



***Things I wish Jesus had said
about...a woman's place***

Selected Scriptures from Luke, Romans, First
Corinthians

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THINGS I WISH JESUS WOULD HAVE SAID...

I have really been looking forward to this worship series. If we are going to take the Bible seriously, we have to deal with all of it, even the parts we don't like, or places we find it lacking. So we are going to take a closer look. In some cases we might find that Jesus had more to say about an issue than we originally thought. Perhaps in actions that have gone unnoticed, or maybe in scriptures that have gone understudied or ignored. Or maybe what we want to find just isn't there.

We will also consider the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit in the 2,000 years since scripture was written. How have we continued to hear God speaking to us as followers of the living Jesus who is still at work within us? How can we seek the mind of Christ?

So here we go...Things I wish Jesus would have said. Or at least said more about. Today...I really wish Jesus would have said more about...

...ABOUT A WOMAN'S PLACE

The role of women and gender equality. Because some in the church still struggle with the idea that women and men are equal partners in this world. And, this problem isn't only in the church, bias against women is still very real in our world today.

But let's start by going back to Jesus' time. It was not a good time for women. Women were treated as second-class citizens and even property. While it's true that *some* women had money, power, ran businesses, overall, women were subordinate to men: they held fewer legal rights and had very limited participation in religious activities. We just saw this in last week's scripture even as we celebrated Jesus' presentation at the Temple. Luke 2.21-24:

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "**Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord**"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons."

The first-born male was to be presented to God as holy. What about the first-born female!? Even though scholars agree that Luke got his Levitical law a little bit wrong, the bias towards boys is already apparent. And these turtle-doves that were to be presented were for Mary's purification because a woman was viewed as unclean after childbirth and not permitted to enter the Temple or touch anything holy for 40 days. And to pile on even more, had she delivered a girl she would have been unclean for double that.

I understand that it is a little unfair to be too judgmental of those in another time and place, a pre-scientific era at that. But, as a father who has seen the beauty of childbirth three times, and twice daughters, I struggle with this. If we take the Bible seriously, we have to be honest about the prejudices that are written in to our sacred text.

Thankfully, the story of Jesus does not end there. Because there is more than a little irony that these purity laws that were used to suppress women like Mary, Jesus goes on to break in the name of people over law. In a society where men and women were separated by an invisible wall, Jesus frequently walked right through that wall. Time and again Jesus raises women up as examples of faith and faithfulness.

The Gospel record shows that Jesus made special effort to include women who were even further on the fringes of society: the disgraced woman at the well, the disabled woman bent over, the "untouchable" woman bleeding. Jesus acknowledged the dignity of *every* human as a child of God.

And there's more...In the gospels, women are there at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. When the men get scared and go running, women are the ones who have the heart and courage to stay at the cross, to accompany him to his tomb. And who sees Jesus first on that Easter morn? Women. And who understands what it means when the men all say it couldn't be true? Women!

So it's pretty clear that Jesus opened some doors for women. But...he never really made equality for women one of his preaching points. Even though many women were his disciples, none were invited into the circle of 12. Was this just a battle that he didn't want to wage given all of the other ways he was bucking the system? Did he just not care *that* much about women? Did he not think women were fully equal to men? That is why I wish he'd said more.

The fact that Jesus was not more definitive about women and gender equality shows up in the earliest of scriptures from the first congregations. For example, the Apostle Paul,

who wrote much of the New Testament, looks like he's not quite sure what he thinks about women in the church. He famously wrote in 1 Corinthians 14.

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Yet in Romans 16.1-16, by name Paul commends the work of a bunch of people, and he begins with women leaders in the church.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (sencreea) so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila (a kee lah), who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. ...Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

In this scripture is a long list of people, some of whom I skipped for the sake of time and tongue twisting, but this list of 20-some are 10 women. And women among the first. Women mentioned as leaders in the church. Wives are listed before their husbands. All of these indicators of a strong role of women in the early church. Again, "Jesus, why couldn't you have said more?!"

SO WHAT DO WE DO WITH ALL OF THIS?

Well, I think we keep moving in the right direction realizing that even in the Church (with a capital "C") we are not quite there yet. I am proud to be in a denomination where women do have equal rights with men, on paper anyway—not all Christian denominations are there yet. Yet, many Brethren congregations refuse to call women as pastors. We still find women underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership in the Church of the Brethren—at the moment, all of our denominational agencies are headed by men.

This congregation on the other hand, as it so often does, sets a healthier tone. We welcome and encourage women into all ministry. Currently, our Board Chair and Moderator—the highest lay positions in the church—are filled by women, as are 3 of our 5 Commission Chairs and we have excellent leadership. Our pastoral team is still mostly men—perhaps in the future we can find a better balance. So we have to keep moving in the right direction in the church.

And we have to speak loudly and clearly in our world about gender equality. In recent weeks we have seen the overwhelming number of men who take advantage of their positions of institutional and societal power to harass and abuse women. This is not right, and it must stop. This harassment and abuse is not only a horrific violation of women at a very personal level, it becomes part of a larger dynamic that suppresses women personally, professionally, educationally, and societally. The church must be part of the solution to these wrongs. If we see it, we must name it. And those of us in power with privilege must be among the strongest voices. Men, we must be at the forefront. It's the Jesus way.