

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Godly Women of Impact

Women on the Front Lines for Jesus Study #3

(as seen in the life and ministry of Jesus and the Apostle Paul)

Introduction: Half...

In 2009, Sheryl WuDunn and Nicholas Kristoff wrote Half the Sky, a book that addresses the terrible plight in which millions of women find themselves in various places today.

I've only read reviews and excerpts of the book. But even from that limited exposure, it's clearly a powerful indictment of the slavery, sex-trafficking, oppression, and inequality that many, many women experience in our world.

After a godly Christian woman, Carolyn Custis James, actually read Half the Sky, she wrote Half the Church - and I have read this one. It's also a powerful book, and Half the Church presents a vision of every Christian woman being fully engaged in front line ministry for Jesus.

In the book, Ms. James writes, "*When half the church holds back - by choice or because we have no choice - everybody loses; our mission suffers setbacks. [We squander] the opportunity to display to [our] world a gospel that causes both men and women to flourish and unites us in a Blessed Alliance that only the presence of Jesus can explain.*"

I highly recommend this book to you. It's an inspiring read and it's a great follow-on to our three weeks of looking at the impact of godly women, which Jeff has begun and I'm wrapping up this morning.

From Deborah...

Jeff began this series by telling the story of Deborah from the book of Judges, a godly woman who led boldly and wisely in ancient Israel.

To that message, I say, "*Amen!*" My life has been marked and this church has been marked by godly women who have lived and led wisely and boldly.

From Ruth...

Then, last Sunday Jeff highlighted how God used Ruth to bless others. It's great to bless suffering widows. But Ruth demonstrates how faithful and loyal widows can bring God's blessing to the rest of us.

And, again, I can testify to the women here at Northwest who have battled great difficulties - widowhood, single parenting, disease - and have been blessings to our church and to me, personally.

Today, we're turning from the Old Testament to the New. And I want to show how prominently women figured into the life and ministry of Jesus and of the Apostle Paul.

I'm going to start off in an odd way, highlighting a couple of glaring omissions of women. I hope to show by these omissions the amazingly prominent role women played in Jesus' life and ministry.

Women in the Life and Ministry of Jesus

Omitting Women

Twelve (male) apostles

First, notice that of the twelve apostles of Jesus, exactly none were female. They were all Jewish (excluding Gentiles) and they were all male (excluding women).

And, yes, there are reasons for this that have nothing to do with prejudice against woman.

By choosing these twelve apostles, Jesus was choosing the representative heads of a new community of faith.

The nation of Israel had twelve representative heads in the fathers of the twelve tribes. After Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, though, Israel would be temporarily set on the sidelines. The church would become, as it is to this day, the community through whom God would be working to redeem the world.¹

The apostolate had to consist of twelve Jewish men. That's why, when the number went down to eleven after Judas Iscariot took his life, Peter said that it was necessary to add an apostle to bring the number back to twelve. (Acts 1:22)

So, there was a good theological reason for Jesus' choice of twelve men.

But social constructs of the day also demanded that the disciples would be men. Rabbis - who were only male - collected among their followers only other men.

Keep in mind that first-century Jewish culture was a male-dominant culture.

And then, there is an incident recorded in the Gospels, that reinforces the reality that the world in which Jesus lived was a male-dominant world.

At feeding time (the feeding of the 5,000)

There are very few events that are recorded in all four of the Gospels. Among those few is the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. It was an important miracle, so we're not surprised that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all include it.

They all also include one detail. There were five thousand men present, ***"not including the women and children."***

Now, in Jesus' day, Jewish women were honored and held in high esteem, especially in the home. Women were not dissed. It's not that women didn't count. But, in recounting this miracle, they weren't counted.

Jesus' world was male-centric. That said, I find the role that women played in the life and ministry of Jesus to be remarkable.

For instance, He enjoyed female friendships and had good, healthy social engagement with women.

Befriending Women

Mary and Martha

Among Jesus' good friends were three siblings - Lazarus, the brother, and the two sisters, Mary and Martha - who lived in the town of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem.

The Gospels reveal how easily Jesus interacted with the sisters.

Luke (Luke 10:38-42) tells us about the time when Jesus was in their home, telling stories about God. It's a good, wholesome, homey scene. Mary is there, hanging on His every word. Her sister, Martha, was scurrying around taking care of serving the guests.

When Martha complained to Jesus that Mary wasn't helping out, Jesus gently reproved her, like a friend would.

Later, Jesus was a good distance away from Bethany when He got word that Lazarus was sick to the point of death. By the time Jesus and the disciples arrived at the family's home, Lazarus had already died and had been buried in a sealed tomb.

During the lead up to the miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus interacted first with Martha and then with Mary. Their conversations were friendly.

The two women knew exactly who Jesus was - Martha even said that she believed that He was the Christ, the Son of God (v. 27) -

¹ Jesus says that the twelve apostles will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30).

but they interact as friends do. The conversation is natural. Jesus had befriended these women.

From what I have read of interactions between men and women in first-century Jewish culture, this was not the norm. Men and women kept their distance. Not Jesus.

Or consider the time when He and His disciples traveled through Samaria.

A woman of Samaria (John 4:1-42)

His lunchtime talk with a Samaritan woman (John 4) is pretty famous and it was a fantastic conversation. She was far from God, coming to the well of Sychar to draw water; He was the Son of God offering her living water.

There is so much to notice in this story about God and His ways. But we would miss a huge part of the point of the story if we didn't notice the fact that Jesus was speaking with a Samaritan woman.

Her Samaritanism, in the eyes of most Jews, was a mark against her. Her immorality was a second mark against her. Her gender, though, by itself, would have kept a Jewish man of Jesus' day from having anything to do with her.

Men simply didn't talk with women to whom they weren't related by blood or marriage. It was improper.

Well, Jesus never got that memo about propriety. So, He entered into a deep conversation about life and God with an immoral Samaritan woman.

And He engaged with women because He valued women as women.

Valuing Women

Not sexual objects (Matthew 5:27-30)

Being the physically weaker sex, women have always been vulnerable to physical abuse, to being sexualized, and to being taken advantage of by wicked men who use their strength to get their way.

The Internet didn't invent pornography and the #MeToo movement didn't uncover something new.

Crimes against women have been in place throughout history and much of it has involved sex. Isn't it remarkable, then, that Jesus directed comments to men forbidding them to sexualize women?

In the Sermon on the Mount, He said, ***[Matthew 5:27] You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery"; [28] but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.***

He went on to tell men that sexual sin against a woman was such a serious offense that if their eye or their hand made them stumble with respect to lust, it would be better to gouge out an eye or cut off a hand.

Jesus affirmed the intrinsic value of women by forbidding that they be reduced to the role of sexual object.

This regard for women carried over to what He had to say about marriage, which came right after He had addressed lust in the Sermon on the Mount.

Not property (Matthew 19:8; Mark 10:5)

We know that Jesus was very pro-marriage. He allowed for divorce only in the face of fundamental violations of the marriage covenant.

He explained that from the beginning, God never envisioned divorce. Divorces happen only because of ***"hardness of heart."***²

² Matthew 19:8; Mark 10:5.

But in Jesus' day, unlike our own, men were almost exclusively the ones with the power to divorce. In many cases, a wife was put away (divorced) for minor slights or made-up infractions.

Jesus' teaching that marriage was a lifelong covenant protected women against being treated like property.³

And, because He valued women so highly, we're not surprised that He poured out His miracle-working power on women.

Recipients of grace and healing

He healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a fever,⁴ cast a demon out of the daughter of a foreigner (a Syrophenician woman),⁵ and raised from the dead the son of a widow in the city of Nain.⁶

One of the more dramatic healings in the Gospels involved Jesus instant response to the pleas of a synagogue official, Jairus, whose twelve-year old daughter was lying sick at home, at the point of death.

On the way to Jairus' home, an older woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years reached out to Jesus for healing. She touched his garment and was immediately healed.

The Lord knew what had happened (He was aware that power had gone out from Him to heal - Mark 5:30) and turned to meet and then to speak with the woman.

He took time with her. He listened to her story and spoke words of life to her. He wasn't at all put off that she had touched Him while she had been in a state of ceremonial uncleanness. Nor was He in a hurry to leave her to go and see about Jairus' daughter.

So, by the time He had started walking to Jairus' house to heal the girl, the report came that she had died due to the delay in getting there because of the time He spent with the older woman.

No problem. Jesus went to Jairus' home and raised the little girl from the dead!

Jesus lavished love and value on women through healing just like He did on men. I haven't counted, but I would estimate that there were nearly an equal number of healings of women as of men in the Gospels.

And, of course, God used women powerfully in Jesus' life. The Gospels highlight some of the women who made a profound difference in God's plan.

A-List Women

Women giving material support (Luke 8:1-3)

Did you know that Jesus and His disciples were financially supported, at least in part, by a small group of devout women from Galilee (including Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast our seven demons, along with others) who gave out of their private funds?

A woman of remarkable generosity (Mark 12:41-43; Luke 21:1-4)

You should also know that when Jesus wanted to showcase the beauty of sacrificial generosity, He didn't draw His disciples' attention to the men who were throwing lots of money into the temple treasury. He pointed out a poor widow who gave all she had.

And, did you know that the Gospels record three very special times when Jesus was honored in the manner He truly deserved?

On these occasions, Jesus was anointed with expensive perfume. These people who anointed Him were all women.

Women who anointed Jesus

³ We see the same thing in the Old Testament Law, which did not allow a man who had previously divorced a woman to remarry her if her second husband also divorced her, to keep her from becoming nothing more than chattel.

⁴ Matthew 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39.

⁵ Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30.

⁶ Luke 7:11-17.

One woman anointed Jesus in Bethany in the home of Simon the leper in such an extravagant way that we remember what she did two thousand years later as a picture of the extravagance of Jesus' sacrifice.⁷

Another woman - a woman with a terrible reputation as a notorious sinner - anointed Him in the home of Simon the Pharisee.⁸

And the sister of Lazarus and Martha, Mary, anointed Him while they were all visiting in a home in Bethany.

There were men present at each of these anointings, these men didn't exactly distinguish themselves. To a man, they were indignant that expensive perfume should be wasted.

Only the women "got it". Only the women understood that no expense was too extravagant, nothing would be "over the top" when it came to lavishing honor on Jesus.

There were women, too, who "got it" all the way to the end.

Women at the end

Most all of Jesus' male disciples ran away in fear when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. But there were women at the cross who watched Him die.⁹

Women went to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, late on Friday, to see where He was buried, among them Mary Magdalene.¹⁰

And then, on that first Easter Sunday, not expecting a resurrection (!), only women - Mary Magdalene, Salome, Joanna, and

one that Matthew simply calls "***the other Mary***" - went to the tomb¹¹ to anoint the dead body of Jesus.¹²

And, of course, in recounting the A-List women in Jesus' life, we can't overlook the first woman in His life.¹³

Mary, the mother of Jesus

Mary was likely a teenager when she was visited by an angel who told her, **[Luke 1:30] ... "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. [31] And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus."**

Remember, at this point Mary had her whole life in front of her. She was engaged to Joseph, who would definitely NOT understand if she turned up pregnant.

She was confused by this extremely disruptive announcement. She asked the angel, **[34] ... "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"**

The angel told her that this would certainly happen because nothing is impossible for God. Mary gave a response for the ages - **[38] "Behold the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."**

That is our memory verse for the three weeks of this series on "Godly Women of Impact", a statement from a woman who sums up submissive obedience to God as well as anyone ever has.

Jesus befriended women. He valued and blessed women, as women. Women supported Him, honored Him, and worshiped Him. He was impacted by the godly women around Him.

Now, from a focus on Jesus, we're turning to look at the chapter that followed Jesus' death and resurrection. This is the season in which

⁷ Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:1-9

⁸ Luke 7:36-39; 40-50

⁹ Out of all the apostles, we know that at least John was there. So was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Salome, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and other women. (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:44-49; John 19:25-27.

¹⁰ Mark 15:42-47.

¹¹ Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1ff...; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18.

¹² Bible scholar R.T. France comments, "*In a society in which women were thought of as second-class citizens, their prominence in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection is striking.*"

¹³ See Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-20.

the church was launched. In the church, both men and women are involved in what God is doing in the spread of Jesus' Good News.

In the early chapters of Acts, the history book of the New Testament, women weren't absent, but they weren't terribly visible.¹⁴

It is later, when the Apostle Paul becomes the main character of Acts, that women shine on the front lines of serving Jesus.

So, for the time that remains, we're looking at women, as they appeared in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul.

Women in the Life and Ministry of the Apostle Paul

As the Story Unfolds (Acts)

In Philippi (Acts 16)

Gathered at the river

As the second of Paul's three missionary journeys got rolling (Acts 16), the first city in which Paul made disciples was Philippi. He (and at least Silas) entered Philippi and looked for a group of Jews with whom they might share the Gospel.

Philippi didn't have a critical mass of Jews to have a synagogue (Jewish custom required at least ten men to start a synagogue).

But there was a group of Jewish worshippers who regularly gathered at the town's river for worship. This group would become the nucleus for the Jesus-worshiping community in Philippi. It was a group made up entirely of women.

Lydia and her household

¹⁴ Chapter 1 - women gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem to await the promised Holy Spirit; Chapter 5 - the husband/wife duo of Ananias and Sapphira died after lying to the Holy Spirit about giving money to the church; Chapter 6 - designated servants were appointed to oversee the serving of Hellenistic Jewish widows; Chapter 9 - Peter raised Tabitha/Dorcas from the dead; Chapter 12 - Peter left the Jerusalem jail and made his way to the home of John Mark's mother and is eventually welcomed by the servant-girl, Rhoda.

One of the women in that group was Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira, a city located about two hundred miles from Philippi.¹⁵ Lydia became Paul's strategic partner, someone who, humanly speaking, made possible Gospel progress in Philippi.

Once, when Jesus sent His disciples out, two by two, on a ministry tour through Israel (Luke 10), He told them to look for "***a man of peace***" who would welcome them into a city.

They were to stay in the house of that "***man of peace***" for as long as they were there preaching and teaching in that city or village. That man's home would be their base of operations.

Today, when missionaries go to areas where the Gospel has never been, they look for that "*person of peace*" to be the open door for them and their message into the community.

I was reading on the website for Destino (the Hispanic ministry of Cru, where the Gerards and the Muckleroyes serve), that workers look for the "*person of peace*" on a college campus who will introduce them to interested students.

When Paul rolled into Philippi, he was probably looking for that "***man of peace.***" It just turned out that the man of peace was a woman of peace: Lydia.

She, along with what Luke describes as "***her household***" (Acts 16:15), all believed and were all baptized.

Even though Philippi wasn't her hometown, she had lodging large enough for Paul and Silas to stay with her. She invited them to stay in her home and they said, "Yes."

¹⁵ Although it is most likely that the woman's name was "Lydia" (it was a common name), it is also possible that Luke is referring to her adjectivally as "the Lydian woman", since Thyatira was located in a province called "Lydia."

Lydia's home was their base of operations for as long as they were in Philippi (except for that night they stayed in jail...¹⁶).

There was great ministry fruit in Philippi, thanks in large part to the role played by Lydia.

And let's notice one more significant impact by a godly woman on this Second Missionary Journey.

From Philippi, Paul and his companions traveled on to Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. Paul finally wound up, by himself, in the city of Corinth, where he met a dynamic ministry couple.

In Corinth (Aquila and Priscilla; Priscilla and Aquila)

Aquila and his wife, Priscilla found themselves in Corinth because Caesar had kicked all the Jews out of Italy (Rome?)

And, since both Aquila (the husband) and the Apostle Paul were, by trade, tent-makers, when these all met each other in Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla welcomed Paul into their home and worked together, both in tent-making and in Gospel ministry.

The three of them became great friends and they made for a great team. When Paul left Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla left with him to travel to Syria.

When the husband/wife duo separated from Paul, they continued to serve Jesus together.

For example, they showed a man named Apollos, who was mighty in the Scriptures, about how he could improve his teaching about Jesus. (Acts 18:24-28) And they hosted a church in their home (1 Corinthians 16:19). These two were on the front lines of ministry.

¹⁶ After they had cast a demon out of a slave girl who had been making her owners good money by fortune-telling, Paul and Silas were thrown into the city jail. Following their arrest, a beating, a night in chains, and an earthquake, they shared the Gospel with the Philippian jailer and told him that if he and his household would believe in the Lord Jesus, they would be saved. They did, and they were!

I find it very interesting that in the six times they are mentioned together, they are 2x referred to as "Aquila and Priscilla" and are 4x called "Priscilla and Aquila", a change in order that many scholars believe tells us that she was the more outspoken, prominent of the two in Christian ministry.

Clearly, Paul highly valued women, just like Jesus did. We see that in how he lived and served and we see that in what he taught.

Value and Worth (Galatians 3:28)

[Galatians 3:28] There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The Jew/Greek distinction, mentioned first, was THE issue in the first century church. Jesus broke down the barriers separating Jews and non-Jews.

Paul mentioned next social and demographic barriers. He brought up social differences in many of his letters, sometimes giving different instructions to slave and to free. So, the Gospel doesn't do away with social standing. But he is clear here, that whatever our social status - rich or poor, business owner or employee, Jeff Bezos or not - we all stand equal before God and before each other in Christ.

And when he wrote, "***there is neither male nor female***" By saying this, Paul was not saying that there are no differences between men and women. He was saying that in Christ there is essential equality between the sexes.

Men and women are of equal value and are deserving of equal respect, even if, in certain contexts they fill differing roles.

Role-Playing

Marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33)

When it comes to roles, for instance, Paul gives clear - but not exhaustive - teaching about Christ-centered marriage.

He tells husbands to sacrificially love their wives as Christ loved the church. He tells wives to submit to their husbands and to show them respect.

The commands to both are weighty and extreme. And they are given in ways that uniquely speak to the woman and to the man.

There are also some gender specific roles and ministries in Jesus' church.

In the church

Paul told older men to mentor younger men and he told older women to mentor younger women. (1 Timothy 5; Titus 2)

Then, too, there is good reason to believe the office of Elder (or overseer, bishop) is to be a role filled by a male. (See 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 for the reference to being a **“husband of one wife”**, or **“one-woman kind of man”**).

But there is another church office mentioned in the New Testament, that of Deacon, and there is room for discussion there.

Paul gives the qualifications for men who serve in the role of Deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-10 and in verse 12.

He then addressed, separately, **“women”** (v. 11) who must also meet certain requirements.

While some believe that Paul is speaking about the wives of Deacons, I think it is much more likely that Paul is providing for a role for women to serve as recognized servants in the church as Deaconesses.¹⁷

¹⁷ Why not also address the wives of Elders, who hold an even more responsible office in the church?

And he then gives explicit teaching to ensure propriety in public worship that is directed to women, especially given the culture of the first-century Jewish and Gentile world.¹⁸

So, there may well be some differences in function and in the fulfillment of roles for women and men in the family and in the church. But there is no distinction in value and worth.

For one, final point highlighting the lofty role women played in Paul's life, just consider the greetings he sends in several of his letters.

Friends, Partners

For one example out of many, at the end of his letter to the church at Rome, he sent greetings to several women, some of whom he just names. Others are described.

- Phoebe was a servant, or literally a “deaconess” of the church at Cenchrea;
- Priscilla and Aquila were fellow workers in Christ Jesus who risked their lives to help Paul;
- Mary worked faithfully in the church at Rome.¹⁹

Conclusion:

Given all that we have seen in these weeks about the powerful ways in which God has used women in the past and how He wants to use women to fulfill His purposes today...

...let's be sure to always
highly esteem our sisters in Jesus;

¹⁸ See 1 Corinthians 11, 14; 1 Timothy 2:9-15.

¹⁹ At the beginning of the short letter he wrote to Philemon, he singled out Apphia for greetings - **“our sister.”** (v. 2)

always affirm them as fellow-heirs of the grace of life;
always encourage them in their service for Christ.

Matthew 12:50; Mark 3:35; Luke 8:21 - Jesus identifies His mother and brothers and sisters as those who do the will of His Father.

Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-27 - Peter is identified by a slave girl as a follower of Jesus.

Luke 1:5-25; 57-80 - Zacharias and Elizabeth are blessed to become the parents of John the Baptist

Luke 2:36-38 - Anna, an elderly woman who was a prophetess, gave thanks to God for Jesus in the temple when He was there being dedicated to God.

Luke 2:41-51 - When Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem after His family left for Galilee after Passover, Jesus' mother questioned Him about His absence and scolded Him for worrying her and Joseph so much. He responded that she should have known that He would be in His Father's house.

Luke 13:10-17 - Jesus healed a woman who had been afflicted by a spirit for eighteen years.

Luke 13:18-20 - Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a woman who hid leaven in three measures of flour.

Luke 15:8-10 - a woman who seeks a finds a lost coin is like the angels of God who rejoice over a sinner who repents

Luke 18:1-8 - in a parable encouraging disciples to always pray and to not lose heart, Jesus imagines a woman who shamelessly begs a judge for mercy.

Luke 20:27-40 - Jesus explains to Sadducees about marriage and remarriage and the kingdom of heaven (also Mark 12:18-27)

John 2:1-11 - Jesus' mother and Jesus interact - maturely - at the wedding in Cana where He turned water into wine

Acts 17:10-15 - a number of prominent women believed in Jesus at Berea. (v. 12);

Acts 17:34 - a woman named Damaris (along with other women) believed in Jesus after Paul's address on Mars Hill in Athens.

Acts 21:1-6 - Paul and Luke and others on his team were escorted to the beach by the men, women, and children of the believing community in Tyre before continuing on their journey to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:7- from Tyre, they sailed to Ptolemais and then to Caesarea where Philip (the evangelist) lived with his four daughters who were prophetesses.

Acts 23:16 - the son of Paul's sister (in other words, his nephew) heard of the planned ambush of Paul and his company and warned the military commander who was guarding Paul.

Appendix: Additional significant references to women in the New Testament

Matthew 1:18-25 - Mary, was a model of submissive obedience to God (Luke 1:38) and has been honored by the church for two thousand years.

Matthew 5:31-32 - Not saying that all divorces are disallowed. But that men (who were in the roles of power in Jesus' day) were not to divorce their wives for slights. (also Matthew 19:1-9)

1 Corinthians 1:11 - Paul had been reliably informed by a woman, Chloe, of problems in the Corinthian church.

Philippians 4:2-3 - Paul urged two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to live in harmony in the Lord

2 Timothy 1:5 - Paul was mindful of Timothy's faith-filled mother (Eunice) and grandmother (Lois) who nurtured Timothy's faith.