a grasp at personal power.

3. *Mary and Martha.* In the home of Mary and Martha we see praise and rebuke side by side. Jesus and his followers had come to stay the night. As Martha scurried about, preparing a meal for Jesus and his entourage, Mary sat at his feet to listen to him teach.

While sitting at Jesus' feet may appear to twenty-first-century readers to be a humble, submissive posture, in the first century this was the place of a disciple, or student, which was forbidden to women.¹⁹ When Martha complained to Jesus that Mary was not helping her "in the kitchen," Jesus surprised her (and today's readers) by proclaiming with his answer that Mary, "who is provocatively acting as though she were equal to the male disciples by sitting at her rabbi's feet to learn from him, has chosen the only thing needed on this occasion."²⁰ Here we see praise for a woman who places herself in a position that the religious and social structure of the day had reserved for men.

The point of this story, however, is not to get women "out of the kitchen." The point is to show the proper way to serve Jesus.²¹ We see that serving has a positive place in the Book of Luke (cf. 4:39; 8:3; 22:26–27). Martha's problem is that she is "distracted" (lit. "pulled about") with her preparations.²²

John Nolland notes the contrast between Martha, who tells Jesus what he *must* say, and Mary, who *listens* to what Jesus *wishes*.²³ "Martha's 'typically female' preoccupation with domestic chores, to provide the kind of hospitality for Jesus and his troupe that society expected, misses the point altogether."²⁴ Once again, Jesus praises the woman who breaks social conventions for the sake of focusing on his Word,²⁵ and he rebukes the woman who takes the socially acceptable position but is focused on her self.

Lesson three for the egalitarian woman: *Whether an*

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action is socially appropriate is not the primary issue in the kingdom of God; what is at issue is whether one is focused on Jesus and his kingdom.

Two women Jesus rebuked

Finally, we turn to two similar stories of women Jesus commended for their acts of love. One is Mary, the same sister of Martha; the other is an unnamed sinner. Both approached Jesus at the dinner table (on different occasions) and anointed him with expensive perfume, enraging the men who watched while drawing praise and approval from Jesus.

In one instance, recorded only in Luke 7:36–50, Jesus is at the home of a Pharisee when a woman simply identified as “a sinner”²⁶ comes up to him in tears. I. Howard Marshall’s reconstruction of this story has the woman coming behind Jesus to anoint his head (a customary way to honor someone) when, overcome by emotion, she breaks down weeping. The tears fall on Jesus’ feet, and in her anxiety to make up for this mishap, she forgets social proprieties and lets down her hair (a shockingly wanton act for a woman to do in public) in order to dry Jesus’ feet, kissing them all the while.²⁷

While the dinner host is silently thinking that Jesus’ acceptance of this indecorous display of emotion proves that he is not a prophet after all, Jesus’ response (out loud) is that the socially improper actions of this rejected and outcast woman were more welcome to him than anything his religiously elite host has done, because the woman acted out of her great love and gratitude.²⁸

Jesus has a similar reaction to a show of love by Mary. After having encouraged Mary’s posture of discipleship²⁹ and having also raised her brother, Lazarus, from the dead,³⁰ Jesus is now at the home of Simon the leper when Mary comes in and anoints Jesus with a flask of very expensive ointment.³¹ Some scholars see Mary’s action as a recognition of Jesus’ messiahship, and/or a prophetic action foretelling his death.³² Beasley-Murray points out that this woman has recognized the dignity and greatness of Jesus and, in “an exemplary action,” has demonstrated this to others.³³ Once again, Jesus’ response to what seems like a reasonable complaint (this time in reference to the cost of the ointment) is to praise the woman who put her love and devotion to him above social norms and expectations.

Lesson number four resembles lesson three: *Whether an action is socially appropriate is not the primary issue in the kingdom of God; what is important to Jesus is the extent of our love and gratitude toward him.*

In the above examples, we see a consistent theme. When a woman grasps for power or personal recognition, or wallows in her own self-pity, she is quickly rebuked by Jesus and reminded to seek first his kingdom. When a woman’s focus is truly on Jesus and his kingdom, however, it matters not whether her actions are acceptable to the

rest of society, or to the religious establishment, for that matter. She is commended for her devotion.

The power of forgiveness

With the Canaanite woman, the “sinner,” and Mary as models, how can the egalitarian woman live today? Working toward change in gender relations may be very threatening to both women and men, because it challenges deeply held, often sacred beliefs.³⁴

In the study on victim roles mentioned above, Baumeister and Bratslavsky encourage victims to rise out of their victim status through acts of forgiveness. These two social scientists affirm that, by forgiving a perpetrator, one may effectively take oneself out of the victim role. “Forgiving is a fairly active response that puts past suffering in the past and renounces claims for further restitution.”³⁵ A variety of research suggests that forgiveness can have many benefits for mental and physical health.³⁶

By forgiving those who marginalize her, a woman is able to move beyond her victim status and focus on bringing about the justice of God. In working toward God’s justice, Christian women would do well to learn

from secular social workers—Weick and others, who advocate working from a strength-based approach, in which the focus is directed toward a person’s positive qualities and attributes, rather than on that person’s problems or deficiencies.³⁷ This has been found to be especially helpful in

cases of people who have been categorically excluded from existing power structures.³⁸ Mary exemplified this approach when she sat at Jesus’ feet. There is no reason to believe that sitting at his feet was a well-planned act of social resistance, meant to make a point. Rather, Mary was probably an intelligent woman who wanted to learn right alongside the men. And so she did what came naturally to her in spite of the social and ecclesiastical rules that stood in her way.

Stay focused on Jesus

These lessons we learn from Jesus’ encounters with women can be summarized as follows: In the kingdom of God, personal power is not to be fought for, and personal hurts are not to be held on to. Striving for justice for the marginalized, however, is highly valued in the kingdom of God, especially when social and ecclesiastical conventions stand in the way. Women who have regularly been told, verbally or nonverbally, that they are not worth as much as the men around them, have traps to avoid, including the extremes of overfocusing on their victim status, or, conversely, denying the existence of that victimization.

There are, however, positive steps we can take, including recognizing our anger, forgiving the objects of our anger, and at the same time, recognizing and building on our strengths as women and as people.³⁹ In doing this, we can learn from the women of the Gospels that the best

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way to avoid the traps and travel in the right direction is to keep our eyes off of ourselves, and focus them on Jesus, and on his kingdom of peace and justice. n



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Notes (including bibliography)

1. For a survey and evaluation of both helpful and unhelpful ways egalitarians can respond in a hierarchical church, see James R. Beck, "Effecting Change, and the Risks Involved," *Journal of Biblical Equality* 4 (July 1992): 11-17.
2. Roy F. Baumeister and Ellen Bratslavsky, "Victim Thinking," in *Loss and Trauma: General and Close Relationship Perspectives*, ed. John H. Harvey and Eric D. Miller (Philadelphia, PA: Brunner-Routledge, 2000), 86-101.
3. Baumeister and Bratslavsky, "Victim Thinking."
4. Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Religious Beliefs and Abuse," in *Women, Abuse, and the Bible*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 23.
5. Heggen, "Religious Beliefs and Abuse," 21.
6. Dusty Miller, *Women Who Hurt Themselves: A Book of Hope and Understanding* (New York: Baker Books, 1994).
7. The Canaanite, or Syrophenician, woman of Matt. 15:21-28 & Mark 7:24-30; Mary, both in Luke 10:38-42 and in Matt. 26:6-13 & pars.; and the "sinner" who anointed Jesus in Luke 7:36-50.
8. The mother of James and John: Matt. 20:20-28; and Martha: Luke 10:38-42
9. Identified as Syrophenician in Mark.
10. I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1971), 140.
11. This paper does not discuss Jesus' unusual answer. For three different explanations see R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press; Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987); Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery, 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992); and Daniel Patte, "The Canaanite Woman and Jesus: Surprising Models of Discipleship" (Matt. 15:21-28): "Reading Matthew 15:21-28 for Its Teaching About Discipleship: An Androcentric Perspective," in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 2000), 33-53.
12. France, Matthew, 246.
13. Patte, "Surprising Models of Discipleship," 35.
14. Kay Leigh Hagan, "A Good Man Is Hard to Bash: Confessions of an Ex-Man-Hater," in *Feminism and Men: Reconstructing Gender Relations*, ed. Steven P. Schacht and Doris W. Ewing (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 163-67.
15. Patte, "Surprising Models of Discipleship," 34.
16. N. H. Katz and K. L. Uhler, "An Alternative to Violence: Nonviolent Struggle for Change," in *Prevention and Control of Aggression* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, Inc., 1983), 273-98.
17. Cf. Mark 10:35-45, where James and John make the request themselves.
18. Blomberg, Matthew, 307.
19. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery, 24 (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 322.
20. Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), 291.
21. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 450.
22. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, 35B (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 604.
23. Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 604.
24. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 291.
25. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series, 3 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 173.
26. Perhaps a prostitute? See Marshall, *Luke*, 304, 308.
27. Marshall, *Luke*, 308-9.
28. Marshall, *Luke*, 310. See also Johnson, *Luke*, 129.
29. See above, and Luke 7:36-50.
30. John 11:1-44.
31. This single flask was worth an entire year's wages; see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, 36 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 204, 208.
32. See, for example, France, *Matthew*, 362; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, The Anchor Bible, 29 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 454.
33. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 209.
34. E. Langland and Gore, W. "Introduction," in *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference It Makes*, ed. E. Langland and W. Gore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.
35. Baumeister and Bratslavsky, "Victim Thinking."
36. *Ibid.*
37. A. Weick, and others, "A Strengths Perspective for Social Work Practice," *Social Work* 34 (1989): 350-54.
38. Barbara L. Nicholson and Diane M. Kay, "Group Treatment of Traumatized Cambodian Women: A Culture-Specific Approach," *Social Work* 44, no. 5 (September 1999): 470-79.
39. Interestingly, feminist writers have identified five stages of feminist identity development, in which stage one involves being unaware of prejudice against women, and subsequent stages grow from recognizing that discrimination exists, in stage two, to letting go of the resulting anger and focusing instead on one's own strengths as a woman, in stages four and five. See Deborah L. Cox, Sally D. Stabb, and Karin H. Bruckner, *Women's Anger: Clinical and Developmental Perspectives* (Philadelphia, PA: Brunner/Mazel, 1999), 208-09.



Books Mentioned in This Issue

These may be purchased through CBE's Book Service or online Book Store

- u Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace* (IVP, 1990); see page 6.
- u Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Religious Beliefs and Abuse," in *Women, Abuse, and the Bible*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996); see page 21.
- u Bence, Evelyn, *Prayers for Girlfriends and Sisters and Me* (Servant-Vine, 1999); see page 22.